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# Youth Oriented Development of Child Protective Services

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## Abstract

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The aim of this Bachelor of Social Services functional thesis is to create participatory and youth-focused working methods that benefit the child protective services in Finland. The thesis was conducted in collaboration with a working life partner, Osallisuuden aika association, which main aim is to gain involvement of former service users of child protective services and professionals of social services. The theoretical framework of the thesis focuses on the child welfare system and its clientship, previous research of substitute care, participation as a concept and the benefits of youth orientation. When referring to children and youth in our thesis, we mean individuals who are approximately between the ages of 13-29 years. This functional thesis was implemented as participatory working methods with a client group. All the seven participants shared a background of child protective services and substitute care. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 31 years old. The workshops that were created as a working method had different themes, which covered the usual events in substitute care: arriving to substitute care, everyday life in substitute care as well as after care and independence. Based on the conversations of the workshops, the participants expressed the importance of proper ways of encountering, open conversation, having a structured everyday life and having enough skills and knowledge for independent life. Additionally, the participants considered the arrangement of services, individuality of each client and how to develop the current child welfare services. The workshops received positive feedback from the participants and the working life partner. We believe that the working methods and contents of the workshops can be adapted and used in other contexts to promote participation.

Keywords: child protection, youth participation, youth-focused orientation, workshop, substitute care, after care, development work

Tämän Sosionomi AMK tutkinnon toiminallisen opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on luoda osallistavia ja nuorisolähtöisiä työtapoja, jotka hyödyntävät lastensuojelupalveluita Suomessa. Opinnäytetyömme toteutettiin yhteistyössä työelämäkumppanin, Osallisuuden aika ry:n kanssa, yhdistyksen, jonka päätavoitteena on saada mukaan edellisiä lastensuojelupalveluiden asiakkaita ja sosiaalihuollon ammattilaisia. Opinnäytetyön teoreettinen viitekehys keskittyy lasten hyvinvointijärjestelmään ja sen asiakaskuntaan, aikaisempiin tutkimuksiin sijaishuollosta, osallisuuteen käsitteenä ja nuorisolähtöisyyden hyötyihin. Viitatessa lapsiin ja nuoriin opinnäytetyössä, tarkoitamme henkilöitä, jotka ovat suunnilleen 13-29 vuotiaita. Toiminnallinen opinnäytetyö on toteutettu osallistavana työmenetelmänä asiakasryhmän kanssa. Kaikki seitsemän osallistujaa jakavat taustan lastensuojelusta ja sijaishuollosta. Osallistujien ikä vaihteli 16 ikävuodesta 31 ikävuoteen. Työpajat, jotka luotiin työtapana opinnäytetyöhön, koostuivat eri teemoista, jotka kattoivat tavanmukaiset tapahtumat sijaishuollossa: sijaishuoltoon saapuminen, arki sijaishuollossa, sekä jälkihuolto ja itsenäistyminen. Työpajoissa käytyjen keskustelujen perusteella osallistujat ilmaisivat oikeanlaisten kohtaamistapojen, avoimen keskustelun, jäsennellyn arjen, riittävän osaamisen ja tiedon omaamisen itsenäistä elämää varten tärkeinä asioina. Lisäksi osallistujat ottivat huomioon palveluiden järjestämisen, jokaisen asiakkaan yksilöllisyyden, ja miten tämänhetkisiä lastensuojelupalveluita voitaisiin kehittää. Työpajat saivat positiivista palautetta osallistujilta ja työelämäkumppanilta. Uskomme, että työpajojen työmenetelmiä ja sisältöjä voidaan mukauttaa ja käyttää muissa konteksteissa osallisuuden edistämiseksi.

Avainsanat: lastensuojelu, nuorten osallisuus, nuorisolähtöisyys, työpaja, sijaishuolto, jälkihuolto, kehitystyö

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# 1 Introduction

From the beginning, we were interested in concentrating our thesis on substitute care of child protective services and its participatory and child-focused orientation development. We saw our thesis to be an opportunity to get a deeper understanding of child protective services and to expand our knowledge about participation and child-focused orientation.

Our thesis working life partner was hoping for us to implement this project as a functional thesis since their clients would in that aspect enjoy participating in it more. We brainstormed as a group for possible topics that we would want to benefit from in our thesis and some ways to implement a functional thesis. Eventually, we decided to make three workshops that will concentrate on the lives of young people during substitute care. Those workshops are called: Arriving to substitute care, Everyday life in substitute care and Stepping towards independence. Our goal is to create workshops as a tool that will help youth in substitute care to be heard and help professionals understand the needs of youth in substitute care.

We are confident that the child protection field needs new and creative working methods to hear the opinions of children and youth. Kuure (2010) explains that youth workshop activities can help us detect oncoming changes to the lives of young people in our current culture. In other words, when studying something small and marginal, at the same time we will get information about something bigger that touches the mainstream of society and the cultural change we are experiencing. (Kuure 2010.) We also see that child protection services could benefit from workshops since they are more participatory and a child- and youth-focused way to be heard than to ask questions monotonically about substitute care.

We will implement our thesis in cooperation with a working life partner called Osallisuuden aika association (In English "Time to participate"). As

Osallisuuden aika association is based in the capital region of Helsinki, our thesis will focus on children and young people living locally. In addition, our working life partner helps us to gather the youth who will be the participants of our thesis workshops. Osallisuuden aika association managed to gather five young persons and two workers of the organization to our workshops. According to the Youth Law, (Orig. Nuorisolaki 1285/2016) young people are considered to be under the age of 29. In our thesis when we are discussing children and youth, we refer to people approximately aged between 12 to 29.

The theoretical framework of our thesis focuses on explaining the structure of child welfare in the Finnish context, the concept of participation and the importance of it considering the child protection field, as well as the definition of child-focused orientation and its benefits. We will consider the importance of Finnish legislation while exploring these topics in our theoretical framework. In addition, we will include previous knowledge of arriving to substitute care, everyday life in substitute care and aftercare.

Our workshop plan will contain our thesis aim and main focus for our workshops. Our workshops aimed to create participatory and youth-focused working methods that benefit child protective services. With our workshop plan, we also planned the possible timetable for our meetings.

The implementation of our workshops explains the actual output of our workshops and how it changed compared to our workshop plan. We arranged three different workshops which themes were arriving to substitute care, everyday life of substitute care and steps towards independence.

Evaluation of our workshops will include the comments of our participants and also our thoughts on how things went through. Finally, the discussion of our thesis evaluates our goal and if it is achieved, further development proposal of our workshops and how our workshops can be carried out and adapted in different situations.

