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Documenting a Well-planned and Effective Client Process in Child Welfare

Child welfare practice in Finland has been blamed for being not enough target-oriented and poorly documented. In the article the client documents written in child welfare practice are read as practitioners’ argumentative tools with practical goals and consequences. The client-related plans are for example increasingly used as a proof of an effective child welfare. It is analysed how the client-related plans are constructed and what kind of textual devices are used when argumenting for a progressive client process. The analysis shows how the support plan is constructed as a process with distinguished elements: defining the eligible client, assessing grounds for extending or terminating the period in supported housing and arguing for positive changes. The analysis gives a concrete insight to the textual devices used when child welfare clienthood is constructed as a goal-directed process.

Key words:
Documentation
cchild welfare
effectiveness
Introduction

Child welfare practice in Finland has been blamed for being not enough target-oriented and poorly documented. As a consequence practitioners and researchers have started to develop client processes in child welfare towards being more target-oriented and evaluated. As well, the practitioners’ work now provides fixed-term assessments and specific service products more than earlier. The various client documents play an important role in generating child welfare practice and they do more than just mirror or record the everyday work. Documents produce and maintain organizational order and professional practices. (Mäkitalo 2005.) Documents are often used also as a proof of the work done and they have a significant role for example in legal proceedings (Korpinnen 2008).

We are interested in reading client documents as practitioners’ argumentative tools with practical goals and consequences. Especially we analyse how the client-related plans are constructed and what kind of textual devices are used when argumenting for a progressive client process. Since the client-related plans indicate the context and assumptions of child welfare work, they ought to be read in their social settings. We should not overlook documentation as an essential task in child welfare and as a source of interesting data for social work research. Documents perform a crucial function in terms of organizational and public accountability and skills in documenting and reading documents are deemed essential (Kääriäinen 2003; Taylor 2008).

The article consists of four parts. Firstly, we introduce the setting and the data of the study. Secondly, it will be discussed how the planning within social welfare institutions, devised at various levels of administration, constrain and shape everyday work with the client. Thirdly, we will clarify the premises of the text analysis and how it is used in this study. How the client-related plans construct clienthood will be analysed as a process. Finally, we will summarize key perceptions of the study and consider the meaning of the client-related plans for the everyday work.

The research setting and data

The article represents a continuation from author’s earlier studies on child welfare documentation. Suvi Raitakari’s dissertation (2006) considers the support plans produced within an NGO (Non-governmental organisation) that provides supported housing for young people in need of child welfare services and Kirsi Günther’s master’s thesis (2006) analyses the case records of children from municipal support family services. The authors share an interest in professional interaction by means of written texts (Vuori 2001; Nikander 2003; Mäkitalo 2005; Tiililä 2007; Taylor 2008). The empirical part of this article will use research data, i.e. 14 support plans for 12 young people, that have been collected in 2002–2003 and published in Finnish by Raitakari (2006).
The institution studied is a supported housing unit for young people aged between 16 and 25. The unit’s aim is to help young people in need of child welfare to move to a more independent life. When a young person comes into the supported housing unit, the legal ground may be placement as non-institutional care, custody or after-care. The child welfare act (417/2007, 11§) obliges the municipality to arrange the child welfare service according to its needs. The municipalities can thus guarantee the sufficiency of the service that they buy from a child welfare organisation or private service entrepreneur. The supported housing unit is provided by a child welfare organisation with a service contract made between the organisation and the municipality for every young person to be placed in such housing.

When a young person becomes a client of the unit, practitioners write a support plan with him/her. In the plan practitioners write down the client's personal data and background information. They also assess the client’s social situation and set goals for the supported housing period. The support plan is related to the explicit goal that supported housing is to be developed to a systematic and well-documented service process. One purpose of the support plan is to develop a form for data collection and follow up. Furthermore, the plan is used when informing the financiers of the NGO about the provided service.

