

## **Disillusioned compromise of substitute care: A critical point for the 'future' in child welfare**

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### **1 Introduction**

When social workers assess a child's situation in child welfare and make related plans to provide services, they base their assessment chiefly on information about the present and past situation of the child. Some degree of uncertainty is embedded in their assessment as, even in the most carefully completed assessments, there may be some shortage of information and the existing information may be fallible. According to Munro (2019), the key problem with uncertainty is that it is unavoidable in child welfare. It cannot be eliminated, but it can be reduced and managed intelligently.

There are, however, extraordinary challenges in managing uncertainty when practitioners need to make decisions about the future of a child. Such decisions are complex social judgements which include predicting the behaviour of the child and those close to the child, evaluating the people involved, estimating the influence of different actions, and attributing causality in one way or another (see Taylor 2018, p. 190). Although 'the family's way of behaving to date is the strongest evidence of how they are likely to behave in the future' (Munro 2008, p. 77), even the most evidence-based risk assessment schemes do not fully predict the future of human behaviour. Nevertheless, the consideration of the past, present, and future is included in the most intrusive child welfare decision: removing a child from his/her parents' care. By a care order decision, the child is 'pulled away' from his/her present abusive conditions and 'pushed towards a better future' in substitute care. How social workers and decision-makers anticipate the future of children and families and incorporate that anticipation into their judgements has only infrequently been studied in child welfare literature (e.g. Pösö 2018a; Juhasz 2020).

The anticipation of the future challenges not only practitioners, but also children and parents. The inclusion of children and parents in making decisions in child welfare is largely seen as being an essential part of sound and human rights-based decision-making (e.g. Lonne et al. 2016; Falch-Erikssen & Backe-Hansen 2018) and it is guided by legislation in several countries (Burns et al. 2017). Their opinions and wishes should be – and are – considered also in removal decisions (Burns et al. 2017; Berrick et al. 2015 and 2017). However, it is rarely questioned how and on what grounds children and parents anticipate the future and include that anticipation in their views about the removal decisions. Nevertheless, social workers are asked to include their views in the removal preparations. What happens when the child's and/or parents' view of the future differs from that of social workers?

The anticipation of the future is examined in this article in the particular context of Finnish care order preparations in which parents and children (aged 12 years and older) are asked to express their view on two topics: whether they agree with the removal of the child and

whether they agree with the placement into substitute care. The latter rests on the anticipation of the future, as the actualities of the substitute care are not known at the moment when the view should be expressed. We examine those situations in which parents and/or children anticipate the future of substitute care differently from their social workers and express their disagreement as part of the statutory process. The question we ask is: how is the future anticipated and integrated into the statutory decision-making of care orders, and what defines the disagreement between the social worker and parents and/or child when substitute care is proposed following a care order decision? We focus on studying matching in substitute care as well as disputes in organisational settings (Miller & Holstein 1996) and temporalities embedded in child welfare (White 1998; Andersen & Bengtsson 2019; Knezevic 2020), and consequently we provide insights into the inclusion of the anticipation of the future in statutory decision-making.

## **2 Separation and substitute homes: past, present, and future**

Although the evidence about 'what works' in out-of-home care is diffuse (Thoburn 2010; Shlonsky & Benbenishty 2014), social workers need to consider the removal of a child if the child experiences serious harm in his/her parents' care. The thresholds for removals and types of removals vary among different child welfare systems (Benbenishty et al. 2015; Burns et al. 2017). Those removal decisions which restrict parental rights to a varying degree are called 'care orders' in this paper. Care orders are typically prepared by social workers, although the actual decisions about taking a child into care may be made by courts or court-like bodies (Burns et al. 2017).

