

# DISCOURSES ABOUT CHILDRENS PARTICIPATION AND CHILD PERSPECTIVE

**A comparative study of policy documents that guide social work in Sweden and Germany**

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## abstract

This article compares Swedish and German social work, including policy documents, and discusses the policies of these two countries regarding the implementation of children's rights in social work practice. The analysis focuses on two main concepts that are used in social work practice: the concept of a child perspective in Sweden and the concept of participation in Germany. This study aims to investigate the ideas, values and guidelines mediated by political institutions to social workers in the field. The results showed that both the Swedish and German policy documents gave the distinct impression that the concepts had been properly implemented and formed part of child welfare practice. In the Swedish context, the idea of both making children visible and the formal aspects were highlighted, whereas in Germany, participation was related to an educational discourse. However, it is argued here that the discourses suggest that there is unequal relationship between children and adults, and we conclude that social workers must contribute to the child's status as an active subject.

**KEYWORDS:** Child perspective, children's participation, German social work, Swedish social work, discourse analysis

## Introduction

**T**o what extent are children's voices heard in social work practice? Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, there has been an ongoing public debate concerning children's rights and children's participation in social work practice. There has also been a growing demand for children's views to be acknowledged and for a child perspective to be adopted in social work.<sup>1</sup> Both the German Children and Youth Welfare Act and the Swedish Social Services Act give children the right to be heard, and state that the best interests of the child must be considered in decisions that concern them. Both of the studied countries are striving to achieve a better realization of children's rights, with a specific focus on strengthening the opportunities for children to participate. There has been an ongoing discussion in Germany for many years on how to anchor children's rights in the German constitution<sup>2</sup> and in Sweden, following a similar discussion, the CRC was incorporated into national law on January 1 2020.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in Sweden, more than 30 years after ratification of the CRC, and the various political efforts, critical voices have stated that the position of children in social work practice is marginalized and their opportunities for influence and participation on issues concerning them are inadequate.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, international research about children's participation in child welfare has shown that, despite a broad agreement on the importance of

children's participation in social work practice, the interpretation of what children's participation actually entails varies<sup>5</sup> and there is a lack of clear guidance regarding how children's participation can be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH** has highlighted several challenges regarding the implementation of children's participation in social work practice. One such challenge is the view of children as vulnerable and in need of protection, meaning they cannot deal with the burden of responsibility that comes with decision-making, and the belief that adults know better, resulting in children's views being questioned when they are not consistent with the views of social workers or when social workers perceive a child as untrustworthy.<sup>7</sup> Other challenges regarding the implementation of children's participation concern organizational barriers, for example, that child protection services primarily focus on systemic requirements, for example, completing investigations on time instead of ensuring that trustful relationships are established between a child and caseworker or that a high workload and a high level of staff turnover do not allow for the frequency and continuity that is necessary to establish such relationships.<sup>8</sup> Hence, both organizational conditions related to social policy and societal views about children's needs and skills seem to influence the ways and the extent to which the implementation of children's participation is made possible in practice. Research on children's rights in policy documents aimed at social work practice shows that children are often constructed as part of a family rather than individuals in their own right, and that a strong emphasis on children's participation in policy is not sufficiently followed up in practice.<sup>9</sup> However, few studies have compared the construction of children and the representation of children's rights between different national contexts.

In this article, the discrepancy between children's legal right to participate and the actual limitations of children's participation in social work practice will be explored through a comparative analysis of national discourses on children's participation in policy documents from two European countries in the Baltic Sea region: Sweden and Germany. The construction of children in policy discourses influences how children's rights and participation are implemented in everyday practice, while social workers also contribute to the construction of children through their daily practices.<sup>10</sup> This article explores and discusses how national discourses about children and children's participation in different socio-political contexts may determine the possibilities and limitations of children's participation in practice. In order to cover a broad range of the national discourses on children and children's participation in the field of social work with children, no specific sub-area in this field has been selected for

analysis. Instead, the focus is on policy documents aimed at any organization that carries out social work with children in the two countries.

Sweden and Germany constitute interesting cases for comparison, given that both countries have a clear political ambition to strengthen children's participation. Yet, there are substantial differences regarding the organization of welfare in the two countries, as well as a divergent ideological foundation. In Sweden, the global influence of the CRC, involving children's right to participate, has led to the development of a national policy that includes the principle of a child perspective (*barnperspektiv*).<sup>11</sup> By contrast, this concept is not common in German social work, where the main discussion primarily concerns the issue of children's participation (*Partizipation/Beteiligung*), and where participation is described as a fundamental postulate and key topic of social work practice.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we will focus on these two concepts: child perspective and children's participation.

### Aim and research questions

The article aims to explore the various meanings and interpretations of a child perspective and children's participation in different national contexts and to better understand the consequences of the enactment of these concepts in social work

practice with children and families. More specifically, the article will compare and discuss the discourses of a child perspective and of children's participation in Sweden and Germany as they are presented in national policy documents that provide recommendations and guidelines for social work practice with children in a broad range of fields of child welfare. The article provides knowledge on how and why children's participation and child perspective are interpreted and shaped in specific ways due to the impact of national contexts and

national discourses about children and childhood. The following research questions are in focus: How are the concepts of a "child perspective" and "children's participation" constructed? Which ideas, values and guidelines concerning children's participation are mediated by political institutions to professional social workers in these policy documents? How can national differences in discourses be understood and what are the implications of specific discourses for the conception and realization of a child perspective and of children's participation in social work with children and families?