## 2 Operating environment

The operating environment in which we are implementing our functional thesis workshops is held in Osallisuuden aika association's youth evening. The client group whom we are keeping the workshop for are former and current child protective service clients. Osallisuuden aika association's Young Developers group will also be part of the evening. We are holding three workshops with different topics in which all of the participants can take part.

### 2.1 Working life partner (Osallisuuden aika association)

Osallisuuden aika association ("Time to participate" in English) is an association whose main aim is to gain the involvement of former service users of child protective services and professionals of social services. Osallisuuden aika association has two key goals which are to strengthen social services as an equal partnership between service users and professionals and to increase cooperative ways of working in child protective services. (Osallisuuden aika ry n.d.)

Osallisuuden aika association was founded in April 2014 from the roots of a group called the Young Developers. The Young Developers began as an expert group with child protection experience in 2011. The Young Developers was awarded the Finnish National Democracy Award in November 2012. Winning this award was an important recognition of the group's development and participation work. (Osallisuuden aika ry n.d.)

The young people who work in the association of Osallisuuden aika are former clients of child protective services. The young people working in the association have for instance been giving speeches and lectures together with social services professionals in several conferences. In addition, they have been teaching new social workers at the University of Helsinki. In the spirit of the co-researching method, they have also participated in several different work



groups that develop social services with the goal of them being new and better functioning. (Osallisuuden aika ry n.d.)

The co-researching method is the main method that Osallisuuden aika uses in their association. The method that is used is based on the systematic innovation model formulated by Pasi Pohjola and Juha Koivisto (2013). In the model, development is seen as a networking process, an interaction between various elements and actors. Previous service users work has an equal relationship with various professionals, researchers and students. (Osallisuuden aika ry n.d.) The foundations of the co-researching method are voluntary participation, acting within a relationship, cooperation and co-planning, empowerment, trust, equal and open expertise, influencing and ethics (Palsanen 2013, cited in Osallisuuden aika ry n.d.)

### **3 Theoretical framework**

#### **3.1 Child welfare in the Finnish context**

The aim of child welfare in Finland is to provide the child an opportunity for a safe growing environment, balanced and versatile development as well as special protection (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023).

The Child Welfare Act 417/2007 states that the child's parents or other guardians are primarily responsible for the child's wellbeing. However, authorities, who work with children and families, have an obligation to provide support and assistance with the child's upbringing if needed.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health are responsible for the preparation of the child protection legislation as well as general guidance. Additionally, the newly established welfare counties have the responsibility to provide these child welfare services. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023; The Child Welfare Act 417/2007.)

### 3.1.1 Child protection

Child protection- and family- services become relevant when the preventive means of child protection are not sufficient to ensure the child's healthy development and safety. Child protection authorities work closely with the child and their family to find solutions to their situation and problems. (Hyvönen & Mustalahti 2020.) Child protection has three basic tasks:

- 1) To influence children's general upbringing conditions
- 2) To support parents or other guardians with the child's upbringing
- 3) To provide protection and safety to children

(Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

### 3.1.2 Clientship process in child protection

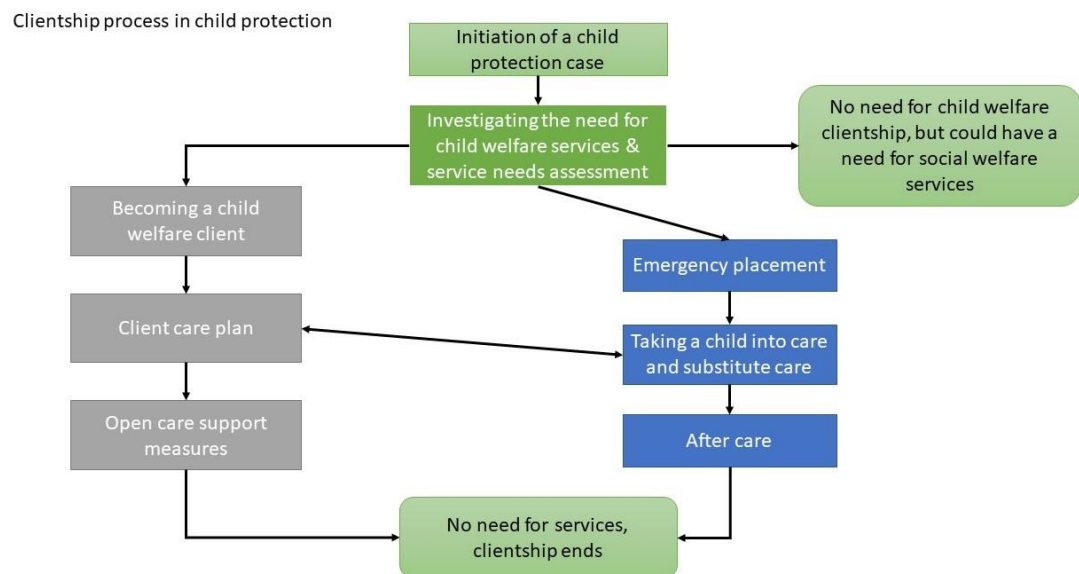


Figure.1 Clientship process in child protection (Hyvönen & Mustalahti 2020).

The flowchart above (Figure.1) depicts the clientship process in child protection. A child protection case will be initiated either through a child welfare notification, at the child's or guardians' notice or if a child welfare worker finds or learns that there is a possibility a child needs welfare services.

Once the case is initiated, it is necessary to assess whether the need for child protection is urgent. Urgent cases may result in emergency placement or the organisation of urgent open-care support measures. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.) In addition, an assessment of the need for services must be carried out in accordance with the Social Welfare Act 710/1982, 36 §. If it is determined that a clientship in child protection is not needed, the child and the family will be referred to social welfare services.

The clientship begins if urgent measures are taken to safeguard the child's health and development. Clientship can also begin if a social worker determines, based on the service need assessment, that the child's upbringing conditions endanger the child's health and development, the child's own behaviour endangers their health and development or that the child needs services and support measures following the Child Welfare Act. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

When child protection clientship begins, a client plan is made for the child together with the child and their family. The client plan is made for children in emergency placements as well as for children receiving open-care measures. The care plan is a tool for documentation, and it guides the work done in child protection. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

A child can be taken into care only if open care support measures are deemed insufficient. Taking into care is always the last option and a means of intervention. (Hyvönen & Mustalahti 2020.)

