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Empowering Unaccompanied Children in Everyday Life in a New Country. A Resilience Support Centre in Sweden Evaluated from the Perspective of Program Theory

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Abstract. *Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming to Sweden are almost all fleeing from violent or threatening situations in their home country and have been sent abroad for their protection. They form a specific growing group of children looked after by local authorities in kinship foster families, network foster families or traditional foster families, as well as in small institutions (HVB-hem) or interim accommodation (Mellanbo) as preparation for independent living. This study explores success factors and impeding factors in a social work intervention for empowering unaccompanied children at a support centre for daily activities in a Swedish municipality from a program-theory perspective. The unaccompanied children in this study are staying in foster families. The data was collected at the centre and with a mixed method design. The results show that unaccompanied children's relationships with other children improved ; they developed their ability to plan and adapt ; some of them started to attend regular schools ; and traumatic experiences were processed to some extent. All of these can be interpreted as increased empowerment in unaccompanied children's everyday life. However, there were still significant gaps in participation in clubs and associations and leisure activities, and some children were mentally unwell. Success factors, challenges and risks coexist in a transnational life situation in which most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children continue to interact with their parents and other family members in their home country or another country using modern technology (online parenting).*

**Keywords** : unaccompanied children, intervention, social work, program theory, migration

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Introduction

Sweden has since 2008 been one of the major host countries for asylum-seeking unaccompanied children[1] in Europe. Since 2006, the number of unaccompanied children applying for a residence permit in Sweden has grown each year and in 2015 there were a dramatic increase. Sweden is the country in Europe that takes care of the highest number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This is despite the fact that in terms of population Sweden is a very small country with relatively few inhabitants (9,845,155 as of November 2015). As shown in Figure 1, in 2015 there came an extremely high number of unaccompanied children (35,369). As many as 66% of the unaccompanied children came from Afghanistan (23,480). They came also from Syria (3,777), Somalia (2,058), Eritrea (1,939), Irak (1,097) and other countries (3,018).
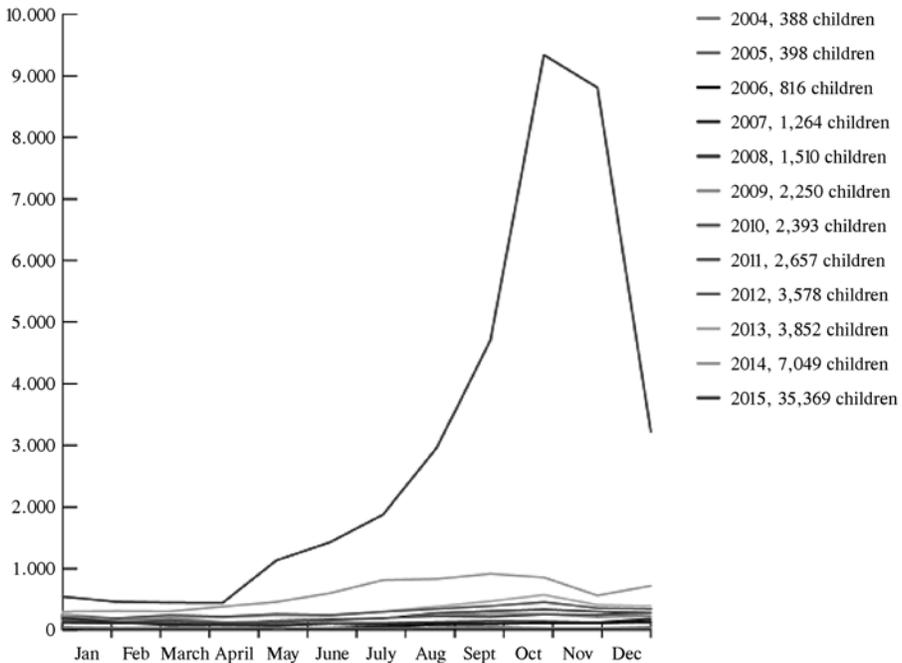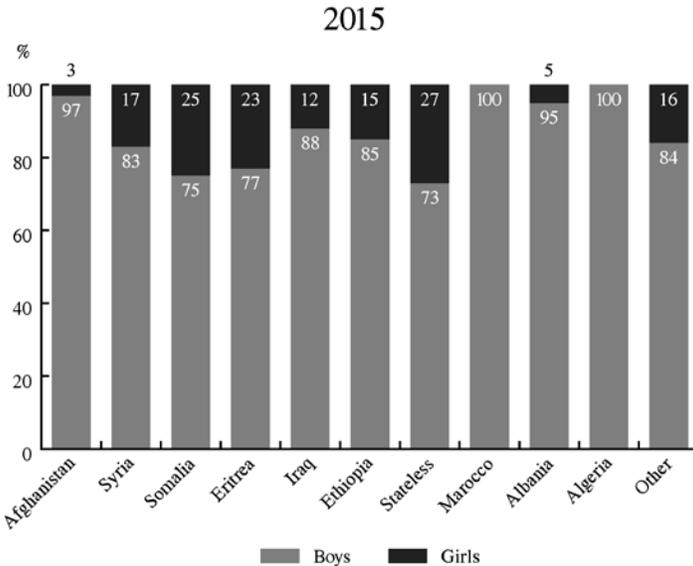