Child welfare constrained by plans and legal control

The Finnish child welfare is based on the universalist Nordic welfare system. It provides the mandate for child welfare but also constrains the practitioners’ actions through national and international legislation. In Finland child welfare is used as a broad concept and consists of preventive services for all children and families and child protection interventions. Welfare is conducted from a wide frame; “welfare of the child” is given first priority instead of protection (Hearn et al. 2004). Child welfare consists of preventive services for all children and families while child protection is instead directed especially to families and children in trouble and in need. The preventive services consist of public services like child health clinic, day care and school systems. Child protection includes interventions like support family services, emergency care, taking into care, foster care and after care. (417/2007, 3, 13, 7§.) All these interventions assume assessment of the child’s needs by municipal social workers and involve an effort by the professionals’ to transform the clients’ life story into an institutional and convincing client case. (Hearn et al. 2004; Korpino & Pöso 2007). By using the concept child welfare we relate to the wide understanding of the child welfare, even though supported housing units are considered as a part of child protection services and our data tells about interventionist practices.

In Finland, the need for more systematic documentation of social welfare work has come from at least three directions. Firstly, professionals are under a legal obligation to plan and monitor their operations. The child welfare act (417/2007, 12§) states that
the individual municipalities or several municipalities together have to make a plan concerning their actions for promoting the well-being of children and young people, as well as organizing and developing their child welfare services. The act concerning the client’s position and rights in social welfare (812/2000, 7§) accordingly obliges professionals to make individual plans for each of their clients. This act also advises professionals on how to write a plan for an individual client. The child welfare act (417/2007, 30§) also obliges professionals to make individual plans for their child clients and provides instructions covering the content of an individual client plan.

Secondly, the need for documentation and recording in client work is increased by the outsourcing service system. This international trend toward new public management (Greve & Jespersen 1999;) appears particularly in municipal social work and welfare organizations in having to put work out to tender; for example, when a practitioner arranges a foster care placement for a young person. This kind of situation often means that the buyer of the service and the producer must be capable of describing what is being bought and sold, and what standard the service is to achieve. An assessment of the municipal service production is also required, because its cost, quality and content has to be known for comparison between various service producers (Karjalainen and Sarvimäki 2005; Kauppinen and Niskanen 2005).

Thirdly, the administrative and academic discourse has identified the need to develop data management in child welfare, with special emphasis on the importance of collecting client data, and its increasing significance in the basic work, decision-making and research. This increasing need necessitates developments in client data systems and documentation. The administrative agents emphasize the need for research information from child welfare for evaluation and monitoring the services as well as for decision-making (Sarvimäki and Siltaniemi 2007).

The support plan as goal-oriented activity
In text analyses it is clarified how documents are produced and how they are used in different contexts and by different actors. The text analysis does not start from the weak points of a text, but looking for a set of valid reasons as well as aims and intentions that the text has. For example, the purpose of the text is read from the choices and categorizations that the writer has made (Bhatia 1993; Fairclough 1992; 2003; Tiilikka 2007; Taylor 2008).

It is important to focus on the wider context of a text. Essential features include the institutional setting and the professional language used for the specific purposes of the practitioners. In addition, it is vital to take into account other texts relating to an analysed text (the intertextual context; Fairclough 1992; 2003; Tiilikka 2007). For example, the planning documents for individual clients are preceded and followed by various kinds of decision-making and follow-up documents by practitioners.

The text analysis applied in this article takes into account that the documents are
written and used to achieve institutional tasks in child welfare. Documents maintain, produce and change institutional reality. Child welfare documents are often written from a practitioner to another who both share the same values and ways of understanding client problems. In addition, each institution has its own way of writing client documents.