A child's substitute care refers to arranging the care and upbringing of a child taken into care, urgently placed, or placed under a temporary order outside the home. A child receiving open care support can be placed in substitute care voluntarily. Substitute care's different forms are family care, child protection institution or other care according to the child's needs. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

A child protection clientship ends when there is no need for services, substitute care, taking into care or if open measures are sufficient. Substitute care and taking into care end when the child turns 18 years old. After substitute care, the young person is moved to aftercare services that help the young person gain sufficient skills to start their independent life. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

### 3.1.3 The rights of the child

Finland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The convention is comprised of 54 articles in total, and it applies to children under the age of 18. Some general principles of the convention include that: all children are equal; a child has the inherent right to life and a child has a right to form their own opinions and express those opinions in matters that concern the child. (Malja et al. 2020; Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.)

Child protection work and its implementation are heavily guided by the principle of the best interests of the child. Thus, all child protection activities and situations must be resolved in accordance with the best interests of the child. On the other hand, the best interests of the child cannot be assessed without taking into consideration the child's participation, because the child is the subject of the decisions made. (Salmela 2020.) A thorough and comprehensive review must be conducted of the child and the child's life situation when assessing the best interests of the child (Malja et al. 2020).

A child in substitute care has special rights during their time in substitute care. According to the Child Welfare Act 417/2007 these include the right to a foster care placement that meets the child's needs, the right to good and respectful treatment, the right to meet and maintain relationships with the people close to the child, the right to meet a social worker, the right to receive information about one's own situation and the right to receive operating funds. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a.)

Child protection in Finland attempts to emphasise the child's individuality. Children's rights, participation in work and being heard are important in child and youth-centeredness. The concept of participation is strongly related to a child-focused orientation. (Sund 2021.)

## 3.2 Previous research on child protective services

### 3.2.1 Arriving to the substitute care

The first 24 hours in new a substitute care place are very important for the child and/or young person. The child must have the feeling of being accepted. Settling into a new home should be a positive experience. Substitute care placement has a huge responsibility to implement the actual transition to the new home in a way that will be a positive experience for a child. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2022.)

Creating a successful basis for placement is necessary for a good reception of the child. Workers must have enough time to spend time with the new child to whom they are welcoming. However, it is crucial to give space for a child to respire. This is important since among other support, a child needs a peaceful space to recover from the crisis and familiarize themselves with the new situation. It requires major adaptability for a child to get used to new adults, other children, a new environment, new rules and lifestyle. In addition, a child needs time for consolation, presence and recovery to strengthen the feeling of safety. For an adult, patience for waiting at appropriate times and finding time for discussion, because the uncertainty of life is turning only step by step towards certainty and times of balance. (Känkänen 2009: 268.)

When a child is moving into substitute care, a child must have their own space with basic necessities. That space must be designed in a way that a child can, for instance, decorate their room the way they want. While this stage happens, a child must also be guided and helped to get to know other children and staff of the substitute care place. In addition, adaptation to the substitute care and the

new situation will be discussed with the child age-appropriately. A substitute care place must consider the individual needs of the child and their situation. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2022.)

Especially in the beginning of the substitute care, new practices can feel confusing and overwhelming for a child and to the close ones of the child. For that reason, a social worker and/or a counsellor will book a time for discussion and conversation with a child and the close ones of a child. Moreover, a social worker must ensure that substitute care place will know the support network of a child. The social worker must also ensure that from the beginning substitute care will have good interaction and professional partnership with a child's close ones. (Eriksson & Korhonen 2022.)

Different research and previous knowledge have pointed out ways that children and youth want to be encountered in general when being in substitute care. According to research by Tallgren (2022), children experience good encounters in a professional aspect including an experience that they want to be helped and that no counsellors use their power position wrongly. In addition, the experience that counsellors are on the same side as the youth and can discuss with genuine interest about the young person's situation is seen as important. From an emotional aspect, youth value encounters that include appreciation, caring and acceptance from counsellors. (Tallgren 2022.) Additionally, Kemppainen (2021) points out in her thesis that it is still important for youth to be heard, even when it does not lead to any concrete measures.

### 3.2.2 Everyday life in substitute care

As the child settles into the substitute care place's environment many important factors should be taken into consideration. According to the Child Welfare Act 417/2007 and to the Act on Child Custody and Right of Access 361/1983 a child's everyday life in the substitute care place must be arranged in a child-centered way and with the child in mind. In addition, substitute care has to secure good upbringing and care of the child, supervision and care that is age

and development level-appropriate, and the child's right to a balanced development and well-being. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos n.d.)

In order to support and secure a fluid everyday life of the child in the substitute care placement certain essential factors have to be followed. The child has to be guaranteed safe living conditions and ensure the child's physical, emotional, mental, and sexual safety. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos n.d.)

Child's basic care such as clothing, food and hygiene has to be provided. Furthermore, it is useful that a child is taught financial management and spending. The substitute care place should support the child to remember to rest, support the child in rehabilitation, support the child to start hobbies and encourage the child to study corresponding to their tendencies and wishes. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos n.d.)

Moreover, children in substitute care should be taught to make and follow boundaries, agreements and rules. In this way, a child learns to bear responsibility and create boundaries for their own actions. In situations of conflict, a child should be given an example of how difficult situations can be solved constructively. The need to use restrictive measures in substitute care places should always be considered carefully on a case-by-case basis. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos n.d.)

Based on a previous study written by Karoliina Salin (2021) brings out the experiences of 33 people based on the Pesäpuu association's 101 letters (101 kirjettä) published study. The study wanted to find out what kind of experiences children and young people have of participation in substitute care. Based on the material three main themes were found: not being heard, not being encountered, and the lack of support and knowledge. (Salin 2021: 1.)

According to the results, the participation of children in substitute care is not realized in a way that it should be in accordance with the rights of the child. The results of the analysis mainly highlight the negative experiences of the participants. Salin explains that the received results are similar to previously

conducted studies and enhance the view that participation of children in substitute care is not on the required level and needs significant improvement. (Salin 2021: 1.)

In addition, the letters brought out the young people's wishes to be seen and encountered. The study conducted by Pesäpuu highlights the significant fact that young people want to be part of creating change and influencing young people's, children's and families' ability to receive help in Finland in the 2020s. The letters bring out the fact that there is still a lot of work to be done so that every child, young person and family would receive the help that they need from child protection. (Kaijanen, Koskenkorva & Westlund 2020: 168.)

