“...It’s not only about giving children a voice”- social workers accounts of child participation in social investigations

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ABSTRACT.

There is a consensus in Sweden that children are right-bearers and shall participate in matters that affect them among legislators, the government’s instructions by Barns Behov I Centrum (BBIC) (Child’s needs in focus) and among social workers. Despite this, previous research shows that children’s participation in social investigations is limited. The aim of this study is to analyse and interpret how social worker’s describe and understand children’s participation in their daily work at a social welfare unit. It is their perception of child participation that is studied.

The data consists of interviews with nine social workers investigating children of 0-12 years of age at three social welfare units in municipalities’ in the outskirts of Stockholm. The theoretical perspective of this study is childhood sociology.

The social workers in this study regard children as competent enough to receive information as well as capable contributors to the investigations. Participation was viewed as a cornerstone in their work with children. Children were described as capable of communicating information and their perspective on their situation through speech, behaviour or play indicating that all children can contribute despite age. But oral communication dominates and has a higher value, showing that age and maturity has an impact on children’s participation. Restrictions by guardians, time-restraint and heavy workloads also limited children’s participation during the investigation.

Key words: child participation, social workers, childhood sociology, social investigation

PREFACE.

I would like to thank the social workers who shared their thoughts and experiences of child participation with me and took of their time to let me interview them.

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1. BACKGROUND, AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTION

That children shall participate in matters that affect them and be given “a voice” is underpinned in both the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as in the Swedish social welfare act (SSA) (UNHR 1989 p.4 and SFS 2001:453 p.3). The convention is not part of Swedish law. However, the principles relating to the child's best interest and children's right to express their views have been included in Swedish legislation. According to the SSA, investigations of children should be designed and carried out together with the child, as well as with his or her guardians. Children have not only a right to be informed and heard during the investigation, they should also be included in the investigation process, seen as capable and agents and have a possibility to influence how the investigation is outlined. As a legal part, children shall be informed about the result of the investigation and be included in the discussion about interventions. But when a child meets a social worker in a social welfare unit it is not only the purpose of the meeting, together with laws and regulations, which steers their meeting. Local bureaucratic traditions and views of what is the right way to investigate do also have an influence.

In my earlier master thesis, when I studied 10 social investigations of children who got interventions, I found that all children had a voice in the investigations. All children had been able to speak to a social worker, at least once, however very few of them were included in how the process of the investigation was outlined, they were informed but had no influence on how the investigation should be conducted e.g. of time and place. Few of the social workers used child adaptive methods to make sure that the children could give their view on their situation in other ways than in oral interviews. Few of them were informed or had an impact on the choice of intervention, despite that they were the target of them.

Barns Behov I Centrum (BBiC) has its origin in the British Looking after children System (LAC) and Assessment for Children in Need and their Families (AF). It has been adapted to the Swedish context by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) and was launched 2006. The purpose of BBiC is to strengthen the child's perspective and participation of children, young people and their families, both during the child investigation and during the voluntarily or compulsory interventions. Nearly all social workers of the 290 municipalities in Sweden are educated in the ideas of BBiC and uses the forms of BBiC.

Despite this huge educational ambition, several reports have shown that children’s participation is limited (Hultman & Cederborg 2014 p.5; Roose et al 2009 p. 328).
(2012) found in their study of social workers in Norway working with child protection that there was no consensus amongst their responders that children should always participate (Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012 p.17). Could this also be the reason for children’s limited participation in Swedish social reports?

In the instructions in (BBIC) (Child’s needs in focus), the government urges social workers to always include children in the process but also to view children as part of a system, the ecological approach. How this could interfere with children’s participation in social investigations is not discussed in these instructions and social workers are not given any guidelines on how to handle situations when children’s participation is questioned or denied by their guardians or extended family. In order to understand how social workers navigate in these situations and what notion of childhood that steer their approach I wanted to interview them as their understanding of participation has a huge impact on children’s possibilities to be included and participate.

A report conducted 2014 by the part of the state agency that supervises inter alia, the work conducted in Swedish social welfare centres, points out that social welfare boards need to further improve their work in a child rights perspective. Social workers need to talk to children at a higher extent than today in order to reach the level of child participation proclaimed by the law (Inspektionen för vård och omsorg (IVO) Health and Social Care Inspectorate, HSCI 2014 p.4). What they mean by child participation is not defined, but they promote that increased numbers of talks between children and social workers will lead to a higher level of children’s participation (HSCI 2014 p.19).

I am interested in the meeting between the child and the social worker and how different notions of childhood affect children’s participation and influence the outcome of their meeting as well as how different structural approaches (legal, policy and administration) shape social workers space to create this.

Legal implications can mean that social workers are restricted e.g. to discuss information with a child until s/he, or family members are interrogated by police. This influences the child’s possibility to fully take part in the investigation at that point. Treating a child as an equal, to be equally trustworthy and believable can interfere with norms of child-parent relationship within families as well as norms of young children as immature and in need of protection. Social workers are influenced by how children’s participation is constructed in laws such as SSA and the penal code and in CRC.
The aim of the study is to examine social workers’ perspectives on child participation and to analyse what notions of childhood that steer social workers in how children’s participation is conducted in social investigations.

Research question:

- How do social workers describe children’s participation in social investigations?
- According to the social workers, what are the obstacles in order to meet the objectives of children’s participation?

2. PRIOR RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To find relevant articles I have used Linköping’s University Library, DiVA and Google scholar. I have used the key words child*, social work, participation and social worker in different combinations. The articles analyse social workers’ views on child participation in social investigations in Sweden, Norway, England, Wales, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Australia (Queensland) and United States of America (California). Most of the articles refer to studies where social workers in one particular country have been interviewed, but three studies have been made as a questionnaire survey or vignette response. The questionnaire surveys by Vis et al (2012 and 2015) are answered by Norwegian social workers and the vignette response study by Berrick et al (2015) compare social workers’ views on child participation in England, Finland, Norway and US (California). These three studies include a larger number of social workers than the others, e.g. Berrick et al analyse the responses from 772 social workers (Berrick et al 2015 p.131). Healy and Darlington, for example, interviewed 28 social workers in Queensland, Australia for their study (Healy & Darlington 2009 p.422).

The following presentation of prior research is divided into two sections. The first section describes research findings concerning the structures steering child participation such as social workers’ understanding of the concept of child participation, the influence of laws, the organisation of social work and the environment. The second section describes studies demonstrating different aspects relating to questions about how the interaction between the social worker and the child influences the child’s possibility of participation.