### Sweden and Germany as comparative cases

A comparison between Sweden and Germany aims to deepen the knowledge of the potential meanings and practical implementation of the concepts of a child perspective and children's participation. The two countries show similarities that allow for

**“SWEDEN AND GERMANY CONSTITUTE INTERESTING CASES FOR COMPARISON, GIVEN THAT BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE A CLEAR POLITICAL AMBITION TO STRENGTHEN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION.”**

a suitable point of departure in this study of a shared phenomenon. Both countries have child welfare systems that are primarily based on family support.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the countries are part of different types of welfare regimes,<sup>14</sup> which may affect the interpretation of children's right to participate in social work practice. German family policies are more conservative and oriented toward marriage, while Swedish policies are characterized by a more individualistic perspective. In Sweden, social work is primarily organized by the state, at a municipal level. The child welfare system is closely associated with the state. Most professionals who interact with children are obliged by law<sup>15</sup> to report any concerns they may have that a child might be at risk to the social services, even if such concerns are based on unverified information. The social services is legally obliged to initiate an investigation if it receives information that indicates that a child might be at risk.<sup>16</sup> In Germany, on the other hand, social work largely takes place in NGOs.<sup>17</sup> The so-called principle of subsidiarity gives priority to voluntary non-profit organizations and means that "public authorities will only be involved in the production of services when the abilities and resources of the family, the community and organizations to serve their members have been fully exhausted."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the different social work traditions of the two countries (educational in Germany and social administrative in Sweden) might affect social workers' interpretation and implementation of children's rights to participate.<sup>19</sup> Such variations create an opportunity to study how discussions on and the implementation of a child perspective and children's participation are described by them from both their partially different background conditions and foundational values.

### Children's participation and child perspective in policy and social work practice

Globally, there is a strong emphasis on children's participation in both social work policy and practice.<sup>20</sup> In Sweden, both children's participation and the terms *child perspective* and *child rights perspective* are commonly used and promoted.<sup>21</sup> It is argued that the concept of a child perspective is imprecise<sup>22</sup> and is criticized for being used as an ideological concept.<sup>23</sup> There is also a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which children's participation is incorporated in the concept, while in the literature, a distinction is made between child perspective (the adult's view of children) and the child's perspective (the child's own perception of their situation).<sup>24</sup> The concept of participation is also seen as ambiguous<sup>25</sup> and in social work practice the interpretations of what children's participation entails are diverse.<sup>26</sup> For example, children and social workers often have different interpretations of this concept, where children tend to emphasize the importance of being taken seriously and having a proper say in decisions that are important to them, whereas social workers tend to focus on children's participation in terms of gathering and providing information in order to find solutions to problems defined by social workers.<sup>27</sup>

Although the importance of children's participation and the need for a child perspective in social work are emphasized, research shows that it is difficult to translate these concepts

into practice.<sup>28</sup> There is also a lack of clear guidance in policy as to how children's participation or a child perspective is to be achieved.<sup>29</sup> The difficulties relate, for example, to a lack of consensus on what children's participation and a child perspective entail.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, among professionals, there may be uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of children's participation in certain situations, something that van Bijleveld<sup>31</sup> has linked to a view of children as vulnerable objects in need of adult protection. Other studies have shown that children are only allowed to participate if their participation do not affect the interests of adults,<sup>32</sup> or that the views of children are given more weight if they are in line with the views of social workers.<sup>33</sup>

**SEVERAL DILEMMAS** have been identified in social work practice regarding children's rights to participation, for instance, the difficulty of combining a *human rights perspective*, which emphasizes children's agency and their active subject position, with a *care perspective*, which emphasizes children's need for protection.<sup>34</sup> Related to this dilemma is the tension between constructing children as *active subjects* in their own right or children being *passive objects* in need of adult care and supervision, something that is commonly discussed in the theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood.<sup>35</sup> These tensions also manifest in policy documents that aim to guide social work practice,<sup>36</sup> where children's participation is strongly promoted, while at the same time children are constructed as part of their family rather than as individuals with their own rights. In line with this, Rasmusson et al.<sup>37</sup> show that policies aimed at promoting child-centered social work tend to balance between emphasizing children's rights vs. children's needs, while Sanders and Mace<sup>38</sup> argue that the difficulties of translating ideals on children's participation from policy into practice may be understood as a consequence of conflicting imperatives to both protect children and give them a voice.

Most research on children's participation in social work specifically concerns children's participation in child protection investigations<sup>39</sup> or during out-of-home care.<sup>40</sup> Many studies show that children are often not sufficiently involved in decision-making processes during child protection investigations, where social workers typically rely on an adult's description of the child's situation instead of listening to the child's views.<sup>41</sup> Research on children's participation in decisions concerning out-of-home care show similar results.<sup>42</sup> However, one study<sup>43</sup> stated that children reported having better opportunities to participate when they were in foster care compared to the earlier stages of their contact with the child welfare services.



## Method

The results presented in this article are based on a discourse analysis that aims to shed light on national discourses about children's rights in Swedish and German social work practice and compare them. More specifically, the analysis focuses on common social work concepts that relate to the opportunity of children to be heard. In Sweden, commonly used concepts to describe this phenomenon are a "child perspective" and "children's participation", whereas in Germany the commonly used concept is "participation". The analysis explores how these concepts are presented in national guidelines and policy documents. In Sweden, this means examining documentation issued by the National Board of Health and Welfare, NBHW (*Socialstyrelsen*), which is the social and healthcare sector authority, and which guides and supports social services in Sweden. In Germany, these policy documents emanate from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, BMFSFJ (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*), which is a cabinet-level ministry responsible for family politics and which is the highest authority for social welfare, including child welfare. The authorities of both countries publish reports as well as guidelines and recommendations for practitioners in the field of social work and address the development of quality in social services. These two authorities are not identical, because a ministry is the highest national authority, whereas the NBHW in Sweden is an authority under the Ministry of Social Affairs. Nevertheless, the publications of these two national authorities are comparable to each other. Germany also has an authority under the BMFSFJ: the Federal Office for Family and Civil Society Tasks (*Bundesamt für Familie und zivilgesellschaftliche Aufgaben*). This Federal Office prepares publications for the BMFSFJ but does not publish them. For this reason, a comparison between the documents of the Swedish National Board and the German Federal office was not possible. A comparison of the publications on a ministerial level was not appropriate because the purpose of this study is to examine guidelines and recommendations directly aimed at social work practice. In Sweden, such documents are not published on a ministerial level but directly by the NBHW.