Source: Constructed on the basis of data from The Swedish Migration Agency (2016)

Figure 1. *Unaccompanied Children Coming to Sweden 2004-2015*

In 2014 there were 7 049 asylum-seeking unaccompanied children coming to Sweden and, 19 per cent were girls. Most of the children were adolescents (5% 13 years old; 10% 14 years old; 23% 15 years old: 32% 16 years old; 20% 17 years old). However there were also young children coming on their own without their parents (3% 0-6 years old; 7% 7-12 years old) (Migrationsverket, 2015b). The migration among children under seven years old seems not to be a gendered migration as among seven years old and older.

In 2015 most unaccompanied children came from Afghanistan (23,480), Syria (3,777), Somalia (2,058), Eritrea (1,939), Iraq (1,097) and other countries 3,018 (Migrationsverket,

2016a). In 2015 it was largely a male migration and just 8% were girls. In the large flows of refugees in 2015, there were fewer girls than previous years. In terms of gender, there were some differences between the unaccompanied children from different countries as shown in Figure 2. A relatively high proportion of girls are coming from some African countries. In this article there will be no further gender analysis.

Source: Constructed on the basis of data from The Swedish Migration Agency (2016)

Figure 2. *Nationality and Gender of the 10 Largest Nationalities in 2015.*

It has been a challenge for Swedish society and local authorities to find foster families or institutions to care for the unaccompanied children. A number of new small residential care homes (HVB-hem) have been set up. Support accommodation (Stödboende) is a new type of accommodation from 2016 in Sweden. The accommodation is for girls and boys 16-20 years old to prepare for independent living in the transformation into adulthood (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2016). The municipality in this study showed an interest in developing care options like a support accommodation (Mellanbo), and also organised various interventions to meet the needs of unaccompanied children in resilience therapeutic interventions. A centre working with daytime activities for unaccompanied children in foster families, support accommodations is explored and evaluated in this study.

The centre, which will be called *the resilience centre* (RC) in this study, was started as a project running 1 April 2009-31 December 2011, and has been converted into a regular activity supporting unaccompanied children. During that period, the municipality received 74 unaccompanied children. Most were boys aged 15-16 on arrival, but there were also girls (21 girls and 53 boys)[2].