2.1 Structures influencing children’s participation

The question of child participation is not only a practical issue in social work. It also reflects the society’s view on children and childhood. Are children commonly looked upon as
vulnerable and in need of protection or are they generally considered as capable of finding solutions to their own difficulties, and therefore seen as having the necessary potential to contribute to the interventions? All countries, except the US have ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and there is a consensus of the importance of the child participating in their own social investigation. This is both reflected in the different laws that regulate social work such as the Swedish Social Service Act (SSA) (SFS 2001:453), the Care of Young Persons Act (CYPA) (SFS 1990:52) and the Parental Code (PC)(SFS 1949:381) but also in policy documents such as the Swedish “Barns Behov I Centrum” (BBiC) (The child’s needs in focus) and the UK and Australian “Looking after Children and Assessment Framework” (Leverin 2014 p.207, UNHCR 2016b).

Social workers agree to these principals but interviews show that there is a gap when it comes to the implementation in practice. This is confirmed by studies of social reports as well as in interviews with children; children’s impact on how the social investigation is carried out as well as on the intervention is limited (Berrick et al 2015 p. 136, Sanders & Mace 2006 p.89, Hultman & Cederborg 2014 p.5, 6, Eriksson 2012 p.211-214).

A child report is a legal document, Olsson (2005) argues that the child protection act (CYPA) (SFS 1990:52) and the legal tradition tends to impact the whole investigation discourse. This affects the social workers freedom to design the investigation and be creative together with the child and is unnecessarily rigid. Most social reports are not made to be the ground for legal decisions in court, they are made to be the ground for voluntarily interventions. (Olsson 2005 p.125).

Social workers have different roles depending on how social work is organized in individual countries; from investigating with little contact with the child and family in some countries to extensive contact together with investigating tasks in other countries, and this affects their answers in the referred studies. Healy & Darlington (2009 p.420) found in their Australian study that social workers working with investigations about protection of children from harm were less positive to include children and let them participate in the social intervention than social workers working with support. The latter were more inclined to include the child, his or her family and the extended family in the investigation and the intervention. Social workers in this study viewed support and protection as dichotomies, making children in need of protection less expected to participate in the investigation. Eriksson & Näsmann (2008 p.272) on the other hand argues, as researchers of children which have experienced domestic violence, that there is no
dichotomy, children in need of protection also need to participate in their investigation as a part of a healing process (Sanders & Mace 2006 p.93).

Social workers in studies by Berrick et al (2015), Toros (2016) and Healy and Darlington (2009) point out that it is important to include children in the investigation process. More important if they are teenagers and less important if they are under the age of five years old. But the social workers were the ones to define the child’s problem, children could give and gain information but were not a part of the decision of how the problem was defined (Berrick et al 2015 p.136, Toros 2016 p.7, Healy and Darlington 2009 p. 422).

Berrick et al (2015) interviewed social workers in Finland, Norway, England and USA (California) and found that social workers in the Nordic countries were more likely to include information from the child about his or her wishes, feelings and needs than their colleagues from Anglo-American countries (with the exception of Californian social workers for whom talking to children was seen as very important). Involving the child and providing information to the child didn’t follow these patterns. The family service orientation in the Nordic countries in contrast to the child at risk orientation view didn’t affect the social workers extent of giving information to the child. Berrick et al’s (2015) study showed that the differences in how important children’s participation is perceived and the importance of providing the child with information differed more between social workers than between countries (Berrick et al 2015 pp. 136, 137, 138).

Studies of social workers views show that transparency, openness and clarity about the process is important in order to reduce confusion and building trust in the process but also to addressing the power imbalances. Social workers in these studies argue that children have a right to be involved in the decision making and help the child to learn how to make the right decisions. The interviewed social workers in Australia and Netherlands point out the importance of getting the child’s view during an investigation as it adds more depth to the report than if they only spoke to parents and other adults. Children want to be heard, informed and taken seriously but social worker’s most common reason for child participation is that it is a way to make children cooperate and to motivate the child to accept the decision made by adults, e.g. guardians, the social worker or the board/court., Healy & Darlington 2009 p.425,427, Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2014 p.256).

Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2012) point out that social work organised by the municipality is often divided into different sections both relating to the kind of problem and the age. A child can also
meet several social workers in the process from notification to an eventual intervention. This can make social workers reluctant to talk to a child; too many adults are involved. Especially experienced social workers have this reason for not talking to a specific child, they want to protect the child from several temporary meetings with discussions about his or her harsh experiences (Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012 p.17).

The social workers in the English, Norwegian and Welsh studies described difficulties of fitting a child’s abilities into a system that is essentially and fundamentally adult-oriented. The social workers argue that differences between professionals in ways of thinking, talking and working with children can be reflected in child protection conferences and review meetings. Large interprofessional meetings with discussions about a child’s shortcomings can be hard to attend even for an adult, e.g. parents, and the social workers described that there was also a lack of time in preparing the child for the meeting. If children experience the meetings as not being interested in their views and the agenda already decided on, this will also limit their interest in attending the meetings and participate. The meetings need to be more “user-friendly” for both children and adults in order for children to participate, argue the social workers (Pinkney 2011 p.42, Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012 p.17, Sanders & Mace 2006, 106).

Vis, Holtan & Thomas (2012 p.19) found in their study that social workers sometimes prevented children to participate in order to protect them. They link this to social workers work training with the emphasis on risks and pathology in child development. When the intervention obviously is not going to be scrutinized and discussed, children were not included in the discussion as their words could not have an impact. In this way they were neither informed nor included. Sometimes social workers also talk in codes, making it not understandable for children what is going to happen, as a way of distancing themselves from a discussion or argumentation with the children. Pinkney (2011 p.43) argues that social workers abuse children’s rights by denying them participation; information, giving them voice and inclusion in the decision under a false attempt to protect them from harm.

Child protection laws emphasize participation by children but when the time frame in these laws, when children are in need of immediate protection, are limited to days or hours (CYPÁ § 6 Sweden and California) this can limit social workers contact with children in order to fully inform them. Research shows that children are not always seen as independent speakers for themselves but members of their extended family (Berrick 2015 p.138, SFS 1990:52).
2.2 Social workers’ interactions with children

The Norwegian social workers in the questionnaire survey by Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2012) promote that participation needs to be seen as a process, not a one-time event. Children need information in order to form and express an opinion and this has to be done in an appropriate setting, so that the child’s view could be considered when a decision is made. “Following which the outcome will be explained to the child” (Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012 p.8, 9).

According to a Dutch study, most social workers that were interviewed about the meaning of participation said that they were not sure about how to define it. They used terms such as “informing, involving, explaining, asking children but also thinking about children’s needs” (Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2014 p.255). When the social workers gave example of participation they described information about the decision as participation. Young children, under the age of 12 years, were informed about the decision, teenagers were informed and asked about solutions. But the use of participation was seen as a strategic action rather than a communicative action: to make children cooperate and take part in the interventions decided by others, such as the social workers, social welfare board or the court (Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2014 p.256).

The social worker’s ability to talk to a child is of course important and this has been addressed by offering social workers both training and guidance. This is one of the most common attempts by the governments in UK and Scandinavia in order to increase children’s participation in social welfare investigations. Research shows that participation by younger children and children with disabilities also highlight the need of social worker’s not only to promote the child’s oral narrative. Social worker’s need to use other ways to let children express how they feel and what they want e.g. through play (Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012 p.16 and Pinkney 2011 p.43).