## The sample

The selected documents (see appendix) were published between 2010 and 2015, a period during which there were intensive public debates about children's rights. This correlates to findings in the National Archives of Sweden: a search in the database of daily newspaper shows that the term "child perspective" was most frequently used during the period 2010–2015, peaking in 2014 with 719 search results, and then steadily declining. In

Germany, a similar picture emerges when searching the digital archives of one of the biggest daily newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*<sup>44</sup> for the term *children's participation*. The years 2010–2015 can be seen as a period where ideas about children's rights were intensively discussed and shaped our understanding of these ideas and of their related concepts. Over 20 years has now elapsed since the ratification of the CRC and a new phase had begun in which both countries discussed and planned the incorporation of the CRC in national laws in 2018. While in Sweden the CRC was incorporated in Swedish law in 2020, in Germany the proposal to incorporate the CRC was rejected in 2021 because there was no majority in the parliament.

THE SELECTED DOCUMENTS can be regarded as examples of professional communication<sup>45</sup> in which political institutions communicated their values and ideas concerning a child perspective and children's participation to social workers and other target groups. Such policy documents can also be seen as representing official understanding, problematization and problem solutions.<sup>46</sup>

**“THE YEARS 2010–2015 CAN BE SEEN AS A PERIOD WHERE IDEAS ABOUT CHILDREN’S RIGHTS WERE INTENSIVELY DISCUSSED AND SHAPED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE IDEAS AND OF THEIR RELATED CONCEPTS.”**

The documents were found via the databases of the NBHW and the BMFSFJ by using the search terms *child perspective* and *children's participation*, as well as other related terms such as *children's rights*, *children's voices* and the *child's best interest* in order to ensure that the relevant documents were not excluded. The search generated findings on different welfare and healthcare topics, many of which are not relevant for this study (e.g., dental care). Documents that mainly focused on social work with adults were also excluded. The focus of this study is on social work with children, in other words, child welfare. We selected documents that address either child welfare in general or a specific

domain of child welfare, for example, residential care. Some documents deal with child welfare in general, but in a broader context, for example, Swedish reports directed at both the social services and health care. After applying these criteria, five German and ten Swedish documents were included in the sample (see appendix).

The sample includes reports, guidelines, handbooks, comprehensive brochures, magazines, and other documents. The types and designation of the documents vary but are all described and presented as a source of knowledge for practitioners and include recommendations and guidelines for practice. Some of the Swedish documents were described as a basis for decision-making, not only for social workers but also for politicians and officials. The German brochures and magazines are types of documents that are not common in the Swedish context. The reports from both countries and the Swedish handbook were the most comprehensive documents (200–500 pages), although

only certain parts of these documents were relevant for the analysis (for example, just one chapter comprising 30 pages on child welfare). The Swedish guidelines comprised around 40–160 pages, the various Swedish and German documents and brochures comprised around 50–60 pages and the German publications and magazines comprised around 20–50 pages.

### Critical discourse analysis

The analysis was inspired by Fairclough's critical discourse analysis,<sup>47</sup> which focuses on how language functions in maintaining and changing power relations in society, and how language analysis may reveal these processes. Critical discourse analysis comprises three interconnected components: The first component – the normative critique of discourse – which can be described as an examination of power *in* discourse, includes manipulation. In this study, it was important to identify contradictions in social reality as well as gaps between what is said and what is done in practice. The second component, the explanatory critique, meaning the examination of the power *behind* the discourse, includes ideology. Ideologies can be understood as assumptions that are taken for granted as common sense.<sup>48</sup> Common sense is basically contradictory in nature, as Fairclough highlighted, and helps to maintain an unequal power relationship. The third component is transformative action/praxis, which aims to change existing social reality for the better. There is no direct connection between critical discourse analysis and transformative action, yet the analysis could be seen as a form of practical argumentation that advocates a form of action.<sup>49</sup>

**IN OUR ANALYSIS** we are interested in exploring how the concepts of a child perspective and participation are described in policy documents and the ideas, values and guidelines that are mediated to professionals through such documents. The analysis was conducted based on the original language of the documents. However, for this article, it was deemed necessary to translate some of the quotes into English. As a first step in the analysis, all documents (both Swedish and German) were searched for the terms “child perspective” and “participation”. The term *child perspective* only appeared, as expected, in the Swedish documents. The term *participation* appeared in both the Swedish and German documents, but more frequently in the German documents. The search yielded relevant sections of text, i.e., descriptions of these two terms were provided and related to the field of child welfare. In many of the documents, particularly the Swedish documents, neither of the terms were frequently used (i.e., 3–10 times), meaning the analysis was easily manageable and, in this context, the use of a term was examined in relation to the specific section or chapter in which it was mentioned. In some of the German documents, the term *participation* frequently appeared (450 times), making it impractical to focus on each specific section in which the term was mentioned; instead,

**Table 1: A comparison of discourses in Germany and Sweden**

	Sweden	Germany
<b>Main concept</b>	Child perspective	Participation
<b>Type of discourse regarding participation</b>	Formal: legal aspects, degree of participation, documentation, ethical aspects	Pedagogical/educational
<b>View of the child</b>	The (in-) visible child	The educational child
<b>Discourse hybrids</b>	Evidence-based practice	Quality discourse
<b>Discourse regarding methods</b>	Standardization	Diversity of methods

the entire text was examined from beginning to end. This was particularly the case for shorter documents.