### 3.2.3 Aftercare

Young people transitioning from substitute care to aftercare services and independent living are seen to form one of the most vulnerable groups in society: according to research findings, many of these individuals have an increased risk of being marginalized and some may have accumulated problems both during and after substitute care. Children and young people, who have been placed outside the home, face different challenges when they move into adulthood, and they have a clear risk of social inequality with different effects. These effects become evident when looking at factors that measure well-being in general, such as education, health, housing, entering the labour market and staying there. (Hoikkala 2016: 29.)

A report published by the Ministry of Social Affairs (2019) highlights that young adults, who become clients of aftercare services, have had significantly more challenges with life management skills, which has led to a considerable increase in demand for services. For instance, 53% of the 13–17-year-olds placed outside the home were also clients of youth psychiatry; the corresponding figure for peers is 7%. This in turn shows that the support provided by youth psychiatric care during aftercare is often not enough to support a young person. These individuals often fall off the service network



when they are repeatedly deprived of long-term and client-oriented support. (Ministry Social Affairs and Health 2019: 10)

Aftercare is not of uniform quality nationwide, and its implementation depends heavily on the municipality and welfare counties. There is a need for up-to-date information produced in different ways about child protection services and aftercare. The information should be based on various research settings and materials about many topics: for example, social problems, good practices, the reasons and mechanisms for child protection services, the structures of society, and the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of child protection work. (Hoikkala 2016: 30.)

### 3.3 Participation as a concept

Participation has several meanings. Participation includes for example hobbies, activities, work and education, which leads towards a political and social focus while at the same time linking it to social democracy and citizenship. In practice, participation is a value-based dynamic process which leads to change and action. (Simpson 2019, cited in Charfe and Gardner 2019: 84.) Wyness' invention "The Voice Model" of participation focuses on people's voices being heard which influences decision-making processes (Wyness 2019, cited in Simpson 2019).

Furthermore, participation can be explained as consisting of the right to receive information on plans, decisions, actions, solutions and their explanations which concern oneself. Part of participation is also having opportunities to express one's own opinions and having the possibility to influence these matters. However, what is very crucial, is a child's own experience that they can participate in influencing the handling of matters concerning themselves. It is not possible to talk about the realization of participation if the child does not have the experience that the matters that are important to them have been heard and they have mattered. This is essentially important in child protection work. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023b.)

Isola et al. explain participation as belonging to such entirety where it is possible to attach to well-being sources and to interactional relationships that increase the meaning of life. Participation means having the possibility to affect one's own course of life, services, opportunities, activities and some common matters. (Isola et al. 2017: 5.)

From a social pedagogical perspective, supporting one's participation and agency can be referred to as the concept of participation ("osallisuus"). It suggests that participation is achieved through a certain kind of inclusion, where the participants' opportunities to influence are emphasized. (Nivala & Ryyänen 2019: 201)

Moreover, participation can be seen as decision-making power in one's own life, the possibility to regulate actions and being, and as an understandable, predictable and manageable operating environment. In addition, participation can appear as a process of influence, where one can influence outside matters such as services, groups, residential environment and broadly in society. Participation can also appear locally in a way when one can invest in the common good, participate in experiencing meaning and creating it, and associate in reciprocal social relationships. (Isola et al. 2017: 5.) Participation can be summed up as involvement, relatedness, togetherness and belongingness, coherence, inclusion, representation and democracy (Isola et al. 2017: 3).

### 3.3.1 Youth participation

Participation is a relational concept. It means that participation is always participation in something or from something. Youth participation is essentially about growing into citizenship, into a full membership of society. It appears as an attachment to the communities of society and to the operating systems in which by belonging to people maintain life control and the quality of life, satisfy their needs and realize themselves as members of society. In addition, youth participation is participation in work, education, adequate livelihood, satisfying

relationships, self-developing hobbies, political influence and other participation, civic activities, and advocacy. (Hämäläinen 2008: 26-27.)

To grasp the nature and conditions of youth participation, we need an understanding of what the society, in which we live in, and whose participation is in question, is like. In the late modern society of the present day, the demand for high professional skills, the need for continuous training, information technology and many kinds of instability are highlighted. Society changes quickly, and participation can be seen as a willingness to keep up with this change. Participation is in essence participation in education, and educational exclusion has fatal and long-lasting consequences both for the individual and for society. (Hämäläinen 2008: 27.)

Promoting youth participation has been held as a strategic answer to young people's symptomatology. On the reverse side of participation is nonparticipation (In Finnish "osattomuus"). It is also common to use the terms disadvantaged and marginalization. By promoting youth participation, at the same time, we are preventing and mitigating exclusion, marginalization and disadvantage. (Hämäläinen 2008: 15.)

However, promoting youth participation is not only about preventing disadvantage and exclusion. In conclusion, promoting youth participation is therefore not only about helping young people at risk of exclusion and breaking individual cycles of exclusion. It is about comprehensively strengthening the future potential of youth and seeing young people as participants in society and builders of the future. The promotion of participation thus concerns the entire youth and covers all young people, broadly the entire youth culture. (Hämäläinen 2008: 15.)

The promotion of youth participation can be seen as a broad national duty, the implementation of which involves non-governmental organizations, working life partners and authorities. The main idea is to follow the idea of young people being attached to working life through educational participation and further

being attached to society through work. (Hämäläinen 2008: 25-26.) Additionally, guided functional youth work emphasizes supporting young people's participation and agency, developing individual potential and encouraging self-expression and the communal spirit of the activity. (Nivala & Ryyänen 2019: 245-246)

If we look at youth participation from the point of view of an individual, the main interfaces are psychological participation and young people's individual activity in society, participation as a citizen, and political and other social influence. On the other hand, from the perspective of the individual and society's relation, participation can be understood as integration, attaching to society in which member the individual is. It is about the creation of such bonds between the individual and society that strengthen the individual's ability to live as a member of society, ability to function socially and meet society's expectations. (Hämäläinen 2008: 26-27.)

### 3.3.2 Participation in child protection

A research study executed in Germany in 2019 to child protective service clients, examined out-of-home placement from the perspective of children. The study analysed the ways in which the inclusion of children's opinions in child protection decision-making is limited or eased. One of the outcomes that were found from the study is that children's involvement in influencing and discussing decision-making processes relating to out-of-home placement enhances children's empowerment, competencies, and feelings of autonomy. In addition, the study highlights the fact that feelings of exclusion and nonparticipation are frequent experiences taking place in the child protection system. (Nunes 2021: 430.)

The study shows that children taking part of the study feel marginal in the participation on their child protection processes (Nunes 2021, 431). The children who were part of this study and children who participated in other studies want to be involved in decision-making processes that deal with their

child protection and placement. (Ibid. Van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen n.d.: 130, cited in Nunes 2021: 431). When children have the opportunity to participate, they can become involved, influence and discuss about their protection. This could also create opportunities for children to help guide child protective service professional's decision-making in the direction of a more child-centred approach. (Nunes 2021: 431.)