Toros (2016 p. 8-10) highlights the need for Estonia to develop a common assessment framework and incorporate it into legislation, and also to provide training for social workers in order to increase children’s participation in social investigations. In her study with 20 social workers, 16 underscored the importance of child participation but only 5 of them did this in practice. Four of these were educated social workers, underpinning the importance of professionals being educated in social work.

Berrick et al (2015 p.139) concludes that despite the recognition of the UNCRC in UK and the Nordic countries where they provide social workers with policy guidance, social workers in these countries didn’t include children in a consistently higher degree than in California (USA).
But the Californian social workers had a master degree in social work, which is not as common amongst their European counterparts. All social workers used strategies to involve children which they view as developmentally sensitive. Depending on how social worker’s view the meaning and purpose of participation, the balance between protection and maturity, local interpretations of policy instructions practices with children will diverge widely. Their study highlights the discretionary context of social work according children’s participation. This was also found by (Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2014 p.257) in their Dutch context. Despite these limited examples of research, these studies show that social worker’s level of education has an impact on children’s participation.

Young age is one of the most common reasons for children to not participate in a social investigation, according to interviews with social workers in Sweden, Netherlands, England, Finland, Norway, USA (California),Estonia, Wales and Australia (Queensland). Children younger than five years, children with cognitive difficulties and angry children have a lesser possibility to be included. Young children sometimes get information about the process but mostly they get information when a decision is made. Research shows that children have to prove their competence in order to be a part of the investigation, and these children often are seen as less capable and/or cooperative (Iversen 2013 p.276, Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2014 p.256, Berrick et al 2015 p.138, Toros 2016 p. 9, Healy & Darlington 2009 p.426, Sanders & Mace 2006 p. 103).

Angry children challenge a normative views on childhood as innocent and playful. Research shows that social workers may also find it difficult to listen to emotional narratives in order to understand the child, and might not be confident enough to know how to handle the situation. Social workers are also worried to harm children by exposing them to inappropriate information and responsibilities (Pinkney 2011 p.41, Sanders & Mace 2006 p.93).

To conclude; according to these studies research shows that there is a gap between social workers support of the idea of children’s participation and how it is handled in practice, children have a limited impact on both the process as well as the outcome of social investigations. More children are able to give information about their situation than to get information from the social workers and participate in the investigation. The organisation of social work differed between the countries referred to in this chapter, the Nordic countries have a child supportive approach and Anglo-American a more child protective approach. Research shows that social workers that work with child support are more willing to make children participate than social worker’s working with child protection but that social worker’s views on child participation as important

Social workers view children in need of protection as less able to participate in investigations, wanting to protect them from harm. Other obstacles described by the social workers are age and maturity, children have to prove their competence in order to be able to participate (Iversen 2013 p. 276).

2.3 Theoretical perspective.

The theoretical perspective of this study is childhood sociology that has its starting point in the critic of the concepts of children as something incomplete, a blank slate and childhood as a development and socialization period (James & Prout 1997 p. viii).

Childhood sociology states that children and childhood should not be seen as becoming, they are beings, but in the same time there is no “finished” person at all. All people are evolving during their life-span. Prout (2005) points out that childhood is a social construction, there is not one childhood, and it can’t be separated from other variables such as class, ethnicity and gender. Children should be seen as active and worthy of study in their own right. He highlights that the sociology of childhood wanted to go beyond dichotomies such as child-adult and being-becoming, but childhood is still framed by the relation between agent and structure. In this frame children are seen as agents, who could influence their own and their peers’ lives as well as their family and society, and in the same time their actions are limited by the structure they live in (Prout 2005 p. 63, 64). Both children and adults can be seen as beings and becomings, and childhood is ambiguous and diverse.

James (2007) doesn’t argue that children are superior agents of their lives, she points out that by listening to children’s voices researchers can explore their situation in the relation between agency and structure (James 2007 p.267). This child-centred approach and view on children as capable and agents is the base of sociology of childhood and has influenced research in social work. Bühler-Niederberger (2010) argues the importance of awareness of the structural differentiation of children and adults as well as children’s fundamental competence to contribute when analysing children in harsh situations (Bühler-Niederberger 2010 p.379). This is also referred to in Healy & Darlington’s study (2012) where they analyse the different outcome of children’s participation in relation to social worker’s job with child protection or family support (Healy & Darlington 2009 p. 420).
This view on children as capable and agents has influenced the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The convention underlines the needs of persons in the phase of childhood and is often described in terms of rights to provision, protection and participation. The 40 articles in the convention intends to be applied to all children, regardless of where they are born or live. The convention states that these needs are universal and contradicts the view of childhood sociology that childhood is globally diverse and depend on social and cultural contexts (James & James 2012 p. 105).

Childhood sociology has made an interdisciplinary impact and influenced social work as well as educational and health sciences, especially “the child as an actor” has been adapted and transformed into professional guidelines or social political claims, and sometimes decisions (Bühler-Niederberger 2010 p.381). This can be seen in the Swedish context were Sweden ratified UNCRC 1990 and the convention has influenced the Swedish Social Service Act (SSA) (SFS 2001:453), the Care of Young Persons Act (CYPA) (SFS 1990:52) and the Parental Code (PC) (SFS 1949:381) (Leviner 2014 p.207). A particular structure for investigations and interventions, “Barns behov i centrum” (BBIC) (Child’s needs in focus) (see appendix 1), is used by most of the municipalities in Sweden. This instruction is in line with CRC and is an example of how childhood sociology has influenced social work. BBIC emphasizes the notion of the child as an agent, capable of affecting both his and her own life as well as the surrounding environment but also promotes that children are a part of their context and childhood as a social construction, different depending on the context. (Socialstyrelsen 2015 p.12). But the child’s legal status is still weak in relation to his or her guardians, a child can’t get an intervention according to SSA if his or her guardians refuses it.

Childhood sociology, with its focus on children’s agency and competence and childhood as socially constructed is therefore a useful theory when analysing children’s participation in social investigations as it is described by social workers in this thesis.

Epistemology gives answers about how we can know what we know, the nature of knowledge. My research question is about notions of childhood, how social workers describe how they understand and practise “children’s participation”.

This research question also implies that social workers are agent’s and can influence their context, at the same time they are influenced by the context of education, guidelines and earlier research on their work that promote them to increase children’s participation in social investigations, what Giddens calls the “double hermeneutic”. Knowledge about how social
workers describe children’s participation can only be understood through an interpretive approach and in a situated context. This knowledge can be seen as subjective but also as objective, it is intertwined as this construction has concrete consequences for the situated work in the social welfare centre. It is preferable to use qualitative methods such as semi-structured or thematic interviews (Della Porta & Keating 2008 p.23-25).

When social workers describe how they investigate children, they do not only describe procedures. These procedures are embedded in a social web of interpretation and re-interpretation and is structured in social discourses (Kitzinger 2004, cited in Silverman 2011 p.181, 182).

