



Save the Children
Sweden

Co-funded by
the European Union



Youth participation workshop Meeting Place Stockholm 26th September 2015

Within the framework of the project *No Longer Alone: Advancing Reception Standards for Unaccompanied Minors*, a youth participation workshop was carried out by Save the Children Sweden on 26th September 2015 in Stockholm.

Meeting place is a method for youth participation developed and previously conducted on several occasions by Save the Children Sweden, and was the method applied when arranging and carrying out this workshop. The aim of Meeting place is to recognize and listen to the experiences of unaccompanied minors in regards to the reception and the initial stay in Sweden. Meeting place is arranged as a one day workshop and the targeted audience is youths who have experienced coming to Sweden as unaccompanied minors.

Meeting Place Stockholm 26th September 2015

Planning and preparation

A project group was put together consisting of a project leader with own experience of coming to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor, an operational developer from Save the Children Sweden, a volunteer engaged in a local group for refugee issues within Save the Children Sweden and a person employed in the municipality of Sigtuna in a project on unaccompanied youths participation in reception procedures. Participating in the project group was also three persons with own experiences of coming to Sweden as unaccompanied minors.

The target audience for the workshop was youths within the age of 13 to 21 that have experienced coming to Sweden as minors without a legal guardian. State of residence permit could vary, though the aim was that the participants should have resided in Sweden at least a year in order to be able to reflect on the reception and to have a basic understanding of the language.

By evaluating the experiences of previous Meeting places within Save the Children Sweden, some challenges were identified and taken into consideration when inviting participants. The identified challenges was difficulties in involving unaccompanied female minors and unaccompanied minors residing in foster care. These challenges though maintained as challenges for this meeting place, regardless of efforts to use new channels when inviting participants.

The workshop

22 youths participated in Meeting Place Stockholm. They all reside in care facilities and the majority were male.

The agenda for the workshop consisted of an introduction and four discussions focusing on four different themes: living situation, guardians, school/education and the future.

These four themes were based on an over-riding theme of involvement and participation whereas the questions to each theme focused on the following: whether or not the participants have been informed on issues related to the theme, good experiences, bad experiences, suggestions for improvement, knowledge of ones rights and obligations and on how oneself would want to act if working with the reception of unaccompanied minors.

An optional activity also existed during the day where the participants in front of a video camera could answer questions on the experiences of Sweden and the future. The workshop ended with a conclusion and an evaluation of the participants experience of the day.

The participants were divided into smaller groups consisting of four to five persons for the discussions, each group a person was lead by a discussion leader who posed related questions to each theme.

Results from discussions

The documentation of the participants experiences during the workshop is here compiled based on the four themes for discussion in the workshop.

Living situation

The participants have experiences from different care facilities in Stockholm where they are currently residing or have previously resided, in which the number of residents in the care facilities vary from 5-30 youths.

The size of the care facilities was a topic lifted in all groups during the discussion on living situation, and was adressed by the participants as an important factor for wellbeing in the home. Participants residing in homes with over 10 youths described the home environment as noisy and never quiet. One participant residing in a home with 25 youths expressed difficulties with disorder and disturbance and making the daily routines function in a home with so many persons. Another participant expressed difficulties with disturbance during night time due to too many youths in the same home. Participants in larger care facilities also expressed that too many youths residing in the same home negatively affects the home environment in form of for example access to kitchen and bathrooms and the possibilities to keep order in those areas of the home. Participants also expressed that larger care facilities contribute to more trouble and fights between residents. Some of the participants with experience of residing in smaller homes with less residents expressed that less persons living together contribute to feelings of living like a family and that building relations is easier.

Another topic discussed in relation to living situation was experiences of the staff in the care facilities. Some participants had very positive experiences of the staff and described the staff as always helping them out, that they are kind and listen and that they assist with homework and language training and with contacts needed for example health care. Positive experiences was also lifted in relation to having an appointed contact person in the staff.

