

FGC in Sweden - the child study

Background

In a suburb south of Stockholm, Botkyrka, the social services have a long tradition of methods including the family network. The municipality has a high percentage of young inhabitants and of refugees from all parts of the world. When the Family Group Conference (FGC) was introduced in Sweden about 1995 the politicians in Botkyrka decided to start a project with FGC as a model for investigating children and youth at social risk. A few years later the FGC was integrated in the ordinary work with these young people and their families.

In the Swedish part of the Nordic research of FGC, with focus on children's participation, there has been a special interest in how this method functions in social work with families from abroad.

The research

With the children's voice in focus the aim of the study was to investigate the FGC process from the child perspective.

Questions

- How does the child describe his or her situation, during and after a FGC process?
- How does the child experience the FGC model as a method to change the life situation?
- How is the child perspective realised in the FGC praxis?

The evaluation has been accomplished with child interviews before, during and after the FGC's, and with observations of the preparations and conferences. The observations has been made with special attention paid to the initiatives of the children, which persons they communicated with, and how they reacted to different topics in the conference dialogue.

Research material

The study covers six FGC processes with seven children (two were siblings).

The research material includes nine interviews from different phases of the FGC process.

The material also includes documentation from the meetings between the family and the coordinator during the preparations, and from the observations of eight conferences, for some of the children the 1st, for some of them also the 2nd one.

In the presentation of the results, the teenagers (between 14 and 17 years) and the younger children (7 and 9 years old) are reported separately.

Four children have a parent born in another country than Sweden, which defines them as "immigrant children".

Results of the study in summary

The teenagers

The preparation phase: the teenagers

- The teenagers experience their fathers as uninterested and see them as absent in their lives. The young persons find it hard to invite their fathers to their FGC.

- The teenagers are not sure that all persons in their family network have an interest in attending their FGC. They are ambivalent to invite persons they fear will give a negative answer to the invitation. A negative answer is interpreted as rejection.
- The teenagers and their parents thinking differently about the mobilisation of the network: The adults worry about the conference as a scene for showing their shortages as a parent. For the teenagers the big question is if the invited persons really want to be present at the conference.
The young persons are willing to invite more persons than their parents do.

The 1st conference for the teenagers: observation

- The teenagers all show a close relationship to their mothers
- The adults dominate the conference, they confirm and encourage the youngsters but also correct them.
- The coordinator tries to communicate with the young person but does not always manage to do so.
- The teenagers are more active during the private discussion than when professionals are present.
- Some teenagers behave in an oppositional way, actively or passively.
- No fathers came to the FGC's of their children.

The 1st conference for the teenagers: interviews

- The teenagers trust their own capacity during the conference and some of them are disappointed that the support person did not help much.
- Some of the teenagers felt like the scapegoat of the family during the conference.
- The young people do not pay much attention to the plan after the conference.
- What matters for the teenagers' opinion of the 1st conference is if, and how, some relationships develop in a new way and become different than before. As a consequence, a tough conference can be a good one, as well as a neutral conference can be a bad one.

The 2nd conference for the teenagers: observation

- The teenagers were more active during the 2nd than during the 1st conference.
- Fewer persons were present during the 2nd conference.

The younger children

The preparation phase: the younger children

- The coordinator had not talked to the children about the FGC.
- The children seem to know that they will have to move from their mother to their grandparents in another country. They don't want to leave their mother.

The 1st conference for the younger children: observation

- The children were not present at the conference.
- The support person of the children played a very dominant role in the conference.
- The parents, the family network and the social services agreed upon, even before the conference, to move the children to their grandparents. The conference was only a confirmation of that decision.

The FGC as a change process

Positive changes during the FGC process: a summary

Changes in relationships

- Agreements between children and parents are more reliable than before
- Better communication between children and parents
- More contact between children and relatives who were present at the conference
- The mothers were less concerned about their children

Personal changes: the teenagers

- Happier
- Better control over negative emotions
- Less drinking alcohol
- Belief in a good future
- Better results in schoolwork
- Attend school more

The Plan: the engagement of the social services

- Contact family - the engagement of another family for the youngster as a support for both child and parent
- Family home - the child moves to another family
- Treatment contacts

The plan: the engagement of the family network

- A continuous communication with the child
- Help to contact the father
- Spend more time with the child
- Listen to and observe signals of the child: how he or she feels and functions in everyday life

A specific question about immigrant children

- For several children in the study, whose families had roots in other countries, the family wanted to solve the problems by sending them to relatives "at home". How shall we look upon this suggestion as a solution?

Specific questions about children's participation

- The younger children were not present at their conference. Is the presence of the child a measure of a good FGC? Is this question associated with the age of the child, or with something else?
- Is there a child perspective if the child's own wishes are not taken under consideration? What strategies are proper in this case?