In the ongoing analysis, we focused on language, particularly vocabulary, rhetorical figures and argumentation, resulting in the analytical themes *The Concept of a child perspective: making children visible* (Swedish context) and *Participation in Educational Discourse* (German context). These analytical themes gave us an insight into how the concepts are discussed in national contexts and the ideas and ideologies with which they are associated. In Sweden a formal discourse and in Germany a pedagogical discourse were identified. Fairclough also points out that the choice of wording depends on, and helps create, social relationships.<sup>50</sup> The concept of subject position that Fairclough uses emphasizes that the subject is positioned in a specific way in a discourse, but that people are not conscious of being positioned.<sup>51</sup> In our analysis, it was important to examine the relationship between children/youth and adults (social workers, parents). Within the formal discourse we could identify the view of the child as (in-) visible, while the pedagogical discourse refers to the educational child.

**THE TERMS** *child perspective* and *participation* appeared in the texts together with the description of methods and, because of our interest in the guidelines that are mediated to social workers, the second analytical theme focuses on *Children's participation and methods*, which says something about how professionals are expected to work with their clients. Fairclough stated that a word cannot be understood as isolated, but that its meaning depends on the relationship of that word to other words. He discusses *a cluster of words*, which are associated with different systems of meaning.<sup>52</sup> Interdiscursivity should also be mentioned here, which includes hybrid combinations and cases in which elements of different discourses are merged into a single discourse. In our analysis, the cluster of words showed that the formal discourse interplayed with the discussion on evidence-based practice and the standardization of methods, whereas the pedagogical discourse interplayed with the quality discourse that emphasizes a diversity of methods. Table 1 provides an overview and comparison of all concepts developed in the analysis.

## Findings

### Sweden The concept of a child perspective: making children visible

In the Swedish documents,<sup>53</sup> the concept of a child perspective (*barnperspektiv*) was presented as something established and given in social work practice. The documents described the successful implementation and expansion of the concept in recent years and argued that the more a child perspective was adopted, the more it resulted in improved participation and consideration of children's rights. Formulations such as the following quotes are common: "These days, a child perspective is used more than it was previously,"<sup>54</sup> or social work is "based on a child perspective to a wider extent."<sup>55</sup>

The concept of a child perspective was not explicitly defined in the documents but was instead presented as already being well defined and clear, even if previous research has pointed out the inherent complexity and ambiguity of this concept and describes child perspective as an ideological term that is open to different kinds of interpretation.<sup>56</sup> In the next quote the term *child perspective* is explained using another complex term: the "best interests of the child". The depiction of a well-defined and clear concept is made through the suggested parity of "best interests of the child" and "child perspective" and through the term "so-called":

**Consideration of the best interests of the child, the so-called *child perspective*, also means that we must be more aware of the child's situation when parents contact social services [...].<sup>57</sup>**

Not only in this quote, but also in other quotes, the concept of a child perspective appeared in constellations with other terms, for example, in the quote above with the term the *best interests of the child*, in other quotes with the terms *children's rights* or *participation*. In these quotes, the concept of a child perspective was sometimes explained using other complex terms and was not further elucidated.

When the concept of a child perspective was described and explained in the documents, a specific view of children emerged, as well as an idea of the desired relationship between children and adults: that adults should make children more visible. The different documents contained descriptions about the seeing and the perception of children, as in the fol-

lowing quotes: "The child perspective means that adults *see* the child and keep them *in mind*."<sup>58</sup>, or: [...] "keep the *focus* on the child".<sup>59</sup> Further:

**The child needs to be made *visible* during an investigation. This can mean that you [the social worker] need to look at the child's housing situation, whether the child attends preschool or school, the child's relationships [...].<sup>60</sup>**

To make children more visible means, as the quotes illustrate, that social workers keep the child in mind and collect data about the child during an investigation, although keeping somebody in mind or remembering somebody refers to a process of thinking and perception, instead of concrete interaction with a child (e.g., talking to children). When a child perspective is described more in terms of action, such as in collecting information about a child, the text is unclear about whether interaction with the child in the form of meetings or conversation forms part of this activity.

Moreover, the analysis showed that a child perspective was sometimes presented as a disguised adult perspective. The documents contained different

variations of this phenomenon. Sometimes the differences between a child perspective and an adult perspective were seemingly erased. Sometimes, as in the following quote, the child perspective and the adult perspective were described as being inseparable, which seemingly makes the power imbalance between adults and children invisible.

**The child perspective is sometimes in conflict with the adult perspective. Indeed, we cannot see children as isolated from their parents, and parents cannot be seen as isolated from their children. That *adults receive the best possible support* from the social services is also in the best interests of the child.<sup>61</sup>**

It is remarkable that this quote, which describes child perspective, emphasizes that the adults (in this case, the parents of the child) should receive the best possible support, instead of emphasizing that their child should receive the best possible support (as may be expected to be the focus of a child perspective). To clarify, what seems remarkable is not the assumption that support for parents may also, in turn, achieve the best interests of the child, but that a child perspective here is described as being essentially interconnected with the adult perspective. In this quote, child perspective in the context of parent-child relationships is depicted as a shared perspective for children and adults, and children and parents are therefore depicted as an inseparable unit.

**"[...] THE MORE A CHILD PERSPECTIVE WAS ADOPTED, THE MORE IT RESULTED IN IMPROVED PARTICIPATION AND CONSIDERATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS."**



### Children's participation and methods

In the Swedish documents, children's participation was primarily described in quite formal terms. This means, inter alia, that the extent of participation was an issue, and both the positive and negative aspects of the implementation of children's participation were addressed. Broadly speaking, the extent of participation is described as varying depending on the field of child welfare: for example, while the opportunities for youth to participate in the planning and implementation of services and activities are described as good in general, out-of-home placements for unaccompanied refugee children and care for criminal youth are described as having a lack of participation. The issues raised in the documents are about the lack of respectful treatment of children, as well as difficulties establishing a trustful relationship between a child and their social worker.