Social workers are the key practitioners in Finland when the preparations of care orders are considered. Upon international comparison, the Finnish child welfare system is often categorised as having a family service orientation with a strong recognition of the child's individual rights (Gilbert 2012; Burns et al. 2017). The majority of child welfare services are provided as in-home services with the intention to support the child and his/her family in their own living environment. When a care order becomes topical, the variety of in-home services has normally been exhausted, resulting in the need to separate the child from his/her parents. The Child Welfare Act (417/2007, Section 40) sets broadly three criteria for a care order: the endangerment of the child's health and development, the insufficient nature of in-home services, and the anticipation of substitute care being in the best interest of the child (in more detail: Pösö & Huhtanen 2017). The first and second criteria require social workers to assess primarily the present and past of the child's life, whereas the third criterion focuses solely on the future: the substitute care that will be materialised by the care order decision should be in the child's interest. The child's best interest is defined in the Child Welfare Act (Section 4), which presents seven dimensions to be considered: 1) balanced development and well-being, and close and continuing human relationships; 2) the opportunity to receive understanding and affection as well as supervision and care that accord with the child's age and level of development; 3) an education consistent with the child's abilities and wishes; 4) a safe environment in which to grow up, and physical and emotional freedom; 5) a sense of responsibility in becoming independent and growing up; 6) the opportunity to become involved in matters affecting the child and to influence them; and 7) acknowledgement of the child's linguistic, cultural, and religious background. The third criterion for a care order indicates that all seven criteria should be thought about when anticipating the placement and its impact on the child.

When considering substitute care, social workers have to decide whether the placement should be in foster care, residential care, or professional family homes, the types available in

Finnish child welfare. The Child Welfare Act (417/2007, Section 50) defines foster care as the prioritised option, with a placement in residential care being the option only if foster care cannot be provided in the best interest of the child. After the choice of the placement type, social workers need to decide which foster home, residential institution, or professional family home would be in the best interest of the child. In matching, social workers consider a variety of issues such as the needs, rights, and wishes of the child and parents; the nature and form of the substitute homes; the professional and legal norms and principles of child protection policy; and the degree to which they match in the particular case at hand (Pösö & Laakso 2016). Social workers in larger municipalities are helped by the municipal or commissioned units, which focus on matching children (Pösö & Laakso 2015). Even in these situations, the actual proposal for a particular substitute home is given by the social worker in charge of children's matters to the child and parents in question.

From the practitioners' point of view, the choice of substitute home is often a compromise (Pösö & Laakso 2016). There may be a shortage in the availability of substitute homes, and that may be why the child is not placed in the 'best' home. On the other hand, parents and children might disagree with the proposed 'best' home. Also, the substitute home may have harmful practices that remain hidden during the matching process. Sometimes the urgency of the child's situation may require a placement in any available home. The term 'good-enough' matching has been suggested by Zeijlmans et al. (2018). This term emphasises that pragmatic issues – such as the availability of foster homes – influence the actual outcome of matching sometimes even more than the systematic exploration of the characteristics of the families and substitute carers. By introducing this term, the researchers (Zeijlmans et al. 2018) wish to bridge the gap between research and practice and highlight the complexity of matching.

For the child, the substitute home means a unique social, cultural, and moral context of childhood and the daily manifestation of a care order decision. Obviously, a compromise in the quality of matching may be unwelcome for the child. Although the quality of matching is not much studied in Finland (see Pösö & Laakso 2016), there are studies highlighting the problematic pathways of children after having been placed into care. Repeated placements, placement breakdowns, and problematic social inclusion in early adulthood are among the concerns (Kestilä et al. 2012; Kääriälä & Hiilamo 2017) suggesting the future following the placement is not necessarily always in 'the best interest of the child'.

### **3 Agreement and disagreement about the substitute home**

According to the Child Welfare Act, children and parents should be involved in a variety of ways in the preparation process when care orders are prepared, including in the choice of substitute home. As part of their involvement, they have a formal status in expressing their view about the proposal of the care order and substitute care, and that view has an impact on the decision-making process. Their views are heard in an administrative hearing organised by social workers. The task of the hearing is to provide all essential information about the care order proposal – the reasons as known by the authorities supporting the removal as well as the documents recording the preparatory process – and to ask for the parents' and the child's view on, first, the care order itself and, secondly, the placement into substitute care. The parties can individually express either their agreement (consent) or disagreement (objection) on both topics. The views are recorded in the hearing reports (Hoikkala & Pösö 2019).

