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# Facilitating Participation for Youths in Child Welfare Services in Transition to Adulthood: Practice between Formalities and Empowerment

Anne Riise<sup>a</sup> and Veronika Paulsen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Child Welfare and Social Work, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Harstad, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Head of child welfare research, NTNU Social Research, Trondheim, Norway

## ABSTRACT



This article examines social workers' perceptions of youths' participation and how their perceptions influence their practice towards youths in aftercare. The article is based on qualitative interviews with 38 social workers in child welfare services (CWS) and collaborative welfare services. The interviews were analysed using a hermeneutic approach. We identified two practices with different objectives: practice that accommodates formal requirements for participation and practice that supports empowerment. When social workers prepared and established aftercare, they focused on fulfilling legal and system-oriented requirements. This practice challenged youths' ability to participate because the social workers focused on the formal conditions for aftercare and youths' consent to aftercare. While youths received aftercare, the practice, which included self-determination, contributed to empowerment. In this practice, the social workers were available and flexible, mobilising their knowledge and resources to establish trust and relationships with youths, thus helping them to experience support and mastery. We conclude that the accommodation of formalities was a foundation for involving youths in aftercare. However, the formalities were barriers to youths' participation and empowerment in aftercare if youths' consent appeared as a threshold to help from CWS.

## KEYWORDS

Children's rights; care; social work; aftercare; participation

## Introduction

In Norway, youths receiving help from child welfare services (CWS) before turning 18 can consent to receiving help until they are 25. In respect to this help, called aftercare, youths have the right to participate, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1989). CWS shall inform youths in care and youths living with their families receiving help from CWS about what type of help they can receive, whom they can

**CONTACT** Anne Riise  anne.riise@uit.no  Department of Child Welfare and Social Work, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, PO Box 1063, 9480, Harstad, Norway

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contact (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion (MCESI), 2011), and cooperate with welfare services to offer aftercare (The Child Welfare Act (CWA), 1992, § 1–7). CWS is responsible for providing youths with adequate information in due time prior to their 18th birthday (MCESI, 2011) and facilitate youths in expressing their views in legal and administrative proceedings (OHCHR, 1989). However, youths experience limited participation as they lack information (Paulsen, 2016b; Paulsen, Wendelborg, et al., 2020) and opportunities to participate (Bijleveld et al., 2013; Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). In this article, we examined social workers' perceptions of youths' right to participate and how their perceptions influence their practice of involving youths in aftercare. The aim was to gain knowledge about youths' participation and thus contribute to the development of practice that will facilitate youths' participation when they enter the distinct period of emerging adulthood. Our research questions were the following: How do social workers perceive youths' right to participate when youths receive aftercare? and how do their perceptions influence their practice in respect to facilitating youths' participation?

We studied social workers' perceptions in the phases of the aftercare process: when preparing youths for aftercare, when youths received aftercare and when aftercare ended. Youths in aftercare have entered the distinct life course between adolescence and adulthood, referred to as emerging adulthood, which involves several parallel but distinct developmental characteristics (Arnett, 2007). The life phase is filled with possibilities and choices that determine youths' help in aftercare and influence their future. At the same time as youths' formal rights to receive further help change and they have more self-determination, youths experience abrupt transitions to adulthood (Paulsen, 2016a), reflecting the compounded expectations of youths in this life course. However, when youths consent to aftercare, they depend on help from CWS in which they experience limited opportunities to participate. Due to the changes in youths' formal rights, it is relevant to study social workers' practice to facilitate youths' participation in aftercare. In this article, we understand practice as social workers' use of professional knowledge and methodology, personal competence and consideration of institutional conditions (Sørensen, 2018). Institutional conditions which influence youths' transitions are organisational perspectives, work and time pressure, staffing situation, routines and competence (Breimo et al., 2015). Based on this, it is valuable to study how social workers assess youths' right to participate and implement their practice concerning youths' situations and maturity.

Public guidelines stress that the transitions to adulthood are processes and that aftercare should provide youths with time to adapt to what the transitions mean for their future (MCESI, 2011), which impose social workers a responsibility in their interaction with youths in aftercare. Paulsen's (2016b) study of youth's participation in CWS, identified three categories of youths' involvement, additionally clarifying social workers' position to interact. When youths had little or no presence, they experienced no participation. When they were present but did not experience participation, youths had few or no meetings with their social workers, received limited information, were not heard or found it too difficult to express their opinions. Youths experienced participation when they cooperated, had processes lasting over a period and had an established relationship with their social worker. Information and guidance from significant persons were crucial in the absence of parents (Kennan et al., 2018; Nho et al., 2017).