Some children were six to twelve years old and a few were around 18 years old. The children were placed in foster families (50%, n = 37), in residential care homes (41%, n = 30), or in support accommodation (9%, n = 7). In the case of seven of the 37 children in foster care, custody of the child was transferred after some time to the foster parents. In Sweden, children

in long-term care are not usually put up for adoption, as in the UK and many other countries. Custody transfer is often used instead. After DNA testing, five of the children were found to be living with a biological parent. These children may have come to Sweden because one parent, living in their home country, was no longer able to care for them, and the other parent, living in Sweden, had established a new family here. Custody of unaccompanied children is used to be considered and transfers are carried out in the same way as for other children, after three years in care (Brunnberg, Aytar, 2012). The reason behind the large flow of unaccompanied children in 2015 is still not known, but known is that of unaccompanied Afghan children, which was the large group of unaccompanied children, half came from Afghanistan and the other half from refugee camps in Iran (Migrationsverket, 2016b). Afghans in Iran perceive that they have a precarious existence.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore success factors and impeding factors in social work interventions for empowering unaccompanied children at a resilience therapeutic centre (RC) in a Swedish municipality from a program theory perspective. The researchers were listening to staff as well as to the unaccompanied children's voices and the staff also made assessments of the situation for the unaccompanied children. Success factors and impeding factors are assessed in relation to the interim goals and project goals of the activities in the centre.

An intervention for empowering unaccompanied children and its logical framework

The RC arranged open and free daytime activities for unaccompanied children, boys and girls, aged 13-20 years. The mentor group initially consisted of four mentors with social, educational or recreational expertise. The RC aimed to provide professional resilient therapy as a way to support unaccompanied children staying with foster families or in their own accommodation in the municipality.

A foster family is a private home that on behalf of the social services receives children for permanent care and upbringing (Socialstyrelsen, 2013). It can be one of several types of foster homes (see Hedin, 2012). It can be a kinship foster family, where the foster parents are relatives of the child ; a network foster family, a family that the child knows before the placement occurs ; or a traditional foster family, a previously unknown family recruited through the social services. In Sweden, unaccompanied children also stay in residential homes. The activities at the centre were not intended for these children, as they already had access to support from professionals. A further, recently introduced type of home designed for unaccompanied children is interim accommodation. This is a kind of transitional residence between a residential care home and independent accommodation. Because children moved between various types of accommodation, children from all types of accommodation took part in activities at the centre, though it was primarily intended for children in foster families.

The four mentors at the RC had frequent contact with 43 of the 74 unaccompanied children received by the municipality during 2009-2011. They also had occasional contact with eight other unaccompanied children ; these could be young people who had returned to their homeland or were 'undocumented children'. When children moved to another type of accommodation than foster families, the mentors continued to have contact with them if they needed more support.

From the outset, the ambition of the RC was to continue providing support for unaccompanied children as a regular activity after the end of the project period. This was achieved when the Resource Team was set up on 1 January 2012. The Resource Team unites two previous projects for unaccompanied children, and its target group comprises young people up to 21 years of age placed in interim accommodation, children placed in foster families, and young people who have moved into their own accommodation. The Resource Team now works with financial assistance, housing, services, and programme activities.

The RC set six interim goals and two more comprehensive project goals for the intervention. The interim goals were : (1) to reach the target group, (2) to increase contact between the unaccompanied children and civil society, (3) to equip them to deal with everyday life, (4) to help the children achieve good school results, (5) to encourage a more optimistic view of the future, and (6) to continuously document their thoughts and experiences. The project goals were : (1) to enable the target group to integrate and become established in society, and (2) to identify the needs and situation of the target group, and thereby help to improve the reception of unaccompanied children. These interim and project goals can together with decisions, resources, and activities be shown in Figure 3.
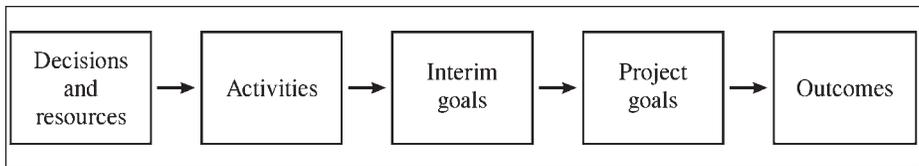
Figure 3. *A program Theory for the RC Constructed by the Researchers*

This program theory for the RC has evolved from the logic developed within the project before the start of the evaluation. This program theory (cf. Donaldson, 2001, 2007 ; Eriksson, Karlsson, 2008 ; Jess, 2011 ; Karlsson Vestman, 2011 ; Vedung, 2009), which was even used in the final evaluation report, helps to construct an overview of the RC as an intervention. The program theory for the RC is used in this article because of its usefulness for analysing success factors and impeding factors in the context.