Children participating in the study described that an important part of participation is discussing the decisions which impact their lives with different actors such as professionals and parents who are involved. Furthermore, this should include open dialogue. More that was mentioned in the study was that professionals should consider children as active social actors who can impact decisions relating to their own protection. (Nunes 2021: 431.)

In addition, the study informed that it is important for professionals and parents or legal guardians to pay attention to the views of the child. This leads to the perception of respect for the child. Moreover, the study highlights the importance that children are listened to and ensure that they feel they are taken seriously. (Nunes 2021: 431.)

A study carried out by Bessel, Vis. et al. and Woolfson found that the participation of children can improve the quality of service provision, result in more precise decisions and improve results for children's protection, and support children's well-being (Woodman & others quoting Bessell, Vis et al. & Woolfson. Woodman, Roche, McArthur, & Moore 2018: 475-84, cited in Nunes 2021: 431). On the other hand, the child protection services and measures keep being distant from children's needs and best interests if children do not participate in the decision making affecting them. The study suggests as a solution that efforts should be made to secure a shift from hearing children to actually seeking to maintain their autonomy. (Nunes 2021: 431-432.)

The results found from the study conducted by Nunes found many factors in the importance of children's participation in their child protection processes. The

information from the study will certainly help and assist us in planning and creating our workshops for our Bachelor's thesis. In addition, it gave us more perspective on what the development areas could be in order to support children's participation as child protective service clients in substitute care.

A study conducted by Höjer, Hultman and Larsson is trying to find out what do actors in child protection processes in Sweden know about children's rights to participation and about talking to children. The study expresses that there can be tension between a child's right to participate and the views they indicate and how different actors in child protection processes understand a child's perspective. It is explained that even if children's voices are heard, they rarely have the chance to influence decisions about their support. There is a chance that parents or legal representatives portray the best interest of the child differently than the child themselves would. (Höjer et al. 2022: 4.)

The relationship between social workers and children is important for the children's experience of participation (Weisz et al. 2021, cited in Höjer et al. 2022: 5). A professional to have a good relationship with a child can make it easier for the child to express what are their real means (Höjer et al. 2022: 5).

Also, a professional has to have enough information and knowledge about the child in question, which can make it easier for the social worker to evaluate whether a child's statement reflects their real feelings (Vis, Holtan & Thomas 2012, cited in Höjer et al. 2022: 5). Based on the study, young people say that for them the most significant factor is availability, for example that a social worker has time to meet them (Dillon, Greenop & Hills 2016, cited in Höjer et al. 2022: 5).

### 3.3.3 Participation as a right in legislation

Children's and young people's right to participation is highlighted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The countries which are part of the constitution's agreement, have to guarantee to a child, who is capable of forming their own opinion, to express their own views on all the

matters regarding the child. The views of the child have to be taken into account according to the child's age and level of development. (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 60/1991, Article 12, section 1.)

The child has to be given the opportunity to be heard in legal and administrative actions concerning them, either directly or through a representative or relevant institution, in accordance with the procedures of national legislation (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 60/1991, Article 12, section 2).

The child has the right to express their opinions freely. This right includes the freedom to seek, receive and spread information and ideas of all kinds across borders in oral, written, printed, artistic or any other form chosen by the child. (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 60/1991, Article 13, section 1.)

### 3.4 Youth orientation and development work

The development of child-focused orientation in child protective services has been one of the emerging themes of the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. The fact that primary concentration is on parents instead of children in work practice and the condition of children is evaluated through the condition of parents has been criticised. Moreover, it has been criticised that even in situations where administratively children must be heard, the children have been disregarded. The development of child-oriented work practices is not only discussed in the child protection field, but also in the educational work field and elsewhere. (Pösö 2003.) Levomäki (2018) also pointed out in her thesis that at the beginning of the 2000 century, child-focused orientation and conversations emphasising the rights of children had taken a certain role in research and development work in child protection services. It is possible to implement child-orientated practices in child protection work environments by different approaches. Those approaches could be, for instance, assessing threats or risks of well-being and insecurity that relate to a child's life, and the child's needs or resources. Additionally, from the point of view of research and

development, child participation has grown as a huge trend. (Bardy & Heino 2013, cited in Levomäki 2018.)

Although child-focused orientation was a discussed topic in the 1990-2000s, the thought of child-orientation pedagogy started even earlier. Loris Malaguzzin (1921-1994) developed a pedagogical theory in the 1960s called Reggio Emilia. The main thought of Reggio Emilia pedagogy is to treat children with respect and listen to their concerns. This pedagogical theory has been referred to as “pedagogy of listening.” In addition, the values of pedagogy by Reggio philosophy are based on the rights to be important actors in children’s and adult’s own lives, respect diversity and participation, learning, play, joy and emotions. (Suomen Reggio Emilia -yhdistys n.d.) This theory clearly emphasises individuals’ participation, own agency and as well as child-orientation.

In child-orientated work, a child is seen as an equal and active actor. Therefore, the meaning of child orientation is that a child and the point of view of a child is considered in every phase of the work process. It is important to understand that the information of children is as valuable as adults’ or professionals’ information. (Pelastakaa Lapset n.d.) Participation considers the influence and decision-making opportunities of children. Therefore, in these respects, participation is a relevant part of child-orientation. (Rosqvist et al. 2019.)

#### 3.4.1 The benefits of child-focused orientation and participation

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, participation refers to being present, caretaking and influencing, and taking part in building collective well-being. In Finland, it is noticed that legislation supports and strongly secures the child’s right to participation. It is mentioned that the basic rights of the child include the right to be treated equally as an individual and the right to have an impact on decisions of themselves considering age-appropriate development (Non-discrimination Act 1999/731, section 6). In addition, in every phase of the child protection process, Finnish child protection legislation emphasises the



involvement of the child. The goal of ensuring the real participation the children in taking care of their own things comes across clearly in legislation. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinninlaitos 2023.)

It has been seen that participation benefits children, youth, and their surrounding community. Leena Turja (2017), states that the aim of participation is equality where every child finds a way to become heard. Turja (2017) continues to argue that participation strengthens the child's motivation to learn, collaboration skills and to be part of own community. It has also been pointed out that when youth can have the opportunity to make impactful decisions, freely make choices and express their opinions, they will learn the valuable skills of participation and influence (Lettenmeier et al. 2019). In addition, participation can create the feeling of empowerment and protection especially for the children who have many experiences of being marginalized. Although the participation of children and youth is beneficial for them, it also gives an opportunity to change adults' perceptions of children as "passive targets." Instead, adults can see children as active actors. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinninlaitos 2023b.)

