YOUNG SPEAKERS

Young speakers

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AN AUTHORITY THAT HAS LEARNT TO LISTEN

The name "Young Speakers" is a good clue as to the purpose of the method - recognising and elevating the voices of young people directly, without adult adjustment or correction. This is an unusual approach but one increasingly being taken by government authorities in Sweden. The authority's reports at the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden are based on children's own experiences. The rationale for this is that children are experts on their own lives and have important information to share with decision-makers.

It all began in Norway. The method of The Change Factory as described in the publication *Do Rights! Nordic perspectives on child and youth participation* has inspired the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden to create Young Speakers. The method has been adapted and refined on an ongoing basis during the time it has been used at the authority. Since 2009, the authority has met nearly 1,800 children, produced around 20 reports based on these meetings, and hosted more than 20 meetings between children and decision-makers.

Fredrik Malmberg, who served as the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden between 2008 and 2017, explains why the authority chose to pursue this venture:

"When I became Ombudsman for Children, the focus was on the inquiry into neglect. Adults described how they had been neglected as children by the children's social services and said that the fact that no one wanted to listen to what they had to say as children meant that this neglect could persist. This, in combination with my expe-

OTTO'S TIPS FOR ADULTS WHEN LISTENING TO CHILDREN

- Be nice to the child
- Ask how the child is
- Listen carefully, and listen to everything the child says
- Don't interrupt
- Take the child seriously
- Don't draw premature conclusions, but listen to what the child has to say

riences from Save the Children in Uganda, where we focused heavily on getting those in positions of authority to listen to children and young people, made me consider how incredibly important it is to do better when it comes to letting children in difficult situations speak on their own terms.

Essentially, however, I think that what we did should be seen as a natural part of the role of any children's ombudsman, whose responsibility it is to listen to children and young people and to monitor and enforce the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child."

The right of children to form their own opinions is laid down in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as is the right to express these opinions and have them taken into account. In respecting this right, adults have a huge responsibility and obligation to create the conditions around all issues concerning children

that will allow them to form their own opinions, express them, and have them taken into account. The right not to be discriminated against is also a key prerequisite of implementing Article 12. This implies that adults have a responsibility to ensure that there are opportunities for children in a variety of situations to participate. The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden has captured this in both its methodology and implementation.

Children who have participated in Young Speakers have all had specific experiences to share. Participants include children who have been in foster homes or institutions, children in the social child welfare system, children with

experience of psychiatric care, children with parents in prison, and children who have been in custody themselves. These are often children who would otherwise find it difficult to make their voices heard in society.

Otto uses a wheelchair, or "rulle" as he calls it in Swedish. He can walk, but only with the help of crutches. He explains what it was like when he told the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden about his situation.

"We started with some cake and just chatted a little. Then we went into a room and Mum had to wait outside. I was allowed to choose everything I wanted to say in my

story. I drew pictures about my life and then they recorded my voice. We then put together what I said with the pictures I'd drawn to make it into a movie. It was great fun."

The process for Young Speakers is divided into six steps. Essentially children are given the opportunity to talk about their situation or a specific aspect of their situation that they want to share by way of creative methods such as short films, collages, and the like. In many cases, the children are then invited to take part in direct meetings with decision-makers, where they present what they have produced to a politician or a municipal civil servant, for example. Malmberg says that in almost all meetings where those in positions of authority are given the opportunity to listen directly to children in difficult situations, the former have been visibly moved.

"We often interviewed those in positions of authority and the children both before and after the meetings. Often, those in positions of authority felt that they already had a good idea of the issue but that the meeting would be interesting nonetheless. Afterwards, they almost all said how moved they were, and that they now saw the true value of direct dialogue with the children affected by their decisions."

Young Speakers is a qualitative method used to highlight the experiences of individual children. What is sought, therefore, is representation not for every child in Sweden but for those who are experts in a specific situation, such as what life in social care is like through the eyes of a child, what it's like to have a disability, or what it's like to have been incarcerated. It's no coincidence that the authority has chosen a qualitative method. It is about listening to reflections, nuances, and in-depth stories that are difficult to understand and take into account without going into detail. By listening to different people tell their personal stories about the same

topics, patterns, trends, and shortcomings can be identified. These can then be supplemented or verified by statistics or other facts. Anna Karin Hildingson Boqvist, Deputy Ombudsman for Children in Sweden since 2018 and former programme director, explains why it's important to work qualitatively when speaking with the children:

YOUNG SPEAKERS IN SIX STEPS

- 1. Preparations**
Define your purpose and prepare for the issue in question
- 2. Contact with children and young people**
Adapt your communication to explain what your work is about
- 3. Work meetings**
Have different ways for the children to produce their stories
- 4. Coding and analysis**
Interpretation of qualitative material
- 5. Young presenters**
Provide decision-makers with knowledge about children's experiences that comes directly from the children
- 6. Communicate the message**
Disseminate knowledge throughout the organisation and to relevant stakeholders

The Young Speakers method is described in detail at www.barnombudsmannen.se/young-speakers/

"Seeing children as experts has to do with showing humility before their unique knowledge and perception of their situation, as well as elevating their perspectives in order to put them at the heart of processes and decision-making. Since research and government reports have identified repeated shortcomings in children's right to speak, this is something we're working actively to improve. In order to take children's right to participate seriously, we adults need to take the time to really listen to what children themselves have to say about their situation."

Otto worked on his story for almost an entire day and is pleased with and proud of the result.

"When I watched the movie afterwards, I thought it was good and that I did a good job. Now that it's done, it feels really nice."

The way that adults approach the children is key to the success of the method. In its online instruction videos, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden repeatedly emphasises the importance of preparation and skills among those adults who will meet with children and work with the method.

"I noticed that the adults listened when I spoke. They looked at me and noticed when I said something," says Otto. He demonstrates what an adult who is listening looks like.

"Lots of adults listen at school and things like that, but sometimes they interrupt or pass judgement before the child has been able to explain or make their point. And sometimes they don't have time to listen properly."

When Otto tells us why he thinks it's important to take part, he becomes very engaged. It's clear that the experience of being included in Young Speakers has made an impression on him.

"It feels amazing to have done something like this! If I hadn't, people wouldn't know about my situation, and then maybe they would only do things for children who don't have the same disability as me. So children with different opinions have to be involved, including people like me with disabilities."

Every country that has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has to report its progress. When in January 2015 Sweden was questioned by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, it was clear that the efforts of the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden and the subsequent report to the committee had made a considerable impact. Among other things, the committee: raised the problem of the lack of statistics on crimes against children with disabilities; urged Sweden to ensure equal access to schooling for all; and emphasised in particular the importance of listening systematically to children with disabilities.

When the former Ombudsman for Children Fredrik Malmberg reflects on the impact of the reports, he emphasises that Young Speakers gives a voice to children living in vulnerable situations.

"I believe the strength of our reports is that children who are never normally heard were able to speak. We could then review the problems and rights challenges that the children pointed out by way of other studies and in dialogue with the relevant authorities. Our reports revealed and deepened our knowledge of serious shortcomings in children's rights, even in a country like Sweden. This made a strong impression on the Committee on the Rights of the Child."

The experiences from Young Speakers are filtering through to more organisations and authorities. Among a number of Swedish authorities there is curiosity as well as a willingness to realise the right of children to have their voices heard and thus to ensure better compliance with the requirements of the Convention on the

Rights of the Child. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has started up a network in which authorities and organisations can learn from each other and share their methods and experiences. Malmberg has a clear message to all authorities and others who are considering incorporating the voices of children in their activities:

"Do it! You've everything to win! Decisions are better founded, mistakes can be avoided, and the rights of children to speak and be heard are respected in relation to important decisions that affect them."

The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden stresses that Young Speakers is not a short-term project but a long-term venture that will allow many children to formulate and express their opinions. The method is used repeatedly each year, which means that decision-makers habituate the inclusion of children's voices and that they can demand their right themselves as well as through powerful organisations. This in turn is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"What's good about Young Speakers is that it gives children and young people the chance to speak on their own terms with the help of several creative tools. The difficulties that exist relate not to the method but to the fact that clear support from the government is needed, as well as enough time being set aside. The participation of children must not be superficial," says Malmberg.

Otto cites other reasons why it is important for adults to listen to what children have to say about their situation.

"It's difficult for adults to know what children want today. It's not the same as when they were children. That's why adults need to listen to children today to find out what they want and need."

Otto concludes by summarising why he thinks it's important that children in different situations get the chance to speak and express themselves:

"Everyone is of equal value. And I have quite a lot to say."

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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child lays down the right of children to form their own opinions, as well as the right to express these opinions. In the light of this, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden has created Young Speakers – a qualitative method which recognises and elevates the voices of young people, without adult adjustment or correction. The rationale for the method is that children are experts on their own lives and have important information to share with decision makers. It is about listening to reflections, nuances, and in-depth stories that are difficult to understand and take into account without going into detail. By listening to different people tell their personal stories about the same topics, patterns, trends, and shortcomings can be identified.

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