If the parents and the child who is 12 years or older all agree with the proposals, the decision of the care order is made by the child welfare authority (social workers) in the municipality (consent-based care order). If any party disagrees with any part of the proposal regarding

either the care order or substitute care, the decision-making authority is transferred to the administrative court (objection-based care order). The majority of care order decisions (approximately three out of four) are made in the social work domain (Pösö & Huhtanen 2017), suggesting that parents and children quite rarely express their disagreements with the proposals. When the care order application is sent to the court for judgement, the majority of applications are approved by the courts and the child is taken into care despite the disagreement (ibid.; de Godzinsky 2012)

When expressing their view on the removal proposal, parents and children may think how relevant the reasons are and how accurately they address the present and past situation. However, when expressing their view on substitute care, the view is informed by a different type of knowledge that is very much about the anticipation of the future. They may have – or may have not – visited the future substitute home and learnt about it as much as one can in a short visit. The child or his/her sibling might have been placed there previously. Social workers may have – or may have not – shared information about the place if it is exactly known already, or some parents and children may have used the websites of residential institutions to learn about the place. Even in those cases in which information about the home is available, children and parents have to anticipate what the substitute home would now be like for this particular child. The basis for the expression of the view is very much anticipation and predicting the future.

#### **4 Data and method**

Although anticipation and the expression of one's views are complex social, cognitive, emotional, and interactional processes, we have chosen to analyse the written documents of care order preparations in order to learn about the proposals for substitute care made by social workers and the expressions of disagreement made by parents and children. Documented knowledge plays an important part in statutory social work, as it entails information that is seen as being institutionally important and legitimate for decision-making (e.g. Jacobsson & Barfoed 2019). However, documents not only record, but also reproduce knowledge and construct and re-construct what the case for social work is about (Prior 2003; Åkerström & Jacobsson 2019), and in our particular case, what the dispute is about (Miller & Holstein 1996). There is thus good reason to assume that the documents would provide a rich source for research about the proposal for a substitute home and the children's and parents' views about that proposal.

The document data have been collected from three Finnish municipalities in collaboration with their social workers as part of a larger study examining consent and objection in child welfare decision-making. We asked social workers to provide us the documents about the latest care order preparations – 20 from the largest municipality and 15 from each of the smaller municipalities – retroactively before a certain day in October 2018. We asked them to include the documents of the care order decisions and applications to the court, hearing reports, client plans, and other relevant material included in the care order preparations so that the ratio of consent- and objection-based preparations would be the same as found nationally (one quarter to be objection-based care order preparations). This method of collecting the documents was chosen for ethical purposes, and it was negotiated with the social workers in the municipalities during the research design process. As a result, we received the anonymised or semi-anonymised documents, and we did not need to look through the full case files. The Ethics Committee of Tampere University and the municipalities granted permission for the collection of this data. Although this method of data collection has several strengths from the point of view of research ethics, the practical obstacles in collecting the

data were significant: it put extra pressures on social workers and their heavy workload. In the end, we did not receive all the documentation we requested (e.g. client plans were missing in some cases). As a result, we received documents about 54 care orders, which took the form of four thick folders. The majority – 37 of them – included a view of consent from every party, while in 17 cases, one or more parties had expressed an objection about the care order proposal or/and the substitute home. We selected those cases for this analysis in which the choice of a substitute home was objected to: nine care order applications to the court, including seven hearing reports and two cases where the hearing reports was missed but the outcome of the hearing was reported in the application.<sup>1</sup>

The style of the documents varies between the municipalities, as there is no national standard on the style of these documents (Hoikkala & Pösö 2019). Documents in bureaucratised settings tend to include a lot of cross-referencing (Atkinson & Coffey 1997), a feature which we also came across in our data: the same descriptions of substitute care may be repeated in different parts of the documents. We make use of two types of documents, namely care order applications and hearing reports, as they summarise the most important information about the substitute care. The applications, which are prepared by a social worker responsible for the child's matters, are signed by a social worker in a managerial position within the municipality. Hearing reports document the outcome of the administrative hearing, demonstrating the view of the care order proposal and the proposed substitute care. In all the templates used by the municipalities, the essence of the view is demonstrated by a cross in a box stating, 'I object to the care order' or 'I object to the placement in substitute care'. Hearing reports are signed by the parents and children aged 12 years or older, and they include sections in which the parties are asked to record their reasons for objection. However, this is rarely done, as will be demonstrated in the analysis that follows.