At the same time, social workers are encouraged to consider alternative procedures to promote participation, such as play and creative activities (Husby et al., 2018; Smith, 2007) and youths' involvement in documentation processed (Paulsen et al., 2017). This suggests the value of interacting in relationships when realising children's right to participate. Studies found that trusting relationships between children and adults were decisive for participation processes in matters concerning their welfare, protection and care (Bijleveld et al., 2013; Kennan et al., 2018; Paulsen et al., 2017). In establishing relationships, social workers' communication skills and ability to establish trust build a foundation for children's active participation (Falch-Eriksen et al., 2021). This competence becomes precarious when developing cooperation in established relationships and maintaining trust despite staff turnovers (Seim & Slettebø, 2017). In addition to organisational factors such as staff turnovers, Ormstad et al. (2020) highlighted social workers' assessments of the child's prerequisites and need to participate as a barrier to participation. This implies that facilitating youths' participation in aftercare requires a plan that considers social workers' involvement when youths are the legal party in the specific child welfare case.

### ***The right to participation in aftercare***

Children and youths' right to participate is outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989) and in § 1–6 in the CWA (1992), stating that children who can form his or her own views have the right to express those views freely in matters affecting the child. The importance shall be attached to the view of the child in accordance with the child's age and maturity (CWA, 1992, § 6-3). Conditions for participation change when youths reach the age of majority and they, in most cases, consent to aftercare. When youths in care turn 18, their formal measures end, which ends the formal facilitation of spokespersons and supervisors involved in the care (MCESI, 2014). Nevertheless, the CWA (1992) stresses that assessments of measures in aftercare should include youths' possibilities to express their views and social workers' considerations of youths' views in the decisions (§§ 1-3, 6–3 a) and shall be based on the best interest of the child (§ 4-1), including decisions about ending and declining measures. In that case, youths shall receive information about their right to appeal (CWA, §§ 6-5, 6-6; The Public Administration Act, 1967, § 42).

### ***Theoretical framework: youths' participation***

In this article, we assume that practice develops within organisational factors and in the meetings and contact between youths and social workers. Seim and Slettebø (2017) emphasised the relational understanding of participation because of the importance of the contact and relationship between the youth and the social worker. Understanding participation as relational requires a commitment on the part of social workers to transferring power to the youth (Franklin, 1997), because trust in the relationships is necessary for youths to feel safe asking for help (Husby et al., 2018). Thus, the relational understanding of participation is a primary focus in terms of youths' ability to participate through consulting and cooperative participation. In consulting participation, youths can express their views; that is, they are asked for their views, but their views do not

necessarily influence decisions, while in cooperative participation, youths interact in a partnership, and their opinions are more important as they are more emphasised (Vis, 2014). In both cases, youths' participation depends on support from other persons to exercise their right to participate. This support relates Gulbrandsen et al.'s (2012) conception opinion work, which supports youths' understandings through interaction by inviting them to cooperate, explore their opinions, assess their expressions and contribute new elements to their self-narratives. The support is crucial for participation and the conditions for establishing relationships (Seim & Slettebø, 2017). When youths are in aftercare, social workers must consecutively consider their maturity in facilitation of participation, especially since youths have reached the age of majority and have consented to aftercare. In such cases, facilitating participation includes facilitating self-determination. Deci and Ryan (2000) defined self-determination as an individual's wish to be considered a source of action and self-determined behaviour as something that is experienced as voluntary and based on one's own interest.

The responsibility to facilitate participation and self-determination lies with the government (OHCHR, 1989) under the current circumstances and, thus, with the CWS. However, the changed status of youths when they turn 18 requires a renewed focus on their situation and needs, recognising that youths are both becomings, entering adulthood, and beings, acknowledged as individuals in a distinct life phase (Lee, 2001). Youths depend on adults to take them seriously and facilitate them to be considered subjects, not objects (Angel, 2010). These perspectives on youths correspond to Arnett's (2007) reference to emerging adulthood because the term recognises the complexity of the life phase and that it involves identity explorations, instability, self-focus, possibilities and the feeling of being in-between (Arnett, 2004). When Seim and Slettebø (2017) emphasised that empowering youths is an important reason for youths' participation, we relate it to youths' development and potentials as they are emerging adulthood. Wehmeyer (2005) outlined the connection of self-determination to empowerment, as self-determination involves processes where the individual finds power through developing perceptions of their own interests and stressed that individuals develop through interaction with their surroundings. In such processes, youths and adults cooperate, and adults assist youths in understanding and forming views regarding their situations (Gulbrandsen et al., 2012). In this context, we understand participation and self-determination to be skills that youths learn and develop in interactions with their surroundings (Wehmeyer, 2005).