Participation, as described in the documents, means taking the children's views into account and documenting them. Participation is also described in technical terms and as an administrative process, as a procedure on how participation should be carried out. For example, the following was determined:

**Finally, the child's opinions about the investigation, the planned interventions and the proposal for a decision shall be stated in the documentation, as well as how the case worker has taken such opinions into account. The opinion of the young person or child shall be documented, as well as their participation.**<sup>62</sup>

The realization of children's participation has been highlighted as an ongoing challenge in the documents, and is presented as something that social services need to become better at reflecting on and constantly aiming to improve. The documents contain a lot of rhetoric on efforts to improve children's participation, yet there is very little discussion about what such participation should entail or how to improve the opportunities for children to participate. At the same time, participation is sometimes described as something risky that could harm a child if it is given too much responsibility, as the following quote illustrates:

**When it comes to children there is need to find a balance, so that they are able to participate without being given too much responsibility for their life situation.**<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the methods that were mentioned in the documents, it was primarily standardized methods and evidence-based practice that were discussed in order to improve children's participation, which is not surprising since evidence-based practice is a part of a broader policy strategy in Sweden, which was also stated in the documents.

**In 2013, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and County Councils (SKL) and municipalities began their initiative to support an evidence-based practice, which includes, for example, allocating state funds for**

**regional and local development work. [...] The work focuses on three areas: 1. Strengthening the participation of children and young people with disabilities [...]**<sup>64</sup>

In the documents, standardized assessment instruments in general and the Integrated Children's System (called BBIC in Sweden), a manual-based model which includes numerous standard forms, were described as important instruments for the participation of children (and parents):

**Participation, clarity and transparency are keywords in BBIC. The participation of the child and their legal guardian is important when planning future collaboration with authorities and others.**<sup>65</sup>

In the Swedish documents, children's participation is associated with the use of standardized methods and working procedures. The quote above is also an illustration of the formal approach toward children's participation, in which participation is mentioned together with terms such as *clarity* and *transparency*, which in this context refers to correct procedures and documentation in child welfare work.

### Germany Participation in educational discourse

In the German documents, we noted extensive use of the term *participation*, both as a loan word (*Partizipation*) and as word used in everyday speech (*Beteiligung*). Overall, there is a range of expressions that include the term *participation*, for instance: *the process of participation, the culture of participation, participation skill, the landscape of participation, the pedagogy of participation, participation capability, e-participation* (meaning *online participation*), etc.

In some German documents, the concept of participation is strongly associated with the concept of education (*Bildung*) and the educational approach in social work. These documents state that social work practice should promote the educational processes of children, and participation and education are described as being interdependent:

**Education needs participation and participation promotes education. Without participation, the educational processes of children and youth are restrained.**<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, participation is identified as:

**the key to successful educational processes,**<sup>67</sup>

and is sometimes even described as being coequal:

**Participation is also always an educational process.**<sup>68</sup>

In the German documents the interdependency of participation and education is presented as something that is obvious and, in this sense, participation is also understood as a process, a recur-

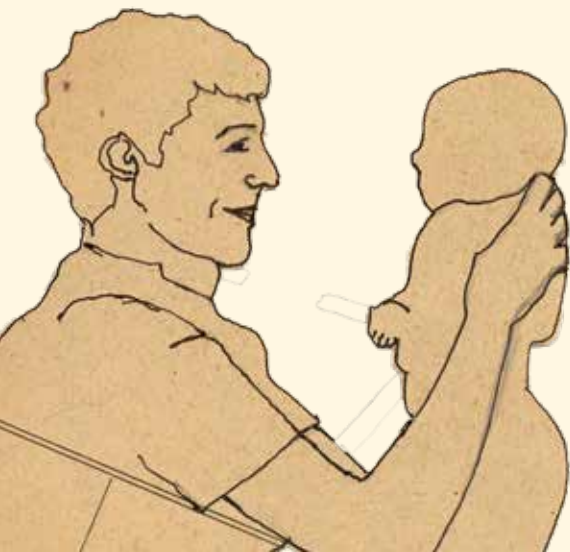


rent term in the above quotes and in other documents. Here, it is important to mention that education (*Bildung*) should not be misunderstood as school education. The socio-pedagogical conception of *Bildung* refers to critical educational theories that describe *Bildung* as a critical and self-reflexive process of own experiences, needs, interests, social norms, etc.<sup>69</sup> Public care is discussed in the documents as a secure place in which participation can and should be tried and acted upon. To exemplify more specifically what educational processes could be referring to, in the documents we found descriptions of public care for children that was described as a place for education in which social skills could be developed:

**Adults, children and youth possess new skills in the process of participation. Children and youth will learn to formulate their interests and to stand up for them. When children and youth participate, adults will experience new processes of negotiation.**<sup>70</sup>

In this quote we find the idea that participation not only refers to children's participation but a process that covers both adults and children, in which adults and children will learn something and in which the relationship between adults and children will be changed. The comment that "adults will experience new processes of negotiation" can be interpreted as an expectation of a decline of power for adults, because of the need to negotiate with children.

When explaining participation, the power relationship between children and adults is a recurrent topic in the documents. The aim of participation was described as being to enhance young people's participation in decision-making, which was also deemed to require adults to share some of their power with them. However, there are other examples in which it becomes apparent that adults are expected to regulate the degree of participation of children. For example, one document stated that adults should tell children how much influence they will be given, and the role they will play in the process: whether they are allowed to be involved in decision-making, or whether they will merely be given the opportunity to formulate their own ideas. The following quote states:



**Children and youth should clearly understand the possibilities and boundaries of their participation.**<sup>71</sup>

The documents also pointed out that participation is only possible if social workers really want it, and that every institution needs to clarify how they understand participation. Indeed, this shows the boundaries of participation, the dependence on adults and the risk of arbitrariness when it comes to implementing the concept. In the German documents too, we found references to the difficulties experienced in different fields of child welfare. There is a high demand to implement children's participation in out-of-home care (e.g., residential care) compared to other fields of child welfare. In services for children in out-of-home care, fear of the negative consequences of children's participation was also described.