After choosing the relevant cases, we explored the existing data to learn more about the proposed placement and related disagreement. In order to do so, we first separated the parts from the care order application and hearing reports that provide any information about the substitute care and reasons for disagreement (objection). The analysis proceeded by thematically grouping the different reasons for proposing a particular home for the child as recorded in the documents, resulting in three clusters. Our reading focuses on the text only and avoids interpreting the (hidden) meanings of the text as suggested by Atkinson and Coffey (1997). Thereafter, the reasons of the children and parents for objecting to the proposal were thematically categorised (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). We excluded the reasons for objecting to the care order, although they may be interrelated with the view about the substitute home. This was done in order to highlight the importance and independent status of substitute care in the care order decision-making. As the next section will demonstrate, the amount of text highlighting the proposal of substitute homes and related views is very small and uneven.

#### **4.1 Limitations**

The number of cases (nine) and the small amount of text concerning the proposal for a substitute home self-evidently marks the nature of this study: it is empirically a small-scale

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<sup>1</sup> The data on objection-based care orders include eight cases in which the child and/or parents objected to the care order proposal but gave their consent to the proposed substitute home. In the study by de Godzinsky (2012), which examined the courts' decisions, it was found that half of the care order applications disputed only the removal proposal but included agreement about the placement.

study. Based on our knowledge of Finnish child welfare, we argue that the shortage of textual data is not the result of poor recording practices in the three studied municipalities but rather a sign of the position of the proposal for the substitute home in the care order preparations: more attention is given in legislation, policy, and practice to the proposal of the care order itself and less to the choice of a substitute home. For example, there are no national statistics of objections to placements, and previous research on those objections is almost non-existent. The focus on recorded descriptions of the placement and expressions of objection provides a limited angle of view on a complex process, and the views of parents and children in our data have been filtered and recorded by the social workers. This is a shortcoming, as according to the literature review by Stalker (2003), there is a lack of research about service-users' ways of coping with uncertainty in social work decision-making.

Bearing in mind the empirical characteristics of the data, the study highlights an issue which so far has escaped the constantly expanding field of decision-making: the statutory expectations that social workers make proposals based on the anticipation of the future and parents and children express a formal view based on anticipation. The statutory expectations obviously vary from country to country, but it is likely that all child welfare systems, in one way or another, include anticipation of the future and other temporalities in their practices (Knezevic 2020). In all child welfare systems, anticipation of the future has considerable consequences for children and parents, as it guides more or less directly some measures taken.

## **5 Expressing and objection to substitute care: Overview of the data**

We provide an overview of the cases in our sample in Table 1. This overview includes the parties that have a formal say in the care order preparation and only the placement that is proposed in the care order application. The overview of the proposed substitute care and the child's and parents' views about the proposed care are rather complex, as the parties in the family often differ in their views and some of them withdraw from expressing their view for the purpose of the hearing. Furthermore, the proposal itself may not be specific, as it is in three cases in our sample. The conflicting views or lack of a view are, however, important as findings.

In six cases out of nine, the proposal for the substitute home is objected to when the child to be placed is a teenager and the placement is a residential institution (Table 1). In half of those cases, the child him/herself expressed his/her objection to substitute care in contrast to the parents' consent, highlighting different views within the family and also the child's agency in presenting an independent view. In one case (Case 3), the child did not attend the formal hearing as he had absconded and could not be found. As his view is missing – as is his mother's view – their missing views are treated as an 'objection' in the care order preparation.

Younger children are more rarely taken into care compared to teenagers in Finland, and this is reflected also in our sample: only three children are below the teenage years. Foster care is a typical type of care for young children, but this sample is diffuse in terms of the type of placement. Information about one child's substitute care is vague (Case 7) and the foster family is not known yet for another child. One case includes a proposal for a placement in a rehabilitation unit for children with the parents (residential care): the father would be there together with the infant. The parents share the same view of objection to the substitute care in two cases and their views differ in one. However, they share a consensus about the care order proposal: they all object.

We also collected information about the parents' and children's views on the care order proposal (column 7 in Table 1). As an overall pattern, the children and parents tended to express an objection to both proposals (in seven cases out of nine). A study examining the court decisions of care order applications reports the same: it is uncommon to object to the placement only (de Godzinsky 2012).

Table 1. Summary of the children's and parents' views about the proposal for a substitute home and care order.