## Method

Data were collected in 2017 and 2018 as part of the research project entitled Aftercare – A Good Transition to Adulthood? initiated by NTNU Social Research (Paulsen, Wendelborg et al., 2020). This article is based on qualitative interviews with 38 social workers from 13 Norwegian municipalities. We wanted a selection of informants that reflected different perceptions of youths' participation, and chose informants based on position, responsibility, welfare service, municipality and experiences reflecting the variety within the group of youths receiving aftercare. We included social workers with experiences with unaccompanied minors because there has been a significant group of unaccompanied minors receiving aftercare (Garvik et al., 2016). There were 15 managers,

17 caseworkers and 6 supervisors. While 26 worked in CWS, 12 worked in cooperative public and private welfare services. We recruited social workers by directly contacting welfare services, seeking out professional environments and getting referrals from professionals. As we sought out informants by means of snowballing (Thagaard, 2018), the networks and cooperation established to help youths in aftercare emerged. Considering this, we perceived that our selection of participants would provide useful and supplemental perspectives on the topic investigated.

We interviewed informants individually and in groups, using partly structured interview guides divided into topics. The interview guides were prepared when collecting data for the NTNU Social Research project and were based on literature reviews and earlier studies. In the individual interviews, we explored informants' perceptions of youths' participation and the youths' position in the participation, in accordance with Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) focus on informant's perceptions of what they take for granted. In the group interviews, we helped informants supplement and explore each other's knowledge and perceptions by reflecting on their own and the service's practices and perspectives. The composition of positions in group interviews could have influenced the answers (Thagaard, 2018), but we considered that the informants elaborated and supplemented each other's ideas and views rather than adjusting to each other. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data approved the study, and it followed the research ethics guidelines for the social sciences.

## **Analysis**

The analyses were mainly conducted by the first author of the article, using a hermeneutic approach inspired by the hermeneutic circle and structure's influence on how individuals create meaning (Christensen, 2015) and on individual's experiences (Kristiansen, 2017). Reviewing the interview transcriptions, we marked portions of the text in which social workers described the practice of involving youths in the different phases of aftercare. Next, we focused on structure, such as law and public guidelines, organisation of aftercare and resources. When applying the hermeneutic circle to the analysis, we were able to connect different perceptions, related to welfare service and social workers' positions and responsibilities. In this way, we developed a more comprehensive insight into the phenomenon because we were able to correct or confirm our pre-understandings (Krogh, 2014). We found that social workers' positions in different welfare services and their responsibilities in the different phases of aftercare influenced their perceptions of youths' participation and how they facilitated participation. We interpreted and connected social workers' perceptions of youths' participation to the described practices to develop new perspectives on their perceptions of youths' participation. Such rounds are processes in the hermeneutic circle (Kristiansen, 2017), which contributed to developing a more complex understanding of the earlier interpreted parts of participation involving responsibility and resources.

## **Youths' right to participate – practice driven by different objectives**

We found that social workers perceived participation as necessary when working in aftercare. However, social workers related this necessity to the different objectives of youths'

participation. Based on this, we identified two practices: practice to fulfil formalities and practice to facilitate empowerment. When social workers implemented youths' right to participate, formal requirements related to documentation and professional accountability was an immediate objective. The long-term objective of contributing to youths' development and future appeared in social workers' descriptions of assessments and follow-up, as they related the objective of participation to enabling youths' empowerment. Social workers emphasised and combined the two practices when facilitating youths' participation. Organisational factors, such as welfare service, social workers' position and responsibility and aftercare measure, influenced how they perceived the objective of youths' participation, which consequently influenced their facilitation of youths' participation.

### ***Practice facilitating formalities***

Social workers' practice notably involved accommodating CWS formalities when they prepared youths for aftercare and ending aftercare. When social workers in CWS described youths' right to participate, they referred to practice in terms of the conditions and assessments of aftercare measures and how they used and developed routines, plans and forms to inform and involve youths. By offering and repeating information about possible aftercare measures and the necessity of youths' consent, social workers tried to ensure that youths received sufficient information to consider if they wanted aftercare. The consent involved agreeing to conditions for help. CWS manager Mona described this:

If youths say they want aftercare, and they want to cooperate and agree to the conditions ... aftercare is not only about economy ... then they receive aftercare.