Some participants expressed negative experiences with the staff. One participant expressed difficulties regarding the staff due to some in the staff being kind and some not. One participant expressed that it is difficult when the staff is changing all the time because it means having to start over again and again with building relations and getting to know new

people. Another participant expressed that it is difficult to not being allowed to contact the staff during night time with problems. Some of the participants expressed that the staff do not care about them, that staff are diminishing their problems and expressed difficulties with not being able to communicate with the staff or that the staff do not ask about how they are or how they feel. Some participants express that they experience too many rules in the care facilities, especially on what is not allowed, whilst some participants expressed rules as positive to keep order in larger homes. Some participants expressed that there is no one to turn to with complaints or for issues regarding the staff, and further that the director of the care facilities was rarely or never seen, this in turn they expressed meant that no one asked about the youths own experiences of the staff.

The participants suggestions for how the living situation can be improved was that the care facilities for unaccompanied minors should consist of no more than 5-10 youths in each home, that the staff must treat everyone equal, that there must be respect for each others religions and that the residents in the home should be involved in decision making. That staff help out with grocery shopping or cooking was also expressed as important according to some participants, who found that it can be difficult with finding the time for both school and chores at home. Another suggestion was regular leisure activities where the youth are able to come with suggestions for activities. There was also a suggestion for youths to get the possibility to anonymously through an evaluation form give opinion on the care facility in which they reside, and what they find in need of improvement.

Guardian

The experiences of ones guardian vary among the participants. Many of the participants express that they are satisfied with their current guardian and see him or her as a peson who helps out with everything they need in day to day life. Some participants express that the guardian have been there for them when they needed, that they do more for them than their actual commitment is, that they are almost like a parent and that they still keep in contact even though the guardianship have officially ended. Some participants have negative experiences of their guardians. One participant express that his guardian have told him that he do not like him due to his nationality and do not help with anything. Some participants expressed that the guardian only talked about personal issues and topics like politics and not the concerns of the youth. Some participants say that their experience is that some guardians seem to be guardians only to make money and that they do not care about the youths. One participant expressed difficulties with the guardian due to language barriers and not being able to communicate with the person responsible for you. Participants expressed that some guardians do not handle the administrative side of the assignment which can result in the youth missing important dates and meetings with authorities.

The majority of the participants expressed that they were not involved at all when assigned a guardian. One participant expressed that it was very hard to try and change guardian when it was not working out due to the guardians personal problems taking over, even though the staff at the care facility as well recognized the problem. Opinions and suggestions on involvement and participation when being assigned a guardian was for example to be able to have a short try out period of around one to two weeks or up to a month with the assigned guardian with a possibility to change if the youth feel that it will not work out. Other opinions from the participants was that is must be possible to change guardian if your are

not satisfied or feel mistreated. For this the participants also express that youths need to be informed on where to turn if in need to make complaints and with requests to change guardian.

The participants shared views according to their own experiences on what they think is important for a guardian, in terms of what a guardian should do and how a guardian should be. It was expressed that it is important that the guardians listen to the youth, that they are engaged and concerned of the youths wellbeing and that they have an understanding of working with youths in general. The participants said it is important that the guardian is aware and considerate of the stress and concern the asylum process can involve for unaccompanied youths. It was further expressed that a guardian should be like a mentor and assist in focusing on the future. The participants also said it important that a guardian is not assigned with too many youths at the same time. Regarding contact with ones guardian the participants expressed that it should be easy to reach and get answers from the guardian and that regular meetings over the phone and in person is preferable at least once a week. It was also expressed that the guardian should respect the youth as a human being regardless of nationality or religion and follow the laws and regulations. According to the participants it is important that a guardian establish good relations to the care facilities and the school, that they take responsibility for, and help plan, the youths economy and that they accompany their assigned youths to meetings.

School/education

For the discussion on school and education many participants expressed satisfaction with the teachers. The majority opinion was that encouragement from teachers is important, and also that teachers and other staff at school care and can be asked for help. The experience was that teachers most often care but that they do not always have enough resources.