Case	Placement proposal	Child's age	Objection expressed about the substitute home	Consent expressed about the substitute home	Opinion missing	Objection expressed about the care order	Reasons for objection about the substitute home documented
1	Residential institution specified	16	Child	Mother, Father	None	Child	Documented
2	Residential institution specified	16	Child	Mother, Father	None	None	Not documented
3	Residential institution specified	15	Child	Mother	Father's opinion	Child	Documented
4	Residential institution specified	17	Child, Mother (missing opinions treated as objection)	Father	Child's and mother's opinion	Child, Mother (opinion missing)	Not documented
5	Residential institution as a type of placement	15	Child, Father		None	Child, Father	Documented
6	Residential institution specified	15	Father	Child	None	Father Child	Not documented
7	Not mentioned	7	Mother, Father		None	Mother, Father	Not documented
8	Foster home as a type of placement	11	Mother	Father	None	Mother, Father	Not documented
9	Parent – child rehabilitation unit	9 months	Mother, Father		None	Mother, Father	Documented

Although the specific placement is known in six cases out of nine, there are differences in information available. Some care order applications contain detailed descriptions – including also the name and address of the place – which are described more in the next section. In one

case, it is written that the parents were given a leaflet about the institution so that they could become familiar with its treatment profile. The specific institution may in some instances be known to the children and parents due to previous or present (emergency) placements. On the other hand, the place may also be known only by its name without any more information recorded in the documents.

The last column in Table 1 demonstrates whether the reasons for the objection are recorded in the documents. Only four cases provide this information explicitly recorded in the care order application or hearing report. When the reasons are recorded, they are the reasons expressed by the children (except for the infant). We return to the objections after we first look at the proposals themselves.

## **6 Social workers' proposals for a substitute home**

Although the descriptions about the proposed substitute homes are scarce in the documents, we found three main thematic clusters of descriptions: social workers present the aims and ambitions of substitute care in general (cluster 1), in a more particularised way (cluster 2), and in practical terms (cluster 3). A document regarding one child may include one or more thematic clusters.

First, the descriptions about the proposed substitute home focus on presenting substitute care in broader terms than those featuring a particular substitute home (cluster 1). Substitute care is rather abstract, as it is approached by presenting the aims and ambitions of substitute care and the care order. Care-to-be-provided is typically described as providing stable, permanent, and safe conditions for the child, and in taking into account close and continuing human relationships, the wording is close to the child's best interest as described in Section 4 of the Child Welfare Act. The older the child to be placed is, the likelier it is that substitute care is described as also providing 'an adult-led environment'.

To highlight the abstract description of substitute care, we present an illustrative extract from the case of a child:

Substitute care will secure the care the child needs in a safe and adult-led environment. While in substitute care, the child's mental well-being will be assessed more carefully and also the child's need for support will be taken care of. The aim is to find a substitute home as close as possible to the child's close ones so as to not make contact problematic. (Case 7)

This extract lists a variety of expectations about substitute care and positions them in line with the general needs of the child. It does not, however, say anything about the substitute home itself – it does not even mention the type. The location is mentioned as being in the proximity of people who are 'close' to the child – just as the terminology of the legislation suggests. The child's parents have custody of the child, but the reasoning for the proximity goes beyond the location of the legal parents.

Secondly, in cluster 2, the descriptions are more detailed and they address a specific substitute home. All the placements known during the care order preparations are residential institutions which are described by their size, treatment rationales, location, and ownership. These descriptions include the names and addresses of the institutions, which make the proposals very concrete. The characteristics of the institutions are linked with the needs or characteristics of the child. The following example illustrates a case in which the



characteristics of the residential institution are given a lot of attention, but less attention is paid to the child (aged 15 years).

This substitute home is a unit which provides care to six children aged 6–18 years who have been taken into care or who need a placement as part of in-home services. The unit provides supervision day and night. In the unit, the staff helps and guides the children to grow up and develop into individuals who respect themselves and other people and are likely to manage well in society. In choosing the substitute home, contact with the centralised unit for matching children and residential care was made already in May, and the child's history and needs for care and support have been presented. They suggested only one residential institution; the child visited the next day and moved there immediately. (Case 3)

Indeed, the extract is detailed in describing the residential unit, but provides less information about how the details match the needs and wishes of the child. The child becomes visible in the extract as it is revealed that the child visited the place and moved there immediately. It is also recorded elsewhere that the child had said that she did not want to go there, but if it is seen to be in her best interest, she would go.