By communicating the conditions for aftercare, social workers wanted to ensure that youths' consent was in line with CWS expectations to youths in aftercare. Both social workers in CWS and cooperative welfare services provided youths with information, but CWS social workers ensured the formalisation of youths' consent to aftercare. The shared responsibility was especially applicable when CWS and a cooperative welfare service offered aftercare to unaccompanied minors. Social workers agreed that the daily follow-up offered a suitable environment for informing youths through dialogue. Thus, when youths consented to aftercare, social workers perceived that they understood the premises, were motivated for aftercare and prepared to meet the expectations.

All social workers used forms and plans in the meetings with youths as a strategy to involve youths in the aims and follow-up targeting youths' independence, which we recognise as aims specified in public guidelines. However, CWS social workers often developed routines to implement public guidelines as part of the practice to facilitate youths' involvement, as exemplified by CWS social worker Frank:

When we started developing aftercare, we experienced that there was no plan. ... The criteria are to get youths through school and teach them independence. ... We created a form, Independent Young Adult form, which we implemented, securing a practice where we work on those life areas, enabling youths to live on their own.

The independence aims targeted economic independence, residence, education or work and youths managing without the help of CWS. When social workers included aims and assessments of youths' independence in the documents, they perceived that



they had secured the formalities of the follow-up and that youths met the conditions for receiving aftercare. CWS manager Lilly related the assessments to professional accountability:

Regarding professional accountability, CWS is not doing payment. If youths want aftercare, they have commitments. Then CWS has a responsibility to find out what more aftercare involves.

CWS social workers weighed the objective of following routines and documenting youths' participation against regularity of follow-up and their assessments of youths' individual needs. They referred to youths participating when they engaged in setting aims and followed up conditions and the content in the plans. Often, social workers in cooperative welfare services contacted CWS when resolutions were unclear, or youths wanted to appeal. This practice suggests that there was an understanding of the responsibility of CWS to accommodate legal requirements for youths' right to participation. When CWS social workers took this responsibility, they experienced it as challenging to establish a relationship with youths, and especially with unaccompanied minors, who were engaged in relationships with social workers in residential care measures.

When CWS social workers developed routines, they related them to establishing and developing practice, accommodating legal requirements and clarifying child welfare assessments within CWS and in terms of cooperation between services. They highlighted the importance of knowing the welfare system when developing routines. Social workers in all welfare services, who regularly followed up youths, noted that system knowledge enabled them to guide and assist youths in gaining their rights, for example, when helping youths understand letters and when coordinating help from welfare services. CWS social worker Tom said:

I have an informal competence. I cooperate across welfare services. They [other social workers] do not necessarily understand the laws and the help systems in the welfare state, but you must know ... when you work with youths in aftercare.

Social workers' system knowledge and competence in coordinating and cooperating were crucial because of a general lack of knowledge amongst social workers about the rights of youths receiving aftercare. They noted that their competence contributed to youths receiving information about welfare services and exercising their rights. They also found it helped youths to develop their ability to appeal, either for a reassessment of resolutions involving CWS or to verify child welfare practices and resolutions through the county governor.

### ***Practice facilitating empowerment***

In respect to the practice of facilitating empowerment, social workers related the objective of participation to how they contributed to youths' coping and development. This practice appeared when the social workers described their relationship to the youths in how they were able to stay connected and cooperate as well as to support and establish trust. The social workers based their descriptions on an impression of youths' situations as challenging because of earlier experiences, parallel help from welfare services, expectations, decisions crucial for their future and a desire to manage on their own. The lack of



an informal network emphasised youths' need for practical and emotional support. Thus, for some social workers, the practice of facilitating youths by providing emotional support was a higher priority than the facilitation of CWS formalities.

Youths' vulnerability and the limited period of receiving help were noted to be risks, leaving social workers feeling responsible for offering help. Social workers who followed up unaccompanied minors felt that the measures and follow-up offered during their first years in Norway were highly necessary. They assisted youths to manoeuvre in the welfare systems by using their system knowledge to guide and train the youth. Social workers in regular contact with youths in the residential care measure or in low threshold measures were able to challenge youths and explain their choices and views to increase their understanding of their situation. Manager Robin, in a residential care measure, explained this as a process:

An important competence is to be able to see possibilities and solutions, and not the limitations. ... After several rounds explaining, exemplifying, they see it for themselves, and come back and present their opinions. Then they understand something, and we have achieved something important for them to further succeed. ... That is how we proceed.