When discussing challenges and difficulties with school and education many participants expressed that the classes must be adjusted according to the levels of the students, in regards to knowledge of the Swedish language but also previous educative background. If not it may decrease motivation and ability to learn and evolve, for both the students on a lower and a higher level. Some participants expressed that it would be valuable to at a higher extent be involved in the regular classes with Swedish classmates and to not be treated differently due to one's background. Concerns lifted was also that being in a preparation class when the level of education is below one's own slows down the process of development. Some participants expressed that worry and stress over the asylum process and not having received a permanent residence permit makes it difficult to concentrate and focus on education and to plan for further studies. One participant expressed experiences of negative attitudes towards migrants from other students at school.

Suggestions for improvements from the participants was that more teachers is needed and that there is a need for better support in learning the language. The participants also expressed a need for increased home language instruction. The participants also lifted the importance of schools working with equality and everyone's right to support regardless of who you are or where you are from as an over-riding essential for all education to be successful.

The future

In the discussion on the future the focus was on how the participants feel about their future and what support they feel they have or lack in regards to realize their plans for the future.

Many of the participants lifted education as an important factor for receiving their goals, to educate and find a job in a field of interest. The field of interest for future jobs varied among the participants but was for example engineer, social worker, doctor, to work with children, to work with refugees, to work with women's rights in the home country, lawyer, mechanic and to work with technics and IT. Some participants express a positive view on the future and for being able to realize their plans and dreams. One participant express that it is also important to be able to look back and be proud over oneself and what you have accomplished and been able to handle, for example to have learned a new language, in order to prepare for your future.

When discussing possibilities and hinders for realizing the plans for the future the participants lifted various aspects. Some participants expressed that stress and worry over whether or not to receive a permanent residence permit was a large obstacle for being able to plan their future. Some participants expressed that worry for family members who are still in the home country makes it difficult to focus on the future and make plans. Many participants expressed difficulties to mentally prepare and plan for the future when being alone without the support of a family and to only have yourself to depend on. Another hinder that was lifted was the difficulties with support around the participants that will end at certain age limits, for example was the termination of the guardian assignment the day you turn 18 brought up as being difficult if there is no information on what happens next. Some participants expressed that these age limits can involve stress since there is no other support network around them such as family and there is an uncertainty on whether you will be able to handle everything on your own.

When discussing hinders for realizing ones plans for the future the participants expressed that there is a need for more information on education; for example on how you can plan your studies according to what you aim for regarding jobs in the future, and information on possibilities for further studies and how to apply for the university. The participants also expressed a need for more information on what rights and obligations they have after the age of 18 and the age of 21, and what support from society they are entitled to and can ask for when passing the limits of those ages, will say after the support they have from guardians and the care facilities ends. One participant said that there is a fear for the age of 21 that other children do not experience, due to the uncertainty of what is going to happen and what support there is going to be, or not be, around you.

Evaluation of the Meeting place

The workshop ended with an evaluation of the day for the participants. The evaluation came to focus on practicalities during the day as well as the content of the discussions. The majority of the participants were satisfied with the day and expressed that it is valuable to listen to what other youths think and feel on for example the future. The topics for discussion was considered good, though there was also a comment on that there could have been more topics to discuss during the day.

Five of the participants in Meeting Place expressed that they are interested in to work further with the results of the discussions during the workshop in some way. They will meet with the operational developer from Save the Children Sweden and members of the project group to discuss how this will be done and in what forum.

Reflections from the project group after the workshop

Here follow some reflections from the operational developer within Save the Children on the process of arranging and carrying out the workshop:

Meeting place is a good method for a youth participation workshop, if it is done thoroughly and the content thought through. It is important to clarify the aim and purpose of the Meeting Place, both within the project group and for the participants. Though the overall view on this workshop is satisfaction over the results and the discussions, we could have worked even more with the themes and the questions in the planning process for a better result during the actual workshop. This might also have prevented that some questions had to be left out due to lack of time. The discussion leaders could have been better prepared and educated within the project group. An experience from this workshop is that it is beneficial to in advance prepare for how to work further with the results of the workshop and the information that is gathered, and how to best seize interest from the youths on continue to work with the content of the workshop and related issues.

The aspect of the project leader and the discussion leaders having own experiences of being unaccompanied minors is believed to encourage trust between organizers and participants. It is important though to reflect on whether one's own experience is influencing or controlling the content, and there is a need to continuously work with methods to avoid that during the process.