Asylum-seeking unaccompanied children in care

Several researchers have previously noted that asylum-seeking children have a dual political identity, as both asylum seekers and children. This means that the children are in two different political and administrative frameworks that also are embedded in different discourses (Giner, 2007 ; Seeberg, Bagge, Enger, 2009). Although Sweden is a major destination country in Europe, few scientific studies have been conducted on this topic. One cannot give a general picture of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children's treatment in Sweden, but some obvious deficiencies do seem to have been found in the extant studies (Keselman, 2009 ; Lundberg, 2009a, 2009b).

In the late 1930s and 1940s, during World War II and the Finnish Winter War, many children were sent without their parents from the war-torn countries to Sweden (Lagnebro, 1994 ; Ascher, 2009). In today's terminology, the Finnish war children would have been called unaccompanied children. Researchers argue that it is important to draw lessons from the experiences of these unaccompanied children, who are now adults (see Lagnebro, 1994 ; Myers, 2000 ; Ascher, 2009).

One study interviewed members of the 1934-1944 birth cohort, who were children during the Soviet-Finnish wars between 1939-1940 and 1941-1944. At that time approximately 70,000 Finnish children were evacuated to protect them from the war. They (11 years old) went abroad primarily to Sweden and Denmark, and were unaccompanied children. They were interviewed when they were over 60 years old. The study showed that the children who were evacuated reported severe depressive symptoms more frequently (20%) than those not evacuated (Pesonen et al., 2007). Being evacuated as children affected their well-being as adults, whether the evacuation was done in Finland or any other country. Evacuation lasting more than three years had the greatest impact. Those evacuated as toddlers between two and six years of age seemed to be less affected than those who were school aged when the evacuation took place. In her study, Lagnebro (1994) interviewed 65 of the Finnish war children who were placed in Sweden. At the time of the interviews, they were between 40 and 55 years old. Two central themes emerged in the interviews : separation and discrimination (Lagnebro, 1994). An important characteristic of the theme of separation is guilt for having abandoned one's parents and home country. Rootlessness, loss of respect, and a lingering existential longing for something forever lost remained with them throughout their lives. The discrimination theme had to do with degrading treatment to which they were subjected when they were introduced into Swedish society. To try to deal with the situation, the Finnish war child had one foot in Sweden and one in Finland. Fear of behaving wrongly came to dominate. There was a constant fear of not being good enough. Language had a profound existential and emotional meaning for the individual children.

The retrospective stories of refugee children who are now adults tell how, as unaccompanied children, they were not passive objects but rather historical actors who actively tried to shape their situation of being in exile. This was, however, entirely done within the policy framework set by adults. The above studies have reported that being able to maintain contact with parents or family during the period of evacuation has a positive impact on children's well-being. Today, new opportunities, that previously did not exist, are available for maintaining continuous transnational contact with family members or relatives. However, this is not currently an option for all children. Many of the unaccompanied children today, as well as in the 1930s, belong to persecuted minority groups with experiences of abuse, violence and war. Some have fled from war and/or social deprivation.

Several international studies show that although many of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have very good resilience (Bates et al., 2005), they experience a varied and often problematic situation with poor mental health as a result. They have increased vulnerability (Fazel et al., 2012 ; Geltman et al., 2008 ; Reed et al., 2011 ; Sourander, 1998). A Swedish longitudinal study shows that it has been a positive experience for many of the unaccompanied children who, after ten years, still stay in Sweden (Hessle, 2009). Several had sought out people in Sweden who were links in their original families' transnational networks or had found people in the network in other countries. Another study showed that unaccompanied children more often were employed than those who had come with their parents (Çelikaksoy, Wadensjö, 2015). The study provides a relatively positive picture of how things are going for the unaccompanied children who had come to Sweden during the years 2003 to 2012. Transnationality is a new theoretical perspective for understanding migration (cf. Alinia, 2004 ; Cohen, 1997 ; Emanuelsson, 2005 ; Gustafsson, 2007, 2008 ; Khayati, 2008 ; Sheffer, 1986). The concept of 'transnationalism' is used to describe how people develop and maintain relationships and activities in several national environments. The transnational perspective is based on an actor perspective and emphasises the migrant's transnational actions. It focuses on the migrant as an active entity rather than a passive