The necessity of a relationship that encouraged participation was related to youths being able to confer with social workers and rely on them to offer them solutions. Social workers found that their relationship with the youths influenced how they were able to meet and help them, and that it prevented conflicts to escalate. This led CWS to reorganise staff and increase social workers' time and flexibility to meet youths and engage in relational processes. Consequently, CWS social workers sensed youths' needs, talked with them and found solutions. Relationships, time and flexibility depended on the aftercare measure and the social worker's position and responsibility. For example, the CWS social worker's flexibility was seen in the weekly time for drop-ins at her office, while the supervisor's flexibility was seen in the weekly grocery shopping with the youths. The social workers in residential care measures were able to be more present and available than CWS social workers. Robin's flexibility was reflected in an open office door when he was present in the residential care measure. Follow-up involved meeting the youths, showing interest and being available in youths' specific environments and present for both serious and casual conversations.

Social workers with regular contact with youths trained and prepared them to handle challenging situations, instead of managing the situations for them. They prepared youths by guiding, planning and role-playing purposely for youths to experience coping, enabling them to manage similar situations on their own. The social workers who described this practice worked in positions within CWS or cooperative welfare services, where they could build trust and develop their relationship with the youths. Social workers felt the youths trusted them when they asked them for support in the doctor's appointment or consulted them before making important phone calls. CWS social worker Linda described the importance of predictability in the relationship:

Some youths ... are almost not in need of practical help but find security in knowing that they have adults to support them.

CWS social workers recognised youths' need for support and considered trust and relationships important but found building trust time-consuming. Regardless of

welfare service, social workers who established close relationships with youths often stayed connected after ending aftercare resolution. CWS social worker Linda said:

I almost had to force a youth to end aftercare. He said, “It is safe to come to you”. I said, “Even if you do not have the resolution, you can contact me”.

The timing of ending aftercare was challenging. CWS management expected aftercare measures to end when the resolution ended because of youths’ financial independence. However, CWS social workers were expected to maintain contact with youths to offer emotional and practical support. According to CWS social workers, CWS management did not prioritise facilitation of relationships and did not acknowledge relationship and availability as part of CWS social workers’ responsibility. In any case, CWS social workers argued that social workers with daily follow-up, through leisure activities and presence in youths’ environments, had better prerequisites to establish relationships with the youths.

### **Facilitating participation – combining formalities and empowerment**

Social workers’ perceptions of participation and facilitation of participation were contextual and changeable. Practices were connected to phases in the aftercare process and the social workers’ position and responsibility within the welfare service, thus influencing how social workers were able to establish relationships and cooperate with the youth.

An inevitable part of social workers’ obligations to facilitate youths’ participation was to accommodate documentation requirements, relating their assessments of aftercare measures to professional accountability. The formalities formed a foundation for practice which included informing youths of what kind of help they could expect in aftercare and gaining their consent (CWA, 1992, § 1–3). The responsibility for formalities ultimately fell on CWS social workers. The practice suggests that the social worker’s objectives concerning youths’ participation must adhere to the principles of upholding children’s rights, fulfilling legal responsibilities and improving services (Sinclair, 2004). When CWS social workers developed routines and forms that they used to document youths’ participation, they related practice to professional accountability. Developing routines became a part of changing aftercare practice (see also The Norwegian Board of Health, 2020). This implies a need to organise requirements of documentation into a professional order, according to Skotte (2020), whose study pointed out how the documentation of practice ensures that social workers’ practice is in accordance with sound professional standards in respect to their clients, colleagues, partners and managers as well as the law. We found that documentation, routines, plans and forms can function as a strategy to involve youths, contributing to justified, verifiable and predictable practice. In an audit, the Norwegian Board of Health (2020) clarified that the purpose of routines needs to be established in practice over time. This indicates a challenge to CWS practice when social workers both develop formalities to meet professional accountability and develop the practice of youths’ participation.