3. METHOD.

3.1 Data collection

The data consists of 9 individual interviews with social workers using open ended questions. All excerpts are translated by me. I tested my interview questions by interviewing two social workers at municipality nr 3 (See appendix 4). After the first interview I changed the questions and the second interview was included in my data. I chose individual interviews in order to if possible get different accounts on child participation, a focus group could perhaps have given me a more normative view on child participation and less data.

The interviews were recorded at the social welfare centres in three municipalities during 1½ week and transcribed by me one week later. The social workers were offered to read the transcribed interviews and two of them wanted to do this. None of them had any comments on the written texts. The interviews lasted between 24 and 42 minutes and created 99 pages of text.

All social workers had read an e-mail from me where I described the background and aim of the study (appendix 3). Before the interviews started with the individual informants I repeated that information. All interviews started with the same question: “Research has shown that it is difficult to create a situation where children can participate in social investigations, what is your approach to include them and make them participate?” This question was continued by follow up questions in order to get a deeper understanding of how the social worker understood and worked with children’s participation. During the interviews all themes were mentioned but in different orders, depending on the follow up questions and the social workers’ answers (see appendix 2). All social workers were given other names in this study in order to protect their anonymity.
All interviewed social workers investigate children at risk and seven of them work at a social welfare unit in a municipality of 40,000 inhabitants in the outskirts of Stockholm. The other two work at nearby municipalities with the same organisation and slightly more inhabitants, about 70,000. Eight of the interviews were organized by my contact person at one of the municipalities.

My plan was to interview five social workers, but when my contact person informed the child division, the whole group, all seven at that time employed social workers, were interested in participating. In order to get a spectrum of work experience among the interviewees, she also contacted an experienced former co-worker at a nearby municipality who was incorporated among the interviewees. These three represented municipalities collaborate, together with some other municipalities, at a children’s advocacy centre (Barnahus) and on education in BBIC of newly examined social workers. The social welfare units are organized in different divisions and these social workers only work with investigations of children in the age of 0 to 12 years. They all have at least a bachelor in social work, most of them had taken courses in how to talk with children and all of them were educated in the principles of BBIC. The social workers in my study have been working with social investigations of children between 2 and 20 years with an average of 8.4 years. Due to this they are experienced in investigations of children, are well aware of the legal implications on their work and have to regularly make decisions on children’s participation. They are capable of answering my research questions. They also have experiences of co-workers’, parents’ and other adults’ views on the subject as well as views of partners such as school teachers, politicians, workers in medical care and police officers. All social workers know about the importance of children’s participation and this is promoted by the form used during the investigation. I think that by myself being a social worker I could create an open climate during the interviews. It is important for me that the conversation was relaxed and that the social workers did not feel like they were being judged.

3.1.1 Methodological reflections

My preunderstanding of social work and especially child investigations can both be seen as a pro and a con. I have experience in how to conduct children’s participation in social investigations, understand the negotiations during the process. But questions in an interview can also risk being understood as normative. This can influence the answers from my interviewees and how I understand their descriptions of the subject and be a part of the construction of knowledge. Child participation in social investigations is unquestioned in the current context, it has to be declared in every report, together with how the report is outlined. It
is one of the important issues that always are declared when social reports are evaluated by the municipalities themselves or IVO (Health and Social Care Inspectorate). To articulate a view on child participation as inappropriate could not be expected in an interview situation with another social worker, but it can be discussed as problematic. It is important to understand that interviewing is an interaction and the answers will be a construction of what the social worker wants to tell (Silverman 2011, p. 165).

In order to answer my research question, my theory has to have a relational approach. It has to be sensitive not only to what social workers say, but also to its meaning, what it represents. It must also be attentive to the context, which includes both purposes of the social work, discourses about child participation and how this influence the social worker in her daily work. The data will be situated both in time and place.

Me being a social worker could have influenced the interviewees’ answers, making them diminish the obstacles in child participation or defending the low result of reports about child participation in social investigations.

3.2 Data analysis.

I have used an interpretive approach when analysing my data as the knowledge of my data is not context free and can’t produce general laws of behaviour to be applicable globally. It is a knowledge that describes meaning within a certain context. The phenomenon has to be defined both in time and place as the meaning changes depending on the context. (Della Porta & Keating 2008 p.23-25). The meaning of “child participation” in social investigations is not the same today as it was before CRC and the discussions of the “competent child”. It is constantly changing as social workers understanding evolve but also as instructions on how to conduct social investigations change. Laws affecting social work have been revised and The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has rewritten their instructions to the social welfare units.

My data will be the result of how social workers talk about and understand “child participation”, what notions of childhood that steer them in how children’s participation is conducted in some social welfare centres in the outskirts of Stockholm today. It is the construction of child participation, as social worker’s describe it.

Thematic analysis can be used in different epistemological research, and in this study it is used with an interpretive approach. This interpretive approach steers the analysis in order to seek how social workers describe children’s participation and what this means to the social workers.
My research questions were the point of reference in my search for patterns and themes in my data. A consequence of the aim of my study is that the themes do not reflect an overall account of social workers’ views on child participation or that the majority of the social workers talk about every theme, the themes in the result section reflect the research questions (Braun & Clarke 2008 p.81-83).

I started by reading all the transcribed interviews to get an overview of the data. Then I started coding for themes and labelled them according to my research questions. I made a map with the themes from all interviews. I then started to read the data theme by theme searching for coherence, differences and tensions as Silverman suggests. The labels were adjusted several times. I read the data again and then used my map when I started to write (Silverman 2011 p.83, 84).

3.3 Credibility.

The aim of this study is not to find the absolute truth about social workers’ notions of children’s participation. The aim is to analyse and interpret how social workers describe and understand children’s participation in their daily work at a social welfare unit. It is their perception of child participation that is studied.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and according to Silverman (2011) the reliability of a study can improve doing so. (Silverman 2011 p.365). I’ve also tried to use citations and examples in my result.

3.4 Ethical considerations.

Child participation in social investigations is a sensitive topic as social workers are repeatedly urged to subjugate to the proclaimed norm of child participation. Social workers can experience being questioned as a form of critic and blame game. It was important for me to conduct my interviews open minded and with respect.

Danby and Farrell highlight the importance of continuously asking for consent throughout the study, also to being quoted in the final written document (Danby & Farrell 2005 p.53). The social workers were informed about this by a mail and during the interview and gave their consent orally.

Silverman points out four goals for a good ethical research; voluntary participation, handling the collected data corpus confidentially, protecting participants from harm and “ensuring mutual trust between researcher and people studied”. Silverman suggests that we as researchers
should think about the motivation for our research, what is our aim. Will the people we study benefit from our research or will they be exploited? (Silverman 2011 p.90, 97). The results from this study can benefit the professional development in an area difficult for the individual social worker being involved in sensitive cases.