Participation of children and youth are major part of child-orientation. There is no possibility to create child-orientated action or work without including elements of participation in it. In other words, child-orientation and participation are complementary concepts. Therefore, we can argue that the upper theoretical information that applies to the benefits of participation also applies to child-focused orientation.

#### 3.4.2 Benefits of youth participation on development work

Lettenmeier et al. (2019) provide a great example of including youth in the operation of the municipality's different service areas. They state that municipalities should consider where the young people want to be and live. Young people need to be heard so that municipalities can make good resource-efficient and transparent decisions. In their example, Lettenmeier et al. (2019)

argue that it is not necessary to build a skatepark if young people do not want it or they do not have a use for it. They continue by stating that when young people have been involved in the planning and designing process, the skatepark could be better protected from vandalism when the young people experience the place as their own. (Lettenmeier et al. 2019.)

It is important to involve youth in development work to create a future which will be beneficial for the whole community. Why would we create new activities and practices if they will not be necessary for the younger generation? Not only by including youth in development work can we create a pleasant environment for youth, but we can also save our resources and bring out practices that can be far more useful for the modern and future generations.

## **4 Implementation of thesis**

Our working life partner, Osallisuuden Aika, was hoping for us to implement this project as a functional thesis. The aims of a functional thesis require describing a process, analysing its steps and developing child protection services through practical activities (Säteri, 2020).

We had brainstormed as a group for possible thesis topics that we would want to learn more about. Therefore, as a group, we decided to narrow down our topic to a thesis aim, which enabled us to begin with the planning and implementation of our thesis. In our thesis, we aim to create participatory and youth-focused working methods that benefit the child protection services.

With this thesis aim in mind, we wanted to implement the workshops with our target group and facilitate these workshops ourselves. We felt that working together for a common cause could bring out the best discussions with the participant group. The target group and participants for our workshops are organized with the help of our working life partner.

## 4.1 Preliminary workshop plan

Our thesis group is building the workshops chronologically around the theme of child protection and the usual events that take place when clientship begins and until it ends. Table.1 shows the themes of each workshop, planned activities, the aim of the activity and what materials we need to facilitate the workshops.

Table.1: preliminary plan for workshops

Themes	Aims	Activity	Materials needed
Workshop 1: Arriving to substitute care	Find out what are the important things and ways to encounter youth. Find out did those important things succeed when youth arrive to substitute care.	Youth must select at least three claim cards which they will perceive as the most important ways of encounters for them when they have settled into substitute care. After selection, we will discuss about those selections.	Claim cards
Workshop 2: Everyday life in substitute care	Find out what makes everyday life nice and pleasant.	Writing thoughts and wishes on note pads about what makes everyday life nice and pleasant for oneself. The note pads are then closed to small envelopes which are then opened and put on a big mind map board.	Note pads, small envelopes, and some big paper board.
Workshop 3: Steps towards independence	To find out what kind of assistance young people need before starting their independent life and what do they think should be taken into consideration before the young person moves out.	Writing on a mind map about the workshop's topics and after that discussing about them.	Mind map / large paper

## 4.2 Practical arrangements and time management

Osallisuuden aika association helped us to promote the Young Developers evening as well as our workshops, so we could get the maximum number of participants for our thesis.

Table.2: Preliminary timetable for workshops

Time	Activity	Comments
10-20 min	Welcome / introduction	Coffee, something to drink and icebreaker games
10-15 mins/per workshops = 45min max	Workshops	5 min breaks to move around workshops
10-15 min	Break	
Around 30 min	Ending	Free-flowing conversation and feedback Pizza for the participants

## 5 Description of implementation

The Young Developers evening is a recurring event every fortnight. The evenings involve working on a theme chosen by the participating group. Visitors, who are experts in the given theme, are regularly invited to join the group sessions. The information produced by the Young Developers group is the core of OA's (Osallisuuden Aika's) advocacy work. Over the years the group has discussed various topics, for example, a good substitute care place, developing the cooperation between schools and child protection, and development of services for families with children.

The thesis group arrived an hour before the workshops were supposed to start and met with the working life partners group facilitators to quickly go over our preliminary timetable. Based on the OA group facilitators' comments, we switched eating to the beginning of the meeting and changed the workshops to be run back-to-back, so that all participants would participate simultaneously. We decided that this would be the best approach to running the workshops,

thus the participants could listen to other group members sharing their ideas and add their own points of view.

Instead of icebreakers, we just decided to talk with the young people when they started arriving as they were already previously acquainted. In the end, we managed to gather a group of 5 young people and two OA group facilitators. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 31 years old. The OA group facilitators are also previous clients of child protection and/or aftercare services as well as experts by experience. They participated in the workshops, helped us facilitate, and kept track of the time of the session.

To start the meeting, OA facilitators asked every participant their thoughts and feelings for the night using “if” cards (jos-kortit). We then introduced ourselves via a prepared PowerPoint where we explained who we were and what is our purpose for joining the Young Developers evening. We briefly covered the contents of the evening as well as the aims of each of our workshops. The workshops aim to enable young people's participation and to innovate new practices for child protection services together with young people. Every member of our thesis group was responsible for facilitating one workshop.

## 5.1 Workshop 1: Arriving to substitute care

### 5.1.1 Aims and the activity of the workshop

The instructions for using the cards are the following: Participants must select three claim cards which they will perceive as the most important ways of encounters for them when they settled into the substitute care. In this phase, approximately 5 minutes or less was reserved for choosing the cards. After selecting the cards, we went through together, what kind of cards were chosen, why exactly those cards were chosen and did those encounter ways succeed when settling in the substitute care.

### 5.1.2 Description of materials and methods used

The workshop utilized self-made claim cards called “Welcome New Young Person!” (See appendix.1 and figure.2). However, the employees of Osallisuuden aika association gave their support and feedback comments about the cards which helped design the cards during the implementation process. The thesis group also provided their own comments about the cards.

The claims of the cards were focused on the interaction between the counsellor and the youth, the environment where the youth live and the needs of the youth. The claims are meant to be applicable for free-form discussion. For example, “I need my own peace and time to adapt to the new growth environment” or “I need support and guidance in my new daily activities.” In total, there were thirty-two claim cards to select from. The pack of cards also included four completely empty cards; in case some cards in the pack do not describe how the person wishes to be encountered.