A more nuanced description is provided by the following extract regarding a 15-year-old child. The social workers describe the nature of the boy's problems with drugs, crime, violence, and a lack of control. Then they describe the residential institution they propose: they describe its methods of upbringing, the expertise of its staff, the services provided by the institution, and its experience of working with children with diverse needs. Then, they summarise the proposal:

This youth home is experienced and well equipped to encounter the child's constant, sudden, and challenging problems of life management. The youth home provides a wide set of services to meet the challenging situations, and it can meet the child's personal needs. (Case 2)

The third type of the descriptions is practical (cluster 3): waiting for a place in a certain institution to become vacant or looking for the right foster family. The reasoning is short, stating for example that 'at the moment they are looking at the institution in X, which will have one place free in February 2018' ('they' refers to the unit providing matching services). This cluster demonstrates the practical obstacles of timing and the shortage of suitable placements. Sometimes the care order application is completed without a proposal, as demonstrated by the extract of a child who is in a temporary placement and has a history of many placements. The proposed care order should provide her with more stability, and the social workers are still looking for the right place:

The choice of the placement is still in the making, and the application will be completed afterwards. (Case 7)

The thematic clusters emphasising substitute care in general terms, a particular home, or the practicalities represent the recorded information which the children and parents also had available when they were asked about their view of the substitute care. The second cluster is obviously more particularised in presenting how a certain substitute home could support this particular child needing a placement outside his/her parents' care. It was found in six cases, leaving three cases with general or practical descriptions only. As illustrated earlier in this section, the particularised descriptions do not necessarily present any thorough matching of

the characteristics of the proposed home and the child, or any detailed speculation about the future in care. Consequently, based on the data here, it seems that the parents and children are asked for their opinion about the placement in substitute care with limited – if any – particularised information. In the following, we look at how children and parents reason their disagreement.

## **7 Children and parents objecting to the proposal**

When exploring the hearing reports that document the formal opinions of children and parents, we find information about the objection marked as a crossed box on the template document, except in one case when the father refused to sign the report (he instead expressed his opinion orally according to the social worker's notes). Only in four cases can we find some extra information about the objection, which was recorded either in the hearing report or in the care order application. Even so, the textual data is very weak in terms of providing insights into the reasons for objecting to the proposed substitute home.

The parents' reasons for objection can be read mainly only indirectly. They are included in the parents' views about the care order proposal, which state that there is 'no need for a care order'. If a care order is not needed, a substitute home would not be needed either. Sometimes there is just a short note saying that 'the parents think that the placement with the mother's sister would be better' without any reasons as to why the proposal is problematic from their point of view.

The children's reasons for objection are recorded in more detail in this sample compared to those of their parents. The following extract presents a clear objection to the particularised substitute home proposal with its approach to treating substance abuse, as the child does not feel any need for it.

The child's view: has told that he wants to live either with the father or in a long-term substitute home. Does not feel that he would need any treatment for his substance abuse. (Case 5)

The text above is short. In contrast, one child's view, slightly revised here for confidentiality reasons, is recorded in more detail and nuance:

It is horrible in the Institution. If I forget to do something or do something wrong, all the staff members start criticising me. They force me to change my clothes daily and to wash them too frequently. I feel worse there than at home. ...I promise that if I get back home, I would go to school properly. I have not ever felt worse than there. They think they know things about me but they do not really know. Help me, I can't stand to be there anymore. (Case 3)

The social worker has written the child's description so that it includes the child's feelings as well as incidents from the everyday life of the institution. This report is given to the administrative court so that it can make a decision about the substitute home. This extract is of special importance because it demonstrates vividly how the child objects to the proposed home based on her/his experience of this place. The objection is based on the child's everyday experience of the proposed home. As this is the only recorded specific objection in this data, it, for its own part, demonstrates the importance of experience instead of anticipation when expressing a view.

Although the child calls for help to get out of the substitute home in the extract above, the social workers in charge of the child's matters write in the care order application that although she has heard the child's view and considered it, the view does not change the proposal: the home which the child wishes to have is not appropriate for her needs. The mother's wish to have the substitute home in a certain town cannot be followed either, as that town does not have any placements appropriate to the child's needs. The arguments as to why the wishes should be ignored are to be found in writing.