Our analysis proceeded in stages. First we discussed what impression our data gives of the client process in the child welfare services, and how the client is constructed. We concluded that the child welfare documents categorized a client process in a way that distinguishes particular elements. In the analysis section we report these findings in the form of a narrative with a plot. We illustrate the narrative of the client process with data extracts taken from support plans which were published in Raitakari (2006). Our aim is to read support plans from a distance and illustrate how a child welfare document can be seen as a tool for arguing for a directed and justified client process. The data extracts emphasize the language used in support plans and give examples of used arguments. However, it is not possible to generalize the findings in any straightforward manner to the wide field of child welfare work. The analysis represents an “experiment” to read client-related documents from the point of view of an argumentative tool in practice (Mäkitalo 2005).

The elements of a convincing client process

The starting point: the eligible client from an organisational point of view

Clienthood is a matter of defining the eligible and the ineligible client from an organisational point of view. Practitioners regard the client’s situation as problematic and to be rectified by means of child welfare. (Holstein and Miller 1997; Loseke 2003; Hall & al. 2003.) By describing the problems of their clients and documenting their need for support, the practitioners try to convince various groups of readers of the necessity to make child welfare efforts. Reading the data from the point of view of an eligible client, we examine how the client is constructed in the documents.

The social welfare work performs a moral task in society, moral arguments often being used as a justification for child welfare services. It is impossible to implement child welfare without moral statements about the desired outcomes (see Kurri and Wahlström 2000; Tolonen 2004). Often the moral statements and tasks can be deduced from the descriptions of the backgrounds of the unwanted youngster.

Matti has problems because of alcohol, has visited the detox clinic in (town) since xxxx. Currently tested weekly, at the same time having consultations with (first and family name). Life at home is difficult and disharmonious, the arguments resulting from things such as money.

Practitioners do not justify clienthood so much by documenting problematic behav-
Hanna has been made a ward of court, in institutional care for four years. From June xxxx until April xxxx she has been in x ward x. Hanna was checked out on x.x.xxxx. According to her attending doctor and her nurse, Hanna then no longer needed in-patient care, but was not yet capable of independent living either.

The writer defines this young person as a ward of court and a long-term ward patient. These notes justify the problematic situation and her eligibility for supported housing. A further mention is of her attending a doctor and of her nurse assessing in-patient care as unnecessary, while she is nevertheless said to be incapable of living alone. The extract gives convincing reasons for a supported housing period planned by the parties concerned, her doctor and nurse having assessed her ability to live independently as experts in special health care. The support plans concentrate on the client’s own injurious behaviour and his/her inability to cope with everyday life. Although the accounts of the problems related to clienthood are brief, they have a meaning and a purpose. The reader gets the impression that the practitioner has done the diagnostic assessment carefully and together with other experts; so that it is professionally obvious what circumstances should change in the young person’s life.

In this way the practitioners in child welfare preclude themselves, not taking a stand on the young person’s characteristics in their personal contribution to the written documents, leaving the deliberative and consultative voice to other experts. At the same time, the practitioners are defined as the sources providing a resume of other expert views. The reader also gets the impression of an assessment shared by many authoritative sources, the document thus assuming more persuasive power.

Assessing the grounds for continuing the client process

One of the practitioners’ institutional duties at times is to re-assess the client’s need for help and support. The efficiency of the service and the possible need for new services is considered at the same time. The practitioner is judging the client’s situation by his/her professional knowledge, trying to help the client to progress. As we read the plans from the point of view of client process evaluation, we interpret how the practitioners assess the client’s current situation.
At the beginning of the supported housing period, Hanna established goals for herself, such as looking after her place, keeping off the drugs, keeping alcohol use within moderation, sticking to agreements, finding a summer job, and normal daily routine. After the first two months, Hanna did not commit herself to supported living, or application of the goals previously set on her conduct.

The extract emphasizes that the client herself has defined the objectives for supported housing, but since these objectives are usually repeated in the supported plans data, we can interpret them as institutional objectives although they are written using the client’s voice. During the period of supported housing, the practitioner first of all writes down and assesses the young person’s current situation from the point of view of conducting everyday life, housing, financial matters, abuse problems, drinking, schooling and working, leisure time and in some cases the mental health situation. The assessment is done about every two months in a multi-professional meeting. The relevant question in the assessment for practitioners is whether the support given is sufficient, whether it is possible to continue the housing, or whether youngster needs more intensive support like placement in institutional care. Hanna’s support plan mentioned that her supported housing had to be terminated.