4. RESULT.

The results are divided in two sections. The first section describes social workers’ expression of children’s participation in social investigations. This section includes the answers to the question: “How do you make children participate in social investigations?”

The second section describes social workers’ opinions of the obstacles in order to meet the objectives of children’s participation.

*Children’s participation in social welfare investigations is a huge subject and is not only about giving children a voice,* this was stated by nearly all social workers that were interviewed. All social workers also described that there were no general rules, a child’s participation was outlined individually, depending on the child’s age and maturity. But there was one exception; abused children that were not in need of protection participated according to a specific model, from report to intervention. It was important for all social workers to meet with the child they investigated, even if the child didn’t have a language, being too young to speak. Meeting the child could give information to the social worker about that specific child.

4.1 Social workers description of children’s participation.

4.1.1 Information to the child

All social workers in my study described that when they met the child, alone or together with a guardian, they explained who they were and why the child had to meet them. Giving information to the child was seen as very important. “*It is self-evident that we speak with the child to get his or her experience and view of the topic but I would say that it is more important to give than to get information*” (Malin) In order to explain the purpose of their meeting with the child and their role as social workers at a social welfare unit, they explain their role by using simple language to young children “*my job is to meet children and parents and see if they need some kind of help*” (Sahra) or “*my job is to help families that are in need of help, sometimes parents need help and sometimes children need help with their parents, that depends on…*” (Johanna). If the children were older, they sometimes, together with the child, read a small book.
(with pictures describing the process and short clarifying sentences) about how the process of an investigation will be carried out. But some social workers were not happy with the book (too complicated) and draw pictures of how the process will proceed for this specific child, together with the child instead. The book is locally produced by a Swedish county.

All social workers argued that it was really important to be honest with the children about the reason for the investigation and some of them also explained to the children about possible outcomes. They pointed out that they were investigating a child’s situation, a situation the child is aware of and often have to deal with each day. The reason can’t be hidden from the child.

I think that children need information, that’s fundamental, children live in their reality and understands more than we think (Cecilia).

4.1.2 The child’s story.

All social workers pointed out the importance of getting the child’s version of the event or situation that caused the social investigation, in order to understand the child’s view on how s/he was affected. “It is their life we are investigating” as one social worker declared. But how this is carried out is up to the individual social worker to decide. And this depends on the individual child’s age and maturity and what the social worker finds appropriate to share and include.

The first meeting with a child most often occurred together with a guardian, especially if the child was young, where the social worker introduced herself and the reason for the meeting. But they preferred to talk alone with the child. This was described as a common practice. The social workers view the children as observant and careful in their descriptions, they correct the social workers if they have understood a situation wrong. The social workers also pointed out that they use the children’s story to get parents motivated for change. One social worker that almost always start the social investigations with meeting the child explains:

I met a 7-year old boy last week. His father had reported to the social welfare unit that the mother and her new husband was drinking so much alcohol that it affected their ability of parenting. When I met the boy, he described how they drank in the weekends and reflected upon it. He got scared when they were drinking and explained to me in what way and what he was thinking of these situations. His story differed from his father’s. Both parents were in a custody battle. I quoted him when I met his mother, she recognized his way of expressing himself, and could
understand his feelings. I told her: This is the way your boy understands the situation when you drinks and it scares him, how can we solve this? (Anna)

Talking about the child’s description and feelings over a situation is also a way of focusing on the child, especially when the reports include child abuse or when there is a conflict between the parents. The child’s story becomes the centre that others’ stories relate to.

The child gets information from the social worker at the beginning of the meeting that his or her guardians will be informed about their conversation but they reflect that most of the children will forget this during the conversation. No social worker described a routine of giving the child a possibility to approve or change the story afterwards. Sometimes the child got a question if s/he wanted to tell the parent, together with the social worker, what they had talked about. If the child didn’t want to do it or not be part of the conversation, the social worker set up another meeting with the parent to inform about the child’s story.

The only situation that the social workers have a routine for was the situations when children reported that they are being abused, mostly through a teacher or pre-school teacher. Then the social worker meets the child, and the child’s story was the starting point of how they take action. After the dialog with the child, contact is taken with the guardians. If the child is not in need of protection, the child, the guardians and the social worker meet together to discuss how to organize support for the family. The child is continually informed of every step and of how the security plan is outlined.

I am thinking of the situations when the criteria of CAP (law of child protection) are not met but I can see that the child is afraid and it does not feel right to let the child go home to his or her guardians again after the conversation. Then the plan has been really good to hold on to and include the child in the security plan together with the guardians and social worker. (Sahra)

4.1.3 Children’s trustworthiness.

All social workers assume that children tell the truth and are trustworthy. They argue that children often describe harsh and difficult situations in their and their family’s life, things that are hard to feign if you have not experienced it. There is also no reason for the child to make it all up. The social workers use the child’s story as a starting point and include information from the child’s guardians, teachers etc. Information from others can both support and broaden the child’s story. But they emphasizes that the child’s experience and feelings of a situation is
important and should be taken seriously. By asking a lot of follow up questions, they can reach
the child’s own understanding of his or her situation.

When a child tells us that s/he has been abused, it’s their experience of the situation, 
and it has to be taken serious, even if the parent says that it isn’t true. The child’s 
safe base has been tampered with and that must be the base of the work. (Görel)

Young children and children with cognitive difficulties are harder to understand, though social 
workers uses drawings, dolls or other technics to make it easier for the child to tell his or her 
story. A child’s understanding of a situation and the guardians understanding can differ. One 
social worker met with an autistic boy:

I met the boy in school and he told me that his mother had tackled him so he fell to 
the floor. His mother told me that he was very clingy and tried to strangle her and 
she pushed him away. They had different experiences of the same event and the 
focus should not be if there was violence or not. I think that you have to work so 
that the child doesn’t feel insecure in the family environment. (Cecilia)

But the social workers also confirmed that they had met children that were fabling, not 
describing their own experiences. The preschool reported this to the social services and it was 
revealed during the investigation that the children were describing a film or a story that they 
recently had heard. This becomes obvious when the social worker asked the child further 
questions and talk with their network. One social worker explained that:

I had a lot of these kind of cases when the law was new, 2014, I called them “Alfons Åberg- cases” because I met three siblings that were describing an Alfons Åberg-movie (a Swedish child story) instead of their reality. But I think the situation has 
calmed down. This happened when the law was changed, all signs of violence 
should be reported and investigated by the social welfare unit. (Sahra)


All social workers used child adaptive methods when they inform children about who they are 
and about the investigation but also in their dialogue with the children. Different artefacts help the child to focus and to explain their situation as concretely as possible. The social workers 
meet children from 0 to 12 years old, and especially the younger children needed help to focus
and clarify their story, sometimes by drawing or showing sequences with the help of dolls and other material.