Figure 2: A few examples of the claim cards “Welcome new young person” (in Finnish)

## 5.2 Workshop 2: Everyday life in substitute care

### 5.2.1 Aims and the activity of the workshop

The Young Developers evening is a recurring event every fortnight. The evenings involve working on a theme chosen by the participating group. Visitors, who are experts in the given theme, are regularly invited to join the group sessions. The information produced by the Young Developers group is the core of OA's (Osallisuuden Aika's) advocacy work. Over the years the group has discussed various topics, for example, a good substitute care place, developing the cooperation between schools and child protection, and development of services for families with children.

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contents of the evening as well as the aims of each of our workshops. The workshops aim to enable young people's participation and to innovate new practices for child protection services together with young people. Every member of our thesis group was responsible for facilitating one workshop.

### 5.3 Workshop 1: Arriving to substitute care

#### 5.3.1 Aims and the activity of the workshop

The instructions for using the cards are the following: Participants must select three claim cards which they will perceive as the most important ways of encounters for them when they settled into the substitute care. In this phase, approximately 5 minutes or less was reserved for choosing the cards. After selecting the cards, we went through together, what kind of cards were chosen, why exactly those cards were chosen and did those encounter ways succeed when settling in the substitute care.

#### 5.3.2 Description of materials and methods used

The workshop utilized self-made claim cards called "Welcome New Young Person!" (See appendix.1 and figure.2). However, the employees of Osallisuuden aika association gave their support and feedback comments about the cards which helped design the cards during the implementation process. The thesis group also provided their own comments about the cards.

The claims of the cards were focused on the interaction between the counsellor and the youth, the environment where the youth live and the needs of the youth. The claims are meant to be applicable for free-form discussion. For example, "I need my own peace and time to adapt to the new growth environment" or "I need support and guidance in my new daily activities." In total, there were thirty-two claim cards to select from. The pack of cards also included four completely empty cards; in case some cards in the pack do not describe how the person wishes to be encountered.





Figure 2: A few examples of the claim cards “Welcome new young person” (in Finnish)

## 5.4 Workshop 2: Everyday life in substitute care

### 5.4.1 Aims and the activity of the workshop

The second workshop’s topic was “Everyday life in substitute care.” The aim of the workshop was to find out what is good in the everyday life of young people living in substitute care and what could be improved to make it more pleasant. For the workshop we created a big flap board paper with two sections: what is good at the moment (in Finnish: Mikä on tällä hetkellä hyvää) and what could be improved (in Finnish: Mitä voisi parantaa)

One of the participants suggested that instead of the topic “What is good at the moment” in substitute care, it could be “What makes child protection safe?” (In Finnish: Mikä tekee lastensuojelusta turvallisen?). This question was then used together with the question “What is good at the moment”.

The workshop was carried out with notepads. The young people participating in the workshop wrote down on green and pink notepads their thoughts on the two questions mentioned above. On the green-coloured notepads, the participants wrote what they thought was good at the moment in substitute care or what they



Figure.3: Notepads on a flap board paper (in Finnish) that were co-created with the workshop participants.

## 5.5 Workshop 3: Steps towards independence

### 5.5.1 Aims and activity of the workshop

As previously stated, the purpose of this workshop was to find out what kind of assistance young people need when starting their independent life and what should be taken into consideration when a young person moves out. We also wanted to find out if aftercare services are deemed as sufficient for those participants who had already moved out and what the participants who are just moving to aftercare think and know of the services already.

In the mind map, we wrote assisting theme ideas, such as what are the young people's hopes and fears when they are starting to become independent adults.

### 5.5.2 Description of materials and methods used

Mind maps are a great way to visually present and organize information. It can also be utilised to demonstrate various perceptions of a common issue as well as to illustrate the relationships between individual concepts. Mind maps can be used to support participation as they are often constructed via focus group discussions in real-time together with the participants or by group facilitators based on the collected information. (Mehryar, MacClune & Norton 2022.)

Due to time restraints, we decided that the workshop facilitator would collect the main ideas from the discussions onto the mind map.

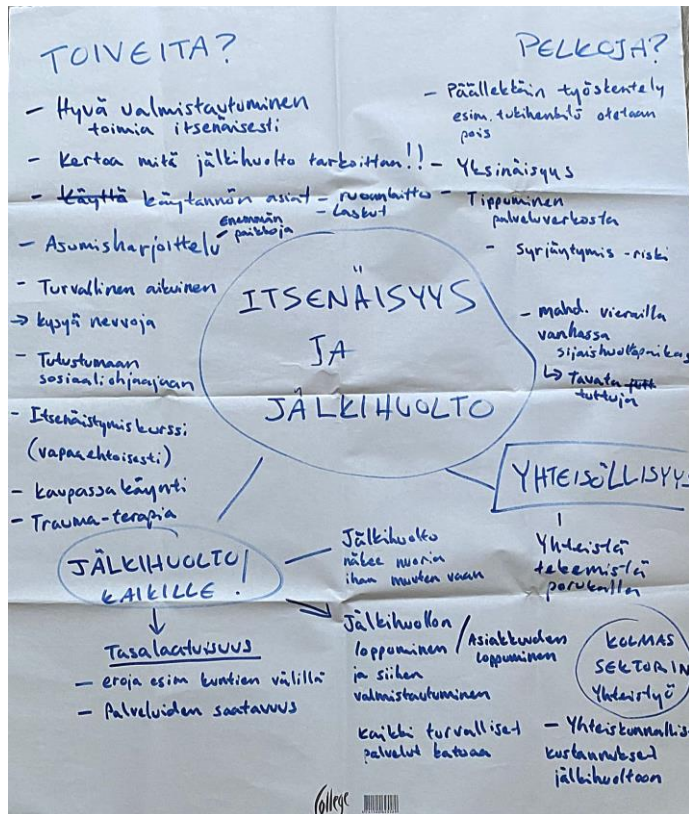


Figure.4: Mind map (in Finnish) that was co-created with the workshop participants.

## 5.6 Summary of workshop discussions

The conversation of workshop 1 was multidimensional and rich. It became clear from the discussion that participants valued counsellors' basic interaction skills, self-initiated skills to have conversations, a possibility for leisurely encounters, considering clients individual needs and not treating children and youth just as a client but as a child as well. In addition, participants wish that counsellors would be braver to have therapeutic conversations with them. Participants valued verbal and physical closeness from counsellors in substitute care, which can be viewed as therapeutic interaction. Moreover, participants brought up social friend groups and activities to be important when they arrive to substitute care. Participants also emphasised the importance of letting children and youth be children and youth and not being pressured to be something for which they are not ready. Unfortunately, while we were having these discussions with the

participants the negative experiences were shared, and we noticed that the needs and wishes of participants did not always succeed during substitute care. However, the experiences of youth differed from each other at times. One participant shared that their interests were not supported, while another participant told about their complete opposite experience. From this workshop, we concluded that there are varying differences between counsellors and substitute care places in Finland.