## 8 Discussion

### *Anticipation of the future*

We have seen above that the proposals for substitute care, prepared and recorded by social workers, vary from being detailed regarding the substitute home's characteristics to abstract aims and practical notes about the availability of places. In general, they are very limited and short of future descriptions. Furthermore, we have seen that the reasons for objection expressed by the parents and child are not recorded in detail. The objections, when recorded, are based on the experiences of particular substitute homes, and that is why the past and present experiences shape their view more than the anticipation of the future.

Overall, the issue of future substitute care and related disagreements remains rather vague and diffuse in the care order preparation documents. Consequently, it is a challenge to look for answers to address our original interest in the anticipation of the future. We expected to find more textual fragments in which the different options of the future and predictions about people's behaviour and well-being were drafted and balanced against each other. We did not find any textual fragments of this type.

Indeed, anticipation of the future does not belong to the ordinary repertoire of documenting care order preparations. This may suggest that hopes about the future are not high or they are difficult to put into words for a variety of reasons. One reason could be that practitioners do not wish to speculate over the uncertainties of the future and thus restrict their writing to practical issues and standards expressed by legislation. Anticipation of the future may invite intuitive reasoning to address legal and practical issues, which the social workers obviously refuse to include in their writing. Zeijlmans et al. (2018) write about compromises and 'good-enough matching' to emphasise the pragmatic parameters influencing the choice of a substitute home. The findings of our study lead us to suggest that the compromises are disillusioned, as so few aims and ambitions are set in a particularised way.

Social workers' hesitation to speculate and set goals for the future is interesting from the perspective of the groups of care-experienced young people in Finland. For years, one of their key messages has been that children in care should be encouraged and allowed to dream about the future: you need trust in life to be able to dream, and you need dreams to flourish in life (Pösö 2018b). If you lose the will to dream, you lose your future. In this study, in the moment of making a fundamentally important decision about the lives of children, very few wishes and hopes about the future are recorded in the documents.

### *Disagreement about (future) substitute care*

Similar to the remark above about the anticipation of the future, we claim that the reasons for disagreement about the proposal of substitute care do not belong to the corpus of institutionally important information when care order documents are prepared. When we look at the documents of the care order preparations, it cannot in every case be specified what the

disagreement is about. Clearly, the disagreement is not about the future but rather about present issues, resting on the child's present placement in the suggested home before the care order decision. The disagreement may also be an expression of silence or withdrawal from expressing one's view, as the data includes cases in which the parties have not attended the hearing event or signed the reports. The only more detailed recordings about objection were those by children, which may reveal the present emphasis of the child welfare policy on the participation rights of children (Harrikari 2019), which are used by social workers in their recording practices. On the other hand, the lack of recordings about objections may also reveal that parents have given up explaining their reasons for disagreeing in the hearing. Expressing objection and disagreement in organisational settings is always shadowed by power (Miller & Holstein 1996). It is, after all, quite a task to construct an alternative scenario about the future substitute care and to argue for it.

## 9 Conclusion

Proposing and objecting to substitute care are complex tasks in which the many layers of social problems in the family, the rights of the child and parents, the privacy of the family, the role of public authorities, and anticipation of the future should be put into words and opinions. Consequently, fundamentally complex issues of people's personal lives are put into the categories of consent and objection as the organisational system requires (Buckley 2013; Miller & Holstein 1996). We have seen the scarce recording of substitute care, disagreement, and anticipation of the future in this small-scale analysis. The term 'disillusioned compromise' has been suggested to capture the weak nature of the anticipation of the future substitute care.

Future substitute care is indeed a difficult landscape for formal disputes in organisational settings when the 'future' is not known. Disillusioned compromises are, in our view, a result of the systemic features of the Finnish child welfare system. Although the legislation requires anticipation of the substitute care and the manner in which it supports the child's best interest in the days, months, and years to come, it is problematic for any practitioner, child, or parent to 'correctly' include it in the formalities of the statutory decision-making and to reduce it to the binary options of agreement and disagreement. This is not to say that one should not have scenarios of the future and to negotiate them; on the contrary, reflective and well-balanced anticipation of the future should guide the steps taken in child welfare, and every action should be taken to achieve the best outcome. Similarly, every action should be taken to abolish disillusioned compromises about the future of a child in any part of child welfare.

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