One social worker explained how a child could tell his or her story and view on the matter by making a film that would be presented at a network meeting aimed to make a coordinated plan for the individual child according to 2:7 SSA (SFS 2001:453). The meeting included the parents and different professionals, altogether almost 30 people, which is too many for a child to confront with.

Usually I talk to the child, write it down and present it to the others. But now we make a digital story, the child can draw, paint, cut and paste and we present it to the meeting. Then they can express their views to the meeting without being present.

We had this meeting about an eleven years old child. I asked her if she wanted to make a film, and she said yes. She has ADHD, could only focus during short periods of time so it became a short film. But she was able to give her opinion of her situation (Sahra)

4.1.5 Infants.

The social workers declared that they met with all children they investigated with very few exceptions, and early age or no spoken language were never the reason why. Infants are observed either together with the guardian or at day care centres. If it is possible, the social workers also play together with the children, alone or together with the guardian. Their right to participation is being achieved by observation, they are being viewed. (Johanna) Some of the social workers were more experienced, they had earlier been working with children at institutions or day care centres, and they argued that observation is an important tool for understanding an infant’s situation. Children can influence their investigation by their actions, their behaviour.

We observe how an infant act and relate to his or her guardians. If it is very fretful or does not thrive. Or doesn’t react adequate on the parent’s initiative or the opposite. We observe infants and you need to know how children develop in order to not react on every sign of inadequate behaviour. (Johanna)
4.1.6. Children’s involvement in the investigation.

Some children could tell the social workers during their meeting that they wanted change in their family like “less conflicts and trouble”. It depended on age and maturity how involved they were.

It depends on age, I work with a boy, and he said: can I start school at 10 o’clock instead of early in the morning. I checked with the teacher and it was ok. Then we decided so, but I told him that this is an agreement and it is important that he will attend the days that we agreed on. His suggestion was included in the working plan.

(Anna)

None of the social workers discussed time and place for meetings with the children. Sometimes they discussed it with the parents to find the optimal time of the day for a particular child. Children were seldom included in the discussions of interventions if they not were the target of the intervention such as contact person or contact family or when the child was in need of protection and had to be separated from his or her family. The social workers rarely met the child when the in-home interventions were discussed, often in the later part of an investigation.

4.2 The social workers’ descriptions of obstacles of children’s participation.

4.2.1 Protect children from harmful information.

The social workers often used different words when informing the children, different from the words used in the reports to the social welfare unit. They argue that children should not be given information about their parents which is difficult for them to handle. They do not say that the parent is an abuse addict or mentally ill, instead they are saying “your parents have a problem as they drink too much or your mother is very ill, as she stays in bed all day and doesn’t speak to you”. (Cecilia) The social workers also described that they did not want to use offensive language. One social worker described how she used other words than in the report, when talking to a child about his or her behaviour at school:

If it is a report about a child’s own behaviour, I do not read it straight from the paper to the child if it contains a lot of negative specific information. I think, you can spare them that, they already know that they’re in trouble at school or at home. Instead I can say: “I have spoken to your teacher and she thinks, she wonders how you experience school. Sometimes the breaks in the schoolyard doesn’t work out
so well and you and your classmates gets into fights with each other”. You have to think about that it is a 10 year old child in front of you, how would you feel if you came to a social welfare unit and they said: “they say that you fight, spit, scream, swear and say dirty words and pee on the door”. Mostly, I am explicit, but sometimes you have to mollify the description. (Anna)

When children have been recurrently investigated by the social worker and is well known, the social workers sometimes decide not to inform the child of the new reports. The social workers argue that they have enough information already or do not want to disturb and interfere with ongoing interventions, only the guardians will be informed.

I have investigated the children in this family seven times before, they have just started with in-home-treatment. No, I will not speak with the children this time, they know me, and they know how to reach me. The report is about school absence and trouble at home and we are working in the family 20 hours a week. (Sahra)

4.2.2 Hurdles in order to meet the child.

Some children do not want to meet or talk to a social worker. They are shy, say nothing or scream and run away when they see the social worker. The social workers often try one or two times in order to get contact with the child, but if a child still doesn’t want to interact, they stop trying. One social worker explains

It is their right to get their voice heard, not my right to hear their voice (Sahra)

Sometimes guardians restrain the children from contact with the social workers. The social workers describe this situation with ambivalence. According to the law, if a child could be in need of protection, a social worker has the right to talk with the child, with or without the guardian’s knowledge or acceptance (SSA 11:10). The social workers use this right very strictly, primarily in cases when the child is abused and could be in need of protection. The most common situation at social welfare units is that children and their families are in need of help and support and this could only be given to them with the approval of the guardians. The social workers pointed out that they are in need of an alliance with the parents to get a consent of the interventions and are therefore willing to accept the guardians’ terms. In particular if it otherwise could create a conflict with the parent. It was seen as more important that the child
and his or her family get help and support. Especially if the child’s participation was not expected to change the outcome of the investigation, e.g. the interventions.

Most of the interventions that are given to families are according to SSA and optional for the guardians. I do not withhold any important information but it has to be said smart and respectful. If parents get angry and walk away, the children’s situation may not be changed at all. (Cecilia)

To talk to a child with extensive support according to the Act Concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (SFS 1993:387 or undergoing therapy was described as a difficult task.

Some of these children have difficulties to express themselves. They are not particularly verbal and have difficulties with social interactions, they seldom speak. When you meet them, you do it for the principle. One child I met together with her family counsellor, and I got information from the counsellor about the girl, but she was present during the interview and overheard it. (Karin)

One social worker explains that she would only speak briefly with a child that is going to be interrogated by the police of child abuse as some children do not want to talk repeatedly about how they have been abused. High work load was also mentioned as being the reason for limited contact with the child.

The social workers emphasized that children are loyal to their parents, even if the parents have huge problems children often deny that it is affecting them, claiming that they can take care of themselves if a parent is failing in that capacity. Most children are also aware of what the consequences could be if they tell the social worker about abuse or neglect, and want to protect their parents.

I think many children are afraid that something is going to happen to their parents if they tell us about their situation. This week I met a boy who asked me if the police will take his daddy. They protect their parents. They are quite aware of this, from the age of five or six years. They understand that what they tell can affect their parents (Birgitta)
4.2.3 Feedback.

Guardians are always being briefed by the social worker about the outcome of the investigation, most often orally but always by the written report according to the social workers in the study. Children are seldom included in the briefing, more often if their participation is included in the intervention such as contact persons or contact family. The social workers argue that the child’s approval is needed in these situations.

I do not discuss interventions with the child, if it’s not an application of contact family or contact person. Then I have discussed it with the child, as the intervention target the child (Elina)

Information is mostly given at the start of an intervention, for example in the case of in-home treatment. Parents and sometimes children meet together with the social workers to discuss the goals and how the intervention will be carried out. Children could be included in the follow-up if the intervention is directed to them. One social worker describes:

I have been working with an 11 years old boy, he hits his mother and sister. I need to get him included in the intervention. I asked him if he wanted to stop hitting them and he said yes. Let’s try to do this, do you think it will work, I asked him. And he said yes. We had a separate meeting before the follow-up meeting, just the two of us. (Görel)

But most of the social workers describe their feedback to the child as “something that we could be better at” or “an area of improvement” showing that the social workers are well aware of that they don’t reach the goals of children’s participation.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION.