object. Child migrants are just as much active entities as adults, and in the globalised world they possess new technological devices. As transnational actors the children are often in a position where human rights are of central importance to them.

The unaccompanied minors have for various reasons been forced to leave their parents. This might be due to a decision by their parents – or by relatives or close friends if the parents are dead – to protect the child. The unaccompanied children can still maintain close relationships with parents or relatives at home or in other countries despite the great geographical distance, while having a safe anchorage in their relationships in Swedish society. In a Swedish longitudinal study, Hessle writes that it is a question of grassroots globalisation. The unaccompanied children in Hessle's study have been very actively involved in building their transnational networks. They define themselves in terms of belonging to multiple nations or states, such as Swedish-Somali, Swedish-Afghan or Somali-Swedish, and so on. Cultural identity pre-migration and expected discrimination in the recipient country predicted the development of the post-cultural identity (Tartakovsky, 2009a, 2009b). Transcultural identities seem to be flexible structures that vary depending on changes in social circumstances ; they are not just a result of an acculturation process in the recipient country, but are shaped during the pre-migration period and then modified in the process of immigrant adaptation in the host country. The search for the origin of the family plays a central role for unaccompanied children. In an American study, Sudanese boys were found to make use of both formal and informal methods to find family members (Luster et al., 2008). When the boys rediscovered relatives, mixed feelings often resulted. The relief that a mother had survived could be clouded by the news that the father had died, for example. Not knowing, however, was often worse than being told that a relative has definitely been lost. Children can wait for several years before daring to find out if their parents are still alive.

A study from the UK shows that establishing oneself in the new country is a complex process that includes aspects of both loss and gain (Kohli, 2006). It is shown that social workers play a key role in supporting young people and that they can provide great emotional support. They generally can understand the unaccompanied children's worries and their silences. None of the young people in the UK study understood the meaning of foster care before they experienced it. The children arrived in the foster family on short notice. Only one third of the foster careers (34 %) had been well-prepared (Wade et al., 2012). Young people's position and relationships in foster families evolved over time, and three types of relationships were identified a) family-like relationships, b) temporary home bases, and c) lodgings where carers delivered the contracted services, as they saw it, but where the young people never felt at home and saw themselves as lodgers in their home.

Of the 18 Sudanese young adults interviewed in the American study, nearly all those who spent a long time in a camp before being relocated to foster families had difficulties finding their place in the foster family (Luster et al., 2009). Misunderstandings caused by cultural differences often resulted in conflicts. However, 15 of the 18 young adults later developed a positive relationship with at least one foster parent. Of the young people interviewed, eight had been placed in only one location, five in two locations, and three in three locations. The other two youths had moved to their own homes when their foster care placement foundered. The young people reported having supportive relationships that helped them in their cultural adaptation process, and other young people from the same culture could play a central role in helping them build bridges.

Ecological systems theory as theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 22) is used as a theoretical framework in this article. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2000), the ecological environment is 'a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next'. As children grow up, they belong to several micro-level communities such as family, preschool, school, and peer group. Between these environments there is ongoing interaction, and the relationships between them form a system (meso-level). The next level is the exo-level; this comprises areas with which the child does not have direct contact but that affect the child's situation. Examples are the parents' place of work and social services organisations. Conditions at the micro-, meso- and exo-level interact with conditions at the macro-level, such as legislation, economics and politics. Bronfenbrenner (2000) later also added a global level. For the unaccompanied children, there is a breakdown of the structures and communities that should support the child in everyday life. The ecological environment of everyday life will be new. Out of the chaos, a new and perhaps transnational ecological system will emerge. Unaccompanied children live in new micro-environments as well as environments at the meso-, exo-, macro- and global level, causing their lives to be characterised by an embedded transnational perspective (cf. Alinia, 2004; Cohen, 1997; Emanuelsson, 2005; Gustafsson, 2007, 2008; Khayati, 2008; Sheffer, 1986).

