Is Out-of-Home Care in a Crisis? Perspectives on Child and Youth Welfare Systems in northern Europe and Germany

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Introduction

This special issue addresses the field of international research on out-of-home care, as there are tremendous problems regarding the quality of life of young people living in out-of-home care, their transition from care to independent life (cf. Paulsen, et al., 2018; Törrönen, et al., 2018) as well as fundamental research gaps within this field.

Young people in out-of-home care belong to the most vulnerable groups within societies (cf. Petersen 2015). In comparison to children living under similar conditions of poverty and family conflict, young people in out-of- home care suffer significantly more from psychological and emotional problems. Even in countries boasting the highest levels of child well-being and strong welfare arrangements, such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden or Norway, educational problems and consequences of psychological suffering such as suicide, drug or alcohol abuse are relevant problems for these young people (Pösö et al., 2014). The central problems of out-of-home care include numerous relationship breakdowns due to premature termination of care and children being passed on from measure to measure. In many cases, there is a lack of continuity in the assistance relationships or of suitable forms of accommodation that can support all the problems and needs of young people (cp. Harkin Houston 2016; Konijn 2019; Neil, 2019). Moreover, in most countries in the Baltic region, fundemental care gaps are emerging in the aftermath of assistance. In most countries in the Baltic region, there is a lack of care after the end of assistance. There is a lack of suitable services for care leavers (Strahl et. Al. 2021).

At the same time, an increase in the number of children taken into out-of-home care can be observed since 2000, in particular in Germany, Sweden, Finland, and Norway, without much knowledge about the causes for this increase (Baake-Hansen et al., 2013; Kääriälä, Hiilamo, 2017, Autorengruppe der Kinder- und Jugendhilfestatistik, 2018). Thus, the proportion of young people suffering from the consequences of out-of-home care is growing significantly. At the same time, municipalities are in a crisis, scrambling to meet these increased needs by providing an appropriate infrastructure for out-of home care.

Despite the fact that out-of-home care covariates with different dimensions of social inequality and quality of life, research on out-of-home care has a dominant focus on national evidence-based practices, evaluating treatments, rather than analysing conditions of care relations (Bryderup, 2013, 2015; Clark, 2018; Törrönen, 2018). Predefined outcomes are the measurement objects, guided by the question of the most effective means of intervention with respect to labour market and social integration as well as the absence of illegal action. Such evidence-based perspectives are future-oriented, focusing on effects manifesting after the intervention in terms of a healthy, productive adulthood. These perspectives have their focus

on the future well-becoming instead of the present well-being of young people in out-of-home care. Furthermore, they are deficit-oriented as they stress the absence of undesirable attributes or the development of desirable but absent attributes in young people. However, as the above-mentioned problems show, there are also unintended consequences of out-of-home care. Moreover, there are consequences and processes of out-of-home care that have yet to be investigated, but may be of importance to young people. Further development of ethically and deliberatively-based indicators reflecting justifiable child and youth welfare institutions needs new research perspectives.

This calls for a crisis and thus a turning point in the hidden normative assumptions concerning the means and ends of out-of-home care, recognizing the voices of those who are affected (Petersen, 2017), as well as considering the philosophical framework the welfare states provide for child- and youth welfare services (Pösö et al., 2014). Participatory methods can address those young people mainly affected by child welfare services as recognizable subjects whose knowledge needs to be taken into consideration when creating new institutions and organisations. Processes and conditions of welfare states - like ownership structure related to New Public Management (cp. Lundström et al. 2018; Meagher et al. 2016) - affect the rationalities of street level practice and thus bring about intended and unintended consequences of out-of-home care. Incorporations of organisational, institutional and welfare state rationalities have to be an object of research, in order to gain a better understanding of mechanisms contributing to the unequal well-being of young people in and in between different settings of out-of-home care.

This special issue is to debate crisis-ridden conditions of out-of-home care in current welfare states in the Baltic Area as well as to flag a need for a crisis of research perspectives, in order to solve evident needs for improvement of out-of-home care in the Baltic Area. Thus, the special issue addresses a virulent key element of Nordic Social Work Research. At the same time, the special issue is a launch of the new international research network "Out-of-Home Care in European Child Welfare Systems of the Baltic Area (WelCare)". The aim of this research network is to generate insights into the conditions of out-of-home care in the context of comparative welfare research. Even if there are central overlaps in the problem situations of young people in out-of-home care in the different welfare contexts, the rationalities and conditions of out-of-home care in Europe are very heterogeneous. Systematising these heterogeneities and at the same time understanding their consequences for young people is a central aim of this network.

Structure of the Special Issue

The articles in the Special Issue deal firstly with fundamental questions of research ethics. Secondly, socio-political contexts and passages of out-of-home care are discussed in articles from different countries, starting with the decision for out-of-home care, through quality over the duration of the care process to the question of care leaving and after care. Finally, an alternative model of access to care for young people is discussed.

In the first article of the special issue, *Maritta Törrönen* and *Kisten Elisa Pertersen* raise fundamental methodological questions that arise in the field of research with vulnerable groups. Based on a re-analysis of different research projects that have taken place in Denmark, Finland and the UK, they reflect on the question of dealing with sensitive topics in participatory research contexts.

In order to cushion the vulnerability of young people, highly intervention-intensive measures such as out-of-home placement are envisaged. This is preceded by complex decision-making processes. The complexity of these decisions is mainly due to the fact that they are based on prognoses about a future state that would develop without an intervention. This prognostic logic is analysed by *Tarja Pösö* and *Johana Korpinen* as a central element of the final decision-making process. In this context, they reconstruct and criticise a lack of ambition found in decision-making processes. The standard is good-enough care, but the authors call for a clearer and more ambitious orientation towards the hopes and dreams of young people, a demand that is as simple as it is correct. The article by *Inge Bryderup* and *Sophie Aggerbo Johansen* makes it clear that the realities of out-of-home care fall far short of the often compromised standard of good-enough care. They discuss a central problem that comes to bear in different welfare state contexts: the lack of continuity of care relationships. They discuss this primarily in the context of the Danish legislature and its significance for the care situation of young people. The authors develop a broad and multidimensional concept of continuity, which enables them to relate it to the educational perspectives of young people and their care conditions. The numerous breakdowns are in turn linked to the fundamental question of trust in the quality of out-of-home care. A central change that is virulent in residential education is the increasing privatisation in the context of New Public Management. This is particularly advanced in Sweden and is discussed by *Tommy Lundström, David, Marie Sällnas & Emelie Shanks*. Developments of New Public Management, privatisation and quasi-markets in the field of residential education affect the service users, but also and especially the working conditions in the field of residential care for young people, which is discussed in the article by *Coco Klußmann* and *Lukas Underwood* against the background of the German context.

The final passage of Out-of-home Care is the care leaving and aftercare process. The barriers to perceiving aftercare are analysed from the Norwegian perspective - the country with the most extensive aftercare system in Europe - by *Inger Oterholm* from a feminist perspective. Overall, the Special Issue shows that there are numerous problems, barriers and forms of undersupply that are anchored in the respective welfare state arrangements. To conclude the Special Issue, *Mark Schrödter's* and *Vinzenz Thalheim's* proposal of unconditional youth welfare is presented, which fundamentally redesigns access to youth welfare and provides an answer to the problems mentioned.

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