All social workers in the study emphasise that children’s participation is not only to be given a voice, to be interviewed, it is to get enough information in order to express an opinion that can influence the social investigation and the intervention.

This view is in line with CRC, SSA and the concept of BBiC (The child’s needs in focus); the child’s views and opinions shall be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (SSA § 11:10) (SFS 2001:453). All social workers embrace the idea of children’s
participation in social investigations, point out that they view the child’s perspective and opinion to be very important and that they meet and talk to almost all children. The social workers described it as their responsibility to make it possible for all children to participate in the investigations. Their starting point was that children are agents, capable of influencing their own life as well as their family and context, and in the same time their actions are limited by their harsh experiences as well as by the structure they live in.

Sweden has ratified CRC and the article 13 of the convention states that “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice”. This article is mirrored in one of BBIC’s basic principles; the work according to BBIC shall “emerge from the rights of the child” (UNCRC 2016, Socialstyrelsen 2016). The structure of the investigation also supports children’s participation; children’s views on their situation must be reported in the document. This Swedish BBIC-instruction of children’s participation differs from how children’s participation in social investigations is described on the website of the Child and Family Service in Washington, District of Columbia (CFSADC) USA. United States of America is the only country that only has signed, not ratified, the CRC and this influences the US children’s participation in social investigations. The website of the CFSADC points out that the social workers always talk to the child that is being assessed without the presence of the parent, but this is not described as a right of the child in any of the documents that describe child support and child protection. Children are constantly being described as part of their biological family, never as independent right holders with views, possibly, in opposition with the family. There is also no right for children to be informed in a child adaptive way, reflected by their age and maturity (CFSADC 2016).

All social workers in my study emphasised the importance of meeting a child several times during the process of an investigation. Children were seen as a part of a family system, but the most important part.

The social workers in my study emphasize that children need to be engaged because the investigation is about their life. They argue that children need to participate because their contribution is important to the investigation. They also stress that the children they investigate are vulnerable, living under harsh conditions or/and have experiences of abuse. Despite this, they have a right to participate and it is the social worker’s responsibility to make their participation possible without harming them.
Eriksson & Näsman stress the importance of especially children that have witnessed domestic violence to have the possibility of getting information, an overview and control – to be participants in the process. But the need to be a participant can include all children that are being investigated by social workers. Eriksson & Näsman argue that seeing the child as in need of care and protection and seeing a child as a participant is not mutually excluding.

Here, the rights principle and the care principle merge. While children’s participation is often mainly associated with an actor and rights perspective, we argue that participation can also be defined as something central for children within a care perspective. It can create possibilities for validation of children’s difficult experiences and following from that, support for children’s recovery after violence and abuse (Eriksson & Näsman 2008 p. 272).

When the social workers that were interviewed got the question of how they made children participate in the social investigation they answered that it depended on the child. They labelled themselves as flexible in how they explain the process of investigation to the child and how they interviewed the child. They described how they adapted different ways of communicating; oral, drawings and observations and met the child at the social welfare unit, in school or at home. The child was described as an individual, with his or her own reactions to the situation. They argue that even a new born or toddler can give information to the investigation through his or her interaction with the guardian and others and through his or her behaviour. Vis & Fossum (2015) found in their study that experienced social workers viewed child participation as more difficult compared to less experienced colleagues. This is not the case in my study, on the contrary, they described their experience as a resource in promoting both young children and children with cognitive difficulties to participate in social investigations (Vis & Fossum 2015 p.285).

But the interviews also showed that there was a discrepancy between the social worker’s view on the importance of children’s participation and how it was accomplished. Despite viewing all children as important contributors to the investigation, the social workers described how oral interaction dominated and that the child’s age and maturity influenced the extent of their participation. Toddlers were able to give information through their behaviour but their statement had to be confirmed by others in order to influence the investigation. The structure of the investigation resulted in that a child was informed about the reason for investigation and was able to give information about his or her situation in the early phases of the investigation.
But children were excluded from the discussions of eventual interventions, these negotiations were held between the social worker and the guardians. It’s the legal guardian that can accept the interventions including children under 15 years old, children have no legal say and this affects the social worker’s attitudes regarding children’s participation. Bijleveld et al (2014) underline that participation is a situational process in which all relevant actors become part of a mutual dialogue and given proper value (Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunden-Aelen p.254). The social workers explained that they were discussing different ideas with co-workers in order to include and inform children about the outcome of the investigation, but time restraint and heavy workloads made this low priority.

All social workers described the children they met as vulnerable because of their experiences of abuse, neglect, domestic violence or school problems, some of them had cognitive difficulties and it was a challenge to make the investigation understandable for them. Their ambition was to include them in the investigation and both inform them and listen to their opinion of their situation. Despite the social workers’ attention towards the child’s needs during the meeting the time and place of the interviews were only discussed with the legal guardians. Children themselves were seldom consulted. The guardians acted as gate keepers between the children and the social workers and decided if the child was capable of meeting a social worker by themselves and to what extent. The social workers pointed out that some children need more time and several meetings in order to be comfortable to talk to the social worker than others. The time restraint of the social investigation can make it hard to give these children the time they need to be able to participate.

The lack of flexibility within the system as well as time restraints was described as barriers for children’s participation in Sanders & Mace (2006) study of welsh social workers. The welsh social workers promoted the possibility for children to attend a part of a conference and be taken care of outside the room if needed and to use creative methods in order to explain the process for the child and to gain knowledge of their wishes and feelings. They also mentioned that one barrier to children’s participation could be poor practice (Sanders & Mace 2006 p 96).

All social workers that were interviewed in my study had taken part in education of BBiC where children’s participation was promoted, and several of the social workers had also taken part in education and training in how to talk with children. The municipality also presented information about the process of social investigation at its web site, addressing young people. These initiatives strengthened the social worker’s ability and eased their work in including and informing children during the investigation process. In Berrick et al (2015) study of English,
Finnish, Norwegian and US social workers they found that English social workers assign lower importance to bringing forth the child’s wishes and feelings and questioning the child about his or her needs. They consider lack of skills and confidence to interact with children to be one reason for this result (Berrick et al 2015 p.137). This is not the situation for the social workers that I interviewed, they were all confident in their skills in speaking with children. They described children as capable and understandable, having an opinion about their own situation if they were given information and time to explain their point of view. Social workers just needed to use child adaptive methods in order to make this happen, they argued.