### **Children's participation and methods**

Overall, the idea of a diversity of methods was dominant in the German documents. In one document,<sup>72</sup> methods such as child conferences, future workshops and children's councils are described as being suitable for the realization of children's participation in different fields of social work. No specific methods were mentioned in relation to social services. Instead, it was stated that:

**A wide range of different forms of participation enables broad participation.**<sup>73</sup>

Also, emphasis was placed on the need to develop new methods:

**New methods need to be tried out and new knowledge needs to be generated.**<sup>74</sup>

The German documents suggested that there is not one single method of participation, but that such methods need to be continuously developed in practical work. In the documents we also found descriptions of various target groups and the goals of different methods. For example, it was suggested that methods of participation should be chosen in accordance with the target group and in relation to the child's stage of development and education. In the following quote, some goals have been formulated:

**The methods should be chosen in such a way that makes them accessible and they should not be unilateral (e.g. focusing on language and writing) because this could contribute to the exclusion of children and youth. The methods adopted should be diverse and should address the different senses and encourage and enable action.**<sup>75</sup>

According to this quote, the general goals for methods of participation seem to be inclusion, both inclusion that "makes them accessible" to different services and the inclusion of all children regardless of their age or ability. Another goal is to "enable ac-

tion”, which can be interpreted as meaning that participation is seen as an activity, not just passive involvement. The documents also discuss the need for gender-specific methods.<sup>76</sup>

**IN THE GERMAN DOCUMENTS** the description of methods of participation includes the terms *quality* and *quality standards*, which are also part of a broader national policy. German quality standards for participation in child welfare (and other fields) were developed in the context of the National Action Plan (NAP) from 2005 to 2010, as well as later.<sup>77</sup> The NAP was developed by the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* as well as the federal government, the state governments, and municipalities. Also, the Children’s Commission of the German Bundestag, NGOs, the science society and children were involved in the development of the NAP. The following quote describes the national policy:

**In order to promote the quality of children and youth participation throughout society, an NAP working group developed both general and specific quality standards and recommendations for practice [including child welfare] [...] The next step will be the distribution of these quality standards in political and professional committees, in professional practices and in education and further education.<sup>78</sup>**

The next quote describes the relationship between participation and quality:

**In Germany, children and youth participation is an inherent part of quality development and is therefore an essential mark of quality for all fields of child welfare.<sup>79</sup>**

This quote illustrates that the realization of children’s participation is deeply intertwined with the idea of quality development in different fields (of social work) and that participation is a crucial element of quality development: an “essential mark”.

In concrete terms, the ambition to ensure children’s right to participate has been consistent throughout the formulation of the quality standards, and one document discussed this more specifically.<sup>80</sup> In this document, we found 14 quality standards, which can mainly be understood as general aims, attitudes and ambitions for practitioners. For example, the document stated that efforts should be made to enable participation for all children, that decisions should be transparent and that methods should be attractive to all the various target groups, etc. Some quality standards included concrete guidelines and strategies such as the need for evaluation and documentation, but also qualification through the development of skills, certificates of

good practice, development of networks, etc. A few quality standards specifically referred to children, for example, that children who meet professionals should be able to choose topics that are relevant to them and, secondly, that professionals should ensure that children’s participation leads to personal benefits for the child.

## Discussion

Concerning the normative critique of discourses, which aims to identify gaps and contradictions between what is said and what is done in practice, in both the Swedish and German documents, child perspective and children’s participation are described as

common sense and something that should be taken for granted in child welfare practice. In contrast, research shows that children rarely have the opportunity to participate in social work practice.<sup>81</sup>

According to Fairclough, the explanatory critique of discourses entails the investigation of the power behind the discourse, including ideology. The Swedish concept of a child perspective was described as common sense in the policy documents and the emphasis on a child perspective was described as self-evident. This also means that descriptions of the complexity and in-

herent dilemmas of the concept were not addressed as an issue of importance, nor was it acknowledged that child perspective in relation to professional action may be a complex issue that requires reflexivity.

As Fairclough has noted, common sense functions as everyday knowledge while also being essentially contradictory. In the Swedish documents, this contradiction is evident in the description of what a child perspective means in practice and of the methods needed to implement a child perspective. While the child perspective in practice is described as a process of thinking and perception (“see the child” and “keep in mind”) – a process that per definition is not standardized – nevertheless, standardized methods were presented as being adequate to achieve a child perspective. These methods were presented as being beneficial for participation, but the relationship between standardization and participation remained unexplained.

**THE GERMAN DOCUMENTS** showed contradictions within the educational discourse, which stated that there was a connection between participation and education (*Bildung*). The educational discourse signaled an openness to various educational processes, learning experiences, etc. and presented a variety of methods for achieving participation in practice. Within the educational discourse, children should be encouraged toward action. As far as the power relationship between children and adults is concerned, the image of a more balanced and equal relationship emerged; within the educational discourse, adults were also pre-

**“THE SWEDISH CONCEPT OF A CHILD PERSPECTIVE WAS DESCRIBED AS COMMON SENSE IN THE POLICY DOCUMENTS AND THE EMPHASIS ON CHILD PERSPECTIVE WAS DESCRIBED AS SELF-EVIDENT.”**

sented as being in need of development, for example, learning participatory attitudes, and participation was described as a process of mutual learning. At the same time, the descriptions of the relationship between children and practitioners also revealed that participation is perceived as being regulated by adults and that the subject position of the “educational child” can barely be understood as an active subject position in line with the framework of childhood sociology.<sup>82</sup>