Usually the supported housing goes on from assessment to assessment. The support plan then records the follow-up procedure of re-assessing the situation.

Matti’s weekly program and the minor intermediate goals are planned, and their implementation is followed up in weekly sessions with Matti, the project worker and the representative from the support family, the support person.

In this extract, the concepts planning, intermediate goals and follow-up give the impression of a controlled and monitored client process. The meeting between the young person and the practitioners is like a checkpoint at which the parties discuss goals relevant to supported housing. The writer convinces the reader that the child welfare organisation has its staff actively monitoring the client process.

The support plans contain comments on the clients’ progress, and whether their situation is the same or deteriorating. At the same time, the documents make more or less convincing statements about the clients’ capacity for good citizenship. Assessments are important because there is always the possibility that young people will be moved from supported housing back to their parent’s home, to independent housing or more intensive child welfare services. Re-assessing and re-planning provides new opportunities and may have crucial effects on the client’s life. A lot depends on the way the client is defined, whether he/she is recorded as a “good” or a “bad” case.
Desired end: progress – proof of success

One function of the planning documents is to produce desired scenarios. The planning and setting objectives offer both the practitioner and the client hopeful images of improvement. The persuasive power of the plans is largely based on their potential to offer the reader a positive scenario on the client’s life. The reader wishes to believe that the client’s everyday life will change for the better and the quality of life will improve (Jokinen and Suoninen 1999). The narrative of the plan documents emphasizes that it is the practitioners’ and clients’ business to consciously work their way towards change; in other words, the desired changes do not happen passively but need careful planning. In reading support plans in terms of progress, we analyze how the documents account for the possible changes taking place in the client’s life. When positive changes occur things go better, and the practitioner’s worry about the client decreases. Often the desired scenario is that the youngster learns and keeps up normal everyday life. At the same time, the reader gets an impression of problems taken care of and a regular everyday life, which is in order.

The support plans emphasize that the young person not only stays in a supported housing unit, but is presumed and helped to make progress gradually and according to a plan.

The goals of the support plan have been established for nine months, divided into periods of three months. After the first three-month period, a plan is devised for gradually decreasing social support to and monitoring of the person’s life if the goals are achieved.

In this extract, the young person’s life is constructed as a pathway towards intermediate points and eventually becoming detached from supported housing. In the document, the author accounts for the efficiency of the unit by defining the practitioners as parties setting goals and making plans, offering social support and monitoring progress. The plan gives the impression that the practitioner is the client’s personal manager or “personal trainer”, but we could also ask, whether the client is only an object of planning after all. The practitioner is a powerful party, trying to achieve the goals quickly and making the support superfluous. The explanation for this kind of writing may be that the practitioners have to argue against the possible reader’s suspicions. There is always the possibility that the supported housing would be taken to be an undirected activity on the behalf of practitioners and stagnation on the behalf of the client.

Discussion: plan documents as a proof of effective child welfare or a reality their own?

In this text we have examined how the support plan is constructed as a process with distinguished elements: defining the eligible client, assessing grounds for extending or terminating the period in supported housing and arguing for positive changes.
The analysis gives a concrete insight to the textual devices used when child welfare clienthood is constructed as a goal-directed process; from the client’s problematic background towards personal growth and a good everyday life by means of an intermediate assessment performed and measures taken. As stated in the article, in child welfare the client-related plans are increasingly written as a proof of an effective service. This is shown for example in plans when practitioners establish goals for young people for the supporting housing period and when these goals are estimated regularly. Nowadays practitioners must also be able to describe their work for different audiences and account for the effectiveness of their work. Relevant audiences include financiers, co-workers, clients and the man in the street, who are interested in outcomes of child welfare. But we can still ask what significance the plan documents have in practical child welfare work. Are the plan documents a reality of their own, with very little connection with what is actually done in child welfare work? Is planning and documenting thus a time-consuming, but futile effort (Prince 1996; Taylor 2008)? We would answer both yes and no.