When the social workers established aftercare, their practice required the facilitation of consultative participation. They asked youths for their views and gave them opportunities to express them. However, the circumstances, including expectations and conditions, influenced what youths expressed and how CWS social workers made use of youths’ views. Consequentially, youths received aftercare, but their views did not

necessarily have any influence on the decision or the measure. An audit of aftercare confirmed that CWS set conditions for aftercare and ended aftercare if youths did not follow them up (The Norwegian Board of Health, 2020). They emphasised that such a practice is against Norwegian law. When CWS presented conditions in accordance with professional accountability, they challenged youths' involvement and participation in aftercare because youths' participation, according to Franklin (1997), relies on whether youths have the power to direct processes. This challenge was underlined when CWS social workers found it difficult to establish relationships with unaccompanied minors and left the information responsibility to social workers in daily contact with them. When CWS social workers communicated conditions for aftercare through information and consultation with youths, this relates to streamlining and customising youths' situations, so they satisfy an objective of participation to concretising already set aims (Eide, 2016), such as aims targeting independence.

In all phases of aftercare, social workers assisted and guided youths to exercise their rights within the welfare system. The objective of the practice relates to Sinclair's (2004) rights agenda, which considers children as individuals with their own rights. Cooperation between welfare services, accommodations of the law, guidelines and routines were practices according to formalities and formed a basis for facilitating youths' right to participate. At the same time, social workers, regardless of welfare service, acknowledged that establishing and developing relationships was crucial, and related the objective of youths' involvement to development of life management skills. We relate this objective to facilitating empowerment and found the objective elaborated by social workers in residential care measures and activity measures. Social workers who followed up unaccompanied minors emphasised the precarity in practice to facilitating unaccompanied minors' empowerment and related their responsibility to substantiate unaccompanied minors' integration processes. Paulsen, Riise, et al. (2020) found that formal network and system factors became crucial for unaccompanied minors in meeting their needs for emotional and social recognition as well as their need for legal recognition. Sinclair (2004) confirmed that the objective of youths' participation is to enhance children's skills and self-esteem and empower them. During early preparations for aftercare, social workers strived to establish predictability in their contact with youths by informing them about their opportunities in aftercare. This emphasises a commitment to transfer power to youths for them to participate. Jensen (2018) claimed that social workers make their position in youths' participation relevant when they offer and share their knowledge. When social workers guided youths to understand their rights, challenged and supported them in expressing their views, they shared and transferred power to youths.

The objective of practice facilitating empowerment recognises an approach that considers youths as beings with rights to self-determination. Arnett's (2004) term emerging adulthood reframed youths as beings on a distinct life course between adolescence and adulthood, involving the factors of possibility, vulnerability and instability. Social workers who established relationships and shared their system knowledge intended to meet youths' need for support and prepare them for future situations. According to Paulsen and Berg (2016), there is a need for practice that facilitates flexible and gradual transitions for youths, enabling them to develop at their own pace. They emphasised that youths' need for independence is not separate from the need for support. When social workers facilitated empowerment through their support, they noted the

importance of flexibility for youths to develop participation. Jensen (2018) underlined that youths' participation requires social workers' time and focus, as well as linguistic support, when assisting youths to reach an understanding of their participation. We found that social workers' guidance and flexibility to enter meaning-making processes together with the youths turned participation into learning processes. Gulbrandsen et al. (2012) emphasised that social workers' support and practice in meaning-making is central in the learning processes. Wehmeyer (2005) determined that practice gives youths opportunities to make their own decisions, experience control and realise a life based on their own preferences. The social workers in positions to facilitate empowerment processes through their interaction with youth noted that the processes were decisive for youths to develop coping skills and experience self-determination.

## Conclusion

In this study, we found that social workers' perceptions of youths' participation in aftercare led to two practices to facilitate participation: facilitation of formalities and facilitation of empowerment. During the aftercare process, social workers developed and followed routines to accommodate legal requirements and public guidelines to ensure the practice was professionally accountable. Formalities regarding youths' consent to aftercare became thresholds for participation and empowerment because practice to follow up on youths' participation relied on youths' consent to aftercare. After youths' consent, the formalities were applicable but incorporated in the practice to follow up, develop relationships and cooperate with the youth. Social workers' positions, the welfare service and aftercare measures influenced social workers' opportunities to follow up youths' participation. This implies that when youths turn 18, their participation requires mobilisation of CWS social workers' time and flexibility. Even though our study showed that these resources not necessarily were prioritised, reorganising of staff to establish relationships, cooperate and follow up youths facilitated youths' participation processes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Anne Riise* is a PhD Candidate at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. This study is part of her PhD thesis on youths' participation in aftercare. She has expertise in municipal child welfare through her practice, from lecturing in social work education and research.

*Veronika Paulsen* is Head of child welfare research at NTNU Social Research. She has a PhD in social work and has broad expertise in practice in municipal child welfare, both through her practice and research. For the past ten years, she has participated in and led several research projects with a focus on child welfare practice.

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