These contradictions can be understood through the term *interdiscursivity*, in which elements of different discourses are merged into an interdiscursive hybrid combination.<sup>83</sup> This phenomenon appeared in the policy documents of both countries. In the Swedish documents, the discourse on child perspective was merged with the discourse on evidence-based practice (EBP), which promotes the use of standardized methods. Speaking of how to achieve and fully realize a child perspective in social work practice, it could be argued whether the discourse on evidence-based practice has merely colonized the discourse on child perspective. The reason why standardized methods are being presented as successful can be interpreted in light of the fact that the NBHW has been a driving force in the implementation of EBP in Sweden and can be understood as a way of strengthening the NBHW’s position in the struggle over the interpretation of a child perspective and how it should be put into practice. As Eliasson-Lappalainen<sup>84</sup> has noted, researchers have been in a kind of “defensive battle” due to their lack of consensus regarding the dominant position of this positivistic approach to methodology advocated by the NBHW. Regarding the German context, the educational discourse has merged with the confines of the quality discourse. The quality management discussion in Germany focuses on efficiency and effectiveness and has economic connotations.<sup>85</sup>

**BOTH THE QUALITY** management in Germany and the EBP discussions in Sweden can be seen in light of a weakened professionalization and a loss of professional autonomy.<sup>86</sup> Otto & Schnurr<sup>87</sup> state that the introduction of quality management could lead to a weakened professionalization, in which the ideal of autonomous social workers is replaced by the ideal of social workers oriented by quality guidelines. Nevertheless, each country seems to place an emphasis on different aspects; while Sweden focuses on standardization and evidence-based methods, Germany focuses on a diversity of methods. It is possible that the definition of the field of child welfare has had an impact here; German child welfare definition includes more (preventive) fields and is more diverse in principle.

The discourse analysis has shown how language contributed to the maintenance of unequal power relationships between

children and adults. In reference to the sociology of childhood,<sup>88</sup> which describes different views about children in terms of active-passive and subject-object, the Swedish documents contained another two terms: *visible* and *invisible*. The application of a child perspective was described as a process of making children visible. Indeed, making children visible does not necessarily mean that children will talk or interact with a social worker, as the analysis has shown. The concept of the “visible child” does not automatically include a view of children as active subjects. The idea of a child perspective, as well as the interconnected subject position of a “visible child”, has a low ambition when it comes to the involvement and participation of children. Thus, this subject position may be described as marginalized. To “see” and to “think about” the child does not take into account the first step in Hart’s<sup>89</sup> ladder of participation, which is manipulation, and which should imply that the child is present.

### Reflection on the method – comparing apples to apples?

International comparisons must address the issue that it is difficult to determine whether what we study is comparable.<sup>90</sup> This study has compared two different concepts (the child perspective in Sweden and children’s participation in Germany) on the

basis that these are the dominant concepts following the ratification of the CRC in each national context.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, this comparison is not unproblematic. The term *child perspective* is not common in Germany, whereas in Sweden the term *child participation* is commonly used and has thus been analyzed in relation to the term *child perspective*. An alternative would have been to focus solely on the concept of participation in both Sweden and Germany, which we considered a lesser alternative because of the common use of the concept of a child perspective in Swedish social work. However, considering a range of different concepts related to children’s rights, instead of just two

specific concepts, would probably have contributed to further insights into how the CRC is interpreted in different national contexts and in social work practice.

Furthermore, we compared different types of documents that also need to be problematized. Some documents are similar, for example, official reports, while other documents are difficult to compare, for example, the German brochures and magazines which have no Swedish equivalent. These brochures and magazines can be seen as more commonplace and less scientific and did not provide as many rich descriptions of the concepts as the other documents. Still, the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* publishes these kinds of documents in order to disseminate knowledge about participation,

**“THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS HAS SHOWN THAT CHILDREN, IN BOTH THE SWEDISH AND GERMAN DOCUMENTS, WERE RELEGATED TO WEAK SUBJECT POSITIONS THAT MAINTAINED EXISTING POWER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ADULTS.”**

which is why these documents were included in the study.

2010 to 2015 was a period in which ideas about children's rights were intensively discussed. However, focusing on this period only could also be regarded as a limitation. However, it may be assumed that the various ideas explored in this study may still have an impact on child welfare practice since child welfare systems and the traditions associated with social work practice do not change quickly. It is hard to say what kind of impact the documents have on social work practice. However, Bergmark and Lundström<sup>92</sup> argue that the Swedish NBHW has a strong position in Sweden and significantly impacts the development of social work, while similar guidelines from authorities in countries with strong NGOs (which is true in the case of Germany, even though Bergmark & Lundström discussed the example of the USA), do not have such a strong impact on social work practice. In Germany, NGOs are strongly involved in the debate about children's rights in social work<sup>93</sup> and the "National Coalition Deutschland" (www.dkhw.de), for example, is a network comprising more than 120 NGOs that work toward the implementation of children's rights in Germany. It is possible that the strong position of NGOs in Germany weakens the position of guidelines from the authorities. Furthermore, the documents we analyzed include guidelines that are not mandatory for social workers to use and we therefore do not know much about the extent to which they actually influence practice.

## Conclusions and implications

This article provides insight into how ideas about the implementation of children's rights in social work practice is interpreted in different national contexts. It builds on an analysis of policy documents regarding child welfare and specifically the presentation of the two main concepts used in social work practice in each country: child perspective in Sweden and children's participation in Germany. The study indicates that national discourses have consequences for shaping ideas about how a child perspective in Sweden and children's participation in Germany is to be understood in relation to social work practice, the methods that are promoted, and how children are positioned in relation to these concepts.

The interpretation of the concepts needs to be understood in relation to the organization of the child welfare system, as well as the definition and tradition of social work in each country. The Swedish documents mainly deal with child welfare investigations and the BBIC method, and the focus is on the exercise of authority through the social services, which goes hand in hand with the administrative tradition of social work and the organization of municipal social services. The more formal nature of the discourse on participation in Sweden can be understood against this background. The German documents refer to a greater variety of fields of child welfare and the diverse work of different NGOs, in which the exercise of authority is not an issue (e.g., preventive youth social work, preschool, etc.). Against this background, the comprehensive interpretation of participation and the variety of methods are understandable. It is also worth mentioning the different definitions of children in national law;

whereas the Swedish Social Welfare Act defines everyone under the age of 18 as a child, the German Child Welfare Act differentiates between children (up to the age of 14), youth (up to the age of 18) and young adults (up to the age of 27). This means that participation in a German child welfare context involves a larger group of people that includes young adults, which can explain the broader approach to participation. Furthermore, we can assume that the German concept of participation is based on both the educational tradition and on the preventive approach of social work.

**THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS** has shown that children, in both the Swedish and German documents, were relegated to weak subject positions that maintained existing power relationships between children and adults. The invisibility of children, and the fact that children and parents are mentioned together, is also described in other studies of policy documents.<sup>94</sup> For social workers, this means that they need to be aware of their own views on their clients and consciously contribute to the child's status as an active subject. Furthermore, a reflection on standardized methods is necessary and a range of methods based on professional judgment about the opportunities for children to become active subjects ought to be promoted.

This analysis of policy document has provided insight into the ways in which the CRC and global concepts such as children's participation can be understood. This paves the way for reflection on and improvement of social work practice. An awareness of the different interpretations of the concepts shows the complexity of these issues but can also be used for transformative action to change the existing reality for the better. ✖

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## appendix

## Documents from Socialstyrelsen [the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare]

Title: Swedish/English (authors' translation)	Type of document, number of pages	Topic/area	Target group
S1: <i>Lägesrapport 2011, Hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2011) [Progress report 2011, Health care and social services]	Report, 200 pages	Health care and social services	Mainly government and parliament, but also decision-makers on a national level, as well as other target groups
S2: <i>Tillsynsrapport 2012, Hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2012) [Supervision report 2012, Health care and social services]	Report, 67 pages	Healthcare and social services	Mainly government and Parliament, but also decision-makers and accountable managers on a national and local level
S3: <i>Dokumentation av barnets bästa inom socialtjänsten</i> (2012) [Documentation of the child's best interests in social services]	Guide, 40 pages	Social services, specifically child welfare and family law	Case workers and managers
S4: <i>Program för trygg och säker vård i familjehem och hem för vård eller boende. Redovisning av regeringsuppdrag</i> (2012) *[Programs for safe and secure care in out-of-home care and residential care. Reporting of government assignments]	Materials for improvement including a guide, legal regulations, general advice and educational materials, 55 pages	Residential care, out-of-home care	Regional development managers, social services, educators
S5: <i>Samverka för barns bästa — en vägledning om barns behov av insatser från flera aktörer</i> (2013) [Collaboration for the best interests of the child — a guide to children's need for services from several actors]	Guide, 104 pages	Healthcare, social services, schools	Accountable healthcare managers, social services and schools
S6: <i>Barns och ungas hälsa, vård och omsorg 2013</i> (2013) [Children and young people's health, nursing and care 2013]	Report, 306 pages	Public health, social conditions, environmental health, healthcare and social services	Mainly government and parliament, but also officials and practitioners in municipalities, county councils, researchers, public authorities and organizations
S7: <i>Placerade barns skolgång och hälsa — ett gemensamt ansvar</i> (2013) [Placed children's schooling and health — a shared responsibility]	Guide, 164 pages	Children in residential care and out-of-home care	Concerned parties in social services, schools and health care
S8: <i>Tillståndet och utvecklingen inom hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2014) [The condition and development in health care and social services]	Report, 223 pages	Healthcare, social services	Decision-makers on a national level, as well as other target groups
S9: <i>Från enskilt ärende till nationell statistik. Barns behov i centrum (BBIC)</i> (2015) [From individual case to national statistics. Integrated Children System (BBIC)]	Report, 126 pages	Integrated Children System	Social workers in child welfare
S10: <i>Utreda barn och unga. Handbok för socialtjänstens arbete enligt socialtjänstlagen</i> (2015) [Investigate children and young people. Handbook for the work of the social services according to the Social Services Act]	Handbook, 214 pages	Child welfare investigations	Social workers, managers, politicians on the social welfare board

## Documents from Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth]

Title German/English (authors' translation)	Type of Document, number of pages	Topic/area	Target group
G1: <i>Perspektiven für ein kindergerechtes Deutschland. Abschlussbericht des Nationalen Aktionsplans „Für ein kindergerechtes Deutschland 2005–2010“</i> (2010) [Perspectives for a child-friendly Germany. Final report of the national action plan “For a child-friendly Germany 2005–2010”]	Report, 128 pages	Child-friendly Germany, strategies on national and local level, for example, in social services, NGOs, schools, preschools, urban planning	No target group specified
G2: <i>immer dabei – Das Magazin für kindergerechte Kommunen</i> (2010) [always there – the magazine for child-friendly municipalities]	Magazine, 36 pages	Child-friendly municipalities, (e.g., social services, NGOs, schools, preschools, urban planning)	No target group specified
G3: <i>beteiligen – Themenheft 1 für kindergerechte Kommunen</i> (2010) [participate – Issue 1 for child-friendly municipalities]	Publications for the practice, 20 pages	Child-friendly municipalities, (e.g., social services, NGOs, schools, preschools, urban planning)	No target group specified
G4: <i>14. Kinder- und Jugendbericht. Bericht über die Lebenssituation junger Menschen und die Leistungen der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe in Deutschland</i> (2013) [14. Children and Youth Report. Report on the life situation of young people and the services of child and youth welfare in Germany]	Report, 519 pages	Child welfare, children's living conditions	Actors on a national level, in federal states and on a local level (national institutions, agencies, professionals, service providers and science institutions)
G5: <i>Qualitätsstandards für Beteiligung von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Allgemeine Qualitätsstandards und Empfehlungen für die Praxisfelder Kindertageseinrichtungen, Schule, Kommune, Kinder- und Jugendarbeit und Erzieherische Hilfen</i> (2015) [Quality standards for the participation of children and young people. General quality standards and recommendations for preschools, schools, municipalities and child and youth welfare]	Brochure, 56 pages	Preschools, schools, municipalities, child and youth welfare services	All actors who want to develop children's rights in their working field

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