The professionals mainly write their client documents for other social services professionals, which means that the author and the reader share the same values and ways of understanding children’s and young people’s problems. The client process descriptions are thus meaningful in professional communication, and are important tools in translating the clients’ backgrounds and problems from everyday language into professional terminology. A client-related plan ought to be read mainly as a professional interpretation of the eligibility of a child or a young person for inclusion as a client. Beside the internal functions in the organisation mentioned above, the client process descriptions can be regarded as significant in communication with external readerships such as decision-makers and financiers. The documents then play a performative role. We should think about and read plan documents as if they were professional “business cards”. The written plan for the client is a proof of a professional intervention in a worrying situation. Although it should be borne in mind that written descriptions of child welfare work form a reality different from that of child welfare work actually done in concrete practitioner-client interaction.

When analyzing plan documents, we noted that the client was often constructed as an object of the planning, not so much as a cooperative partner. The explanation of this kind of writing may be the audience for whom the plan documents are actually written. The child welfare plans are always made from the organisational point of view, the aim of the planning mostly being to offer the right services to the right client. The plans are thus institutionally instrumental in defining who is eligible and what kinds of services are offered. Neither can we disparage the fact that the plan documents often give the impression of a committed and hard-working organisation. Still it is not insignificant whether it is the voices of the parents or the children and young people or the experts that we hear in the descriptions of client processes.
(Endnotes)

1 This article is part of the Academy of Finland research project: Dilemma between Control and Support in Social Work Practices (2005–2007). The Pirkanmaan Regional Fund have also made financially possible to put the last touch in this article.

2 What is meant by child welfare and child protection is highly cultural and relies on the context. There are no unambiguous definitions, but meanings vary depending on the writer’s national, cultural writing style and linguistic understanding. For example in England and Canada the child welfare is understood narrowly to refer to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the children, especially children in need. (Khoo et al. 2002; Hearn et al. 2004.)

3 The private service providers currently stand for more than a half of the substitute care in child welfare in Finland (Kauppinen & Niskanen 2005, 29).

4 Public Procurement Act (1505/1992) came into force in 1994. According to this law the municipalities have to put services out to tender, unless they produce these themselves or in cooperation with others.

References:


Summaries

Skräsetning á velskipulögu og árangursriku ferli í målum skjólsteöinga barnaverndar

Barnaverndarstarf í Finnlandi hefur verið gagnrýnt fyrir það að vera ekki nógur markvisst og fyrir það að skräsetning sé öfullnægandi. Í greininni eru skjöl um skjólsteöinga skoðuð sem rökfræslugögn starfsmanna með praktísk markmið og niðurstöður. Aform varðandi skjólsteöinga eru til dæmis í vaxandi mæli notuð sem sannanir um árangursrika barnavernd. Það er kannað hvernig aform varðandi skjólsteöinga eru uppbyggð og hvaða orðalag er notað, þegar rök eru færð fyrir árangri í ferli skjólsteöinga. Könnunin sýnir hvernig stuðningsáformin eru byggð upp som ferli með aðgreindum þáttum: Skjólsteöingur, sem kemur til greina, er skilgreindur; mat er gert á því hver grundvöllur er fyrir lengingu eða styttingu tímarbils í stuðningsathvarfi og röksemdir færðar fyrir jákvæðum breyingum. Könnunin veitir raunhæfa innsýn í hvaða orðalag er notað, þegar markmið og ferli þess að vera skjólsteöingur barnaverndar er byggt upp.

Lykilorð: Skräsetning, barnavernd, árangur

Suunnitelmallisen ja tavoitteellisen asiakasprosessin dokumentointi lastensuojelussa