The social workers in my study all at first said that they believed that children were telling the truth when asked about their situation. Then they explained that children tell the truth about their experience of their situation and that this is the core of the investigation. They argued that young children can’t describe living conditions that they have not experienced promoting their view on children as reliable. But they also gave examples of when children were unreliable and had described child stories they heard or films that they had watched as their own experience. They avoided saying that children can lie, they described it as children could fable, describe a story that had made an impact on them. Children were often very careful with the words when they described their living conditions and these stories were used by the social workers to improve the children’s situation and to make their guardians motivated for interventions. Children were described as active and competent, the social workers gave examples of how the children were part of the discussions of how the interventions were outlined.

But the social workers also described how they protected children from information they were viewed as to immature to know about, such as rape and mental illness. The social workers were ambivalent, wanting to protect the children from harsh information but at the same time saying that children always are aware about what happens in their family.

Pinkney (2011) argues that listening to children is not an easy task, as it is described in legislations and policies. Listening is about understanding, and professionals sometimes have difficulties in understanding children’s views when they are not expressed in a mature way. Angry children are not behaving as expected, not in accordance with the view on childhood as innocent and playful. It can be hard for professionals to listen and understand these children (Pinkney 2011 p. 40, 41).

Another hurdle of children’s participation was the social workers pragmatic posture towards parents that refuse to let them speak to their children or limit the subjects that they could discuss
with them. The social workers in my study argue, in these cases, that the possibility to make the parents accept an intervention was a priority. They argue that the intervention, from which the child will benefit, will be at risk if the social worker persists in talking to the child. In these cases the child neither get or give any information and can’t influence the eventual intervention. But listening to the views of the child and taking them into account in the process “is the only way to ensure a rights-compliant approach to the implementation of article 3 in CRC” (Kilkelly 2015 p.219).

In research by Vis & Fossum (2015) they point out that child participation in social work doesn’t meet the expectations according to Norwegian child protection policy and that there is a “relationship between participation and factors related to organization and culture within social services” (Vis & Fossum 2015 p.279). Many of the interviewed social workers mentioned that children’s participation in social investigations were discussed together with the whole children’s division and at discussions with the supervisor about how a particular case would be outlined. The social workers considered these discussions to be important reminders of the importance of including the child in the investigation and to receive suggestions from co-workers.

They also emphasized the importance of support and understanding from the supervisor that building a trustworthy relationship with a child takes time if you want to have a meaningful discussion with him or her. Too heavy workloads and lack of time available to meet with the child counteracts the ambition among the social workers to meet with the child at least two times. It is also the supervisors that can decide to prolong the investigation if needed, to make it possible for the social worker and the child to meet before a decision about an invention is made. Most social reports have to be confirmed by the supervisor, making her a key person regarding child participation.

None of the social workers brought up that the structure of the social investigation is unfriendly to children or that the method, orally and written language adapted for adults and the legal process, could be a hurdle for children in their participation. The structure was taken for granted and not able to change. It is described as an obstacle that has to be navigated.

To sum up, the social workers viewed children to be competent enough to receive information as well as to be capable contributors to the investigations. Participation was viewed as a cornerstone in their work with children. Children were described as capable of communicating information and their perspective on their situation through talk, behaviour or play, indicating
that all children can contribute despite age. But oral communication dominates and has a higher value, showing that age and maturity has an impact on children’s participation. Children were seldom consulted during discussions about interventions and rarely informed about the outcome of the investigations making them unaware of how their contribution had influenced the social investigation.
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Appendix 1

Explanation of key terms.

Children.

The term children means humans in the age 0-18 years.

Social worker

The term social worker, in this study means an employee which investigates children at a social welfare centre.

Social investigation

When the social welfare centre gets knowledge of a child that might be in need of protection or support from the unit, because of abuse, neglect or other circumstances an investigation according to 11:1, 2 SSA has to be done. The investigation shall result in a report that includes the ground for the investigation, the child’s and the guardian’s view on the matter, a thorough description of the child’s situation and the child’s, the parents’ and other, for the child important persons view on the matter. The investigation shall not be more extensive than needed (11:2 SSA). The social worker shall analyse the child’s situation and suggest interventions if needed. The report shall include the child’s and parents’ view on the report and the eventually suggested interventions. (SFS 2001:453 p.13; Socialstyrelsen 2011 p.21-36).

Social welfare centre, child department

In larger municipalities, the social welfare centre is divided into different departments. These departments are specialized to meet the need of different categories such as children 0-12 years old, youth 13-20 years old or adults 21-.

BBiC (Barns Behov i Centrum) – The child’s needs in focus.

BBiC has its origin in the British Looking after children System (LAC) and Assessment for Children in Need and their Families (AF). It has been adapted to the Swedish context by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) and was launched 2006. The purpose of BBIC is to strengthen the child's perspective and participation of children, young people and their families, both during the child investigation and during the voluntarily or compulsory interventions. The system shall also ensure consistency across the country and to
improve and maintain the quality of the social child and youth care. A conceptual triangle is used during the investigation with sides describing needs of children, parenting capacity and environment and the concept emphasizes seven principles that underpin BBIC. Different forms are used during the process; from investigation to different forms for interventions and reviews (Socialstyrelsen 2011 p.21-36).

**Participation**

The principles of BBiC underpins the importance of children’s participation in the investigation process and during the interventions. The social worker shall inform the child about the process and the content of the investigation. In every decision that includes the child, the social worker shall describe if and how the child’s view is acquired and taken into account.
Appendix 2.

Interview questions.

Research has shown that it is difficult to create a situation where children can participate in social investigations, what is your approach to include them and make them participate?

What does the concept of participation mean to you and how can you tell that a child is participating in the investigation?

How are children participating in the investigation process, from report to eventual interventions?

What encourages the child’s participation?

What are the obstacles when it comes to children’s participation?

Are there, according to you, guidelines as to how you should work with child participation?

Can children be harmed due to participating?

Do children speak the truth when describing their situation?

The social workers were also asked about their age and years of work experience.
Hi

I have been working as a social worker at child welfare units for many years but is now pursuing a Master program in Child studies at Linköping University. I have chosen to conduct my second master essay on research about children’s participation in social investigations. In my first essay I analysed children’s participation in ten social reports of children between seven and twelve years old.

The aim of my forthcoming essay is to examine social worker’s perspective on child participation and my questions are about how children of 0-12 years old are engaged in social investigations. How do you as a social worker deal with children’s participation? What are the advantages, are there problems or difficulties and how do you handle that?

If you chose to take part in this research you can stop participating at any time during or after the interview. You will remain anonymous and the name of the municipality will not be revealed. The interview sessions will last for about an hour. I will record the interview and transcribe it by myself and you will be able to read the interview afterwards and make comments. Material from the interviews will be destroyed after my examination in September 2016.

The interviews will preferably be conducted between 20-23 April at the social welfare centre.

The essay will be available at DiVA.

Please e-mail me if you have further questions.

Agneta Mönefors Berntell
agneta.m.berntell@gmail.com
Appendix 4.

Fictitious names, age and years of professional experience as social worker among the interviewees.

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<th>Age</th>
<th>Year of experience</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
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