The second workshop brought up many principal factors in the everyday life of young people living in substitute care. One of the main things that was discussed is that young people wished that they were or are to be encountered as individuals by their counsellors.

In addition, very mundane everyday life things such as schedules, food routines, having the possibility to have hobbies, structured everyday life, spending time with counsellors and doing joint activities with the young people in the children's home were seen as important parts of making substitute care more enjoyable and safer. These types of factors support the participation of young people in substitute care, which further develops their agency, influence and involvement. Moreover, the ability of counsellors to face negative emotions and topics was seen as an important factor by the participants.

The part of the second workshop which topic was "what could be improved" in substitute care caused comprehensive discussion. One main factor that was brought up in many participants' answers were humane encounters and the caring of young people by adults. For example, this showed in the notes about wishing that adults had expressed that they had wanted to spend time with young people, time to do things together with adults, and not having to feel uncomfortable such as in stores when buying with purchase slips and if a problem appeared in those situations.

Based on the discussions, caring for young people and a wish that adults would show it concretely arose in many points made by the participants. For example,

having been wished good night and receiving good physical touch from counsellors, such as a hug, was seen as important as well as the flexibility of the counsellors. However, what was discovered during the discussions was that many of these factors certainly varied between substitute care places.

The third workshop was highly anticipated by the participants as they felt that they had lots of ideas to discuss about the topic of independence and aftercare. The discussions ranged vastly from small individual wishes all the way to examining wider structural issues that workers and clients might face during the independence transition period.

The small wishes were related to practical everyday matters the young person needs to know when moving out on their own such as residential training at the substitute care placement, going to the grocery store, cooking, paying bills and managing personal finances. Additionally, having a safe adult who would guide the young person through this period was seen as crucial.

Wider structural issues the participants discussed were about the fears of loneliness, marginalisation and falling off the service network. Also, the uniformity, quality and availability of aftercare services seem different based on the municipalities. The participants suggested that aftercare services should be outsourced in collaboration with the third sector service providers to manage client congestion.

The conversations from all workshops were active and vivid. Every participant was eager to participate in each workshop with differing opinions and experiences. It was useful to facilitate each workshop back-to-back, so all participants could listen to each other's comments and bounce off ideas from others. By doing so, the contents of the discussions were highly determined by the participants and our pre-planned themes only acted as a conversation starter.

From the facilitators point of view, we wanted to give each participant enough time to speak their thoughts and be heard by others. We found guiding the

conversation to be easy as the participants had plenty of ideas to discuss. However, managing time was the most difficult aspect of facilitating the workshops and we often found ourselves rushing through the different themes.

## 6 Evaluation

### 6.1 Feedback of Workshops



Figure.5: Feedback (in Finnish) that was posted to Osallisuuden Aika's Instagram after the workshops.

The feedback we got from the workshops was very positive. After the workshops, we sat down and had a feedback circle where every participant could tell their thoughts on the workshops, what went well in the workshops and what could be improved.

The participants liked the workshops and some even said that they would like to continue with these topics in the next Young Developer's group meeting. In addition, we got constructive feedback from the participants. Many of the

participants expressed that the time ran out during the workshops. More time would have been needed. The most discussion arose in workshops 1 and 3 and more time in those workshops would have been necessary.

In addition, one feedback that we got was that at least one participant got bored during the workshops. As facilitators, we got very nice feedback from the participants and the Young Developer group leaders. We also got feedback that we should be braver as facilitators in the future.

All in all, the participants seemed to enjoy the workshops and how the evening went. A feedback post was posted on Osallisuuden Aika's Instagram page (see Figure.5). One of the participants wanted to share in their WhatsApp group that this was one of the best group meetings and they would really like to continue on these topics.

## 6.2 Evaluation of thesis from a theoretical perspective

In our thesis, we did not do any kind of official research. Instead, we gathered the results of our workshops and estimated them. We saw this to be the examination of our thesis.

Participation was a carrying theme during our whole thesis. We saw that the best way to put the theory of participation in practice is to produce a functional thesis workshop, where young people could feel a sense of belonging and being able to take initiative and have influence over matters that concern them.

Another theory that we emphasised in our thesis was child- and youth-focused orientation. Child- and youth-focused orientation aims that a child or a young person and their lives is always taken into account in the work process. This will increase collective wellbeing. We saw that our thesis is child- and youth-focused oriented since we gave youth the opportunity to share their experiences on their terms. Instead of having ready-made questions, we let youth themselves to discuss things that they wanted to share. In other words, we gave a structure for discussion, but youth were the ones who implemented the



content of conversations. We see this to be participative and child- and youth-focused orientation action.

## **7 Discussion**

The purpose of this functional thesis was to promote youth participation through workshops and to create participatory and youth-focused working methods that would benefit the child protection services. Instead of the traditional thesis methods, we opted to describe the process of planning and creating workshops as well as evaluating the contents produced in them and their feedback.

The prominent themes of the theoretical framework included describing the typical events of the child protection clientship, participation and youth orientation. We felt that these should be addressed in the theoretical framework as we saw that there are many shortcomings in terms of how these services are implemented and organised.

The findings and responses from the workshops further highlight that youth want to be active agents in their own lives and in matters that concern them. Nonetheless, they wished to have a safe adult figure in their life who knows how to take into account the young person's individual needs and to create a safe growing environment for the young person, such as guaranteeing the young person's psychical, psychological, emotional and sexual safety.

Participation and youth orientation were achieved through the workshops. In concrete terms, the youth participants highly determined the contents of the discussions, ideated arguments as well as solutions to those contents. All participants were engaged in the workshops and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about being able to advocate their firsthand experience of substitute care. We felt that letting the participants freely discuss led to conversations, where their voices could be heard the best without any outside influence.

A limitation of our thesis is that the only material gathered and examined was the participating pilot groups' subjective experiences of the themes that were covered in workshops. To develop this thesis, we suggest that the same workshops could be worked on with different youth groups to gather more information about the effectiveness of substitute care.

Additionally, the workshops could be used in other contexts or substitute care places such as in children's homes or in family homes. It could be a great way for children and young people to openly share their thoughts on given matters.

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