Method and empirical data

The empirical data in this study is both quantitative and qualitative (see Fridström, Brunnberg, 2010; Fridström, Aytar, Brunnberg, 2011; Brunnberg, Aytar, 2012). Twelve in-depth interviews were held with unaccompanied children, and three in-depth interviews were held with staff (in the following, staff are called mentors because they just were employed to support the children) working with unaccompanied children. Surveys with open and closed questions were carried out both in 2009 and 2011 by the three mentors at the RC. They made assessments of all the young people they were in contact with, and of 17 unaccompanied children both 2009 and 2011. Due to a high rate of non-response about two children in 2011, the answers about these two children were excluded. Hence the 2011 sample comprised 15 children. So the design can be described as quasi-experimental, involving a before-after study with no control group (cf. Creswell, 2009). Municipal documentation was also made available to researchers. This approach has an embedded pluralistic perspective (cf. Lishman, 1999); that is, it uses a 'mixed methods' approach (cf. Creswell, 2009).

Performing a correlation analysis proved difficult, because the results from the surveys concern only the 17 unaccompanied children in 2009 and 15 unaccompanied children in 2009 that had contact with the RC, and the data was obtained on two separate occasions (in 2009 and 2011). Furthermore, no analysis was carried out for gender and country of birth because of the imbalance in these variables. It is difficult to draw any general statistically based conclusions on unaccompanied children in this municipality because of the small sample size. However, bearing in mind that the RC was working on a local level with daytime activities for unaccompanied children primarily placed in foster families, the results can still be useful for increasing our knowledge about unaccompanied children with or without professional support.

Interviews with the mentors were recorded and transcribed. All the interviews were read through in full so we could familiarise ourselves with the texts, and were analysed through

content analysis. The interviews with the mentors were conducted when the day centre was about to convert from project status to regular operations and the mentors could look back on three years of work. The analysis follows the steps described by Granheim and Lundman (2004). First, meaning units were formed for each interview and condensed into short sentences. The meaning units were then coded and categories were outlined for the most frequent codes in the interviews. Then the categories were compared between the respondents.

The interviewees' statements were recorded during the interviews with the children. Most of the questions in this questionnaire had closed answers but some questions were open-ended. The analyses of the open-ended questions were also performed through content analyses in connection to the program theory of the RC (see Figure 3). Regarding the analysis of the empirical data in connection to the program theory of the RC, the decisions and resources, some planned activities, and the lists of interim and project goals are presented in the article.

Ethics in the study was reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (Registration number : 2009/341).

Results and analysis

Project activities

In accordance with the objectives of the RC, the children received resilience support in many different forms and were offered chances to participate in various activities, which are important for children's increased empowerment in their everyday life. These varied during the project period according to the children's identified needs. Examples were homework help, holiday jobs, summer school/camp, outdoor activities, cultural activities and professional personal resilience support. The latter activity involved talking with the children about their experiences and about how to manage in the Swedish system. The mentors often used a network map in their resilience work. The children also received information about the Swedish welfare and health care system. At the centre, the children had access to computers and the Internet so they could stay in regular contact with their families, do their homework, search for information, etc.

At the RC, the mentors listened to the children to find out what sorts of things were not working in their lives or were troubling them at that particular time. For example, if they were having problems in school, the mentors helped them plan ways to improve their situation. The work was solution-focused and highlighted positive aspects. The children were taught to work independently and make their own decisions. According to one of the mentors, when it comes to everyday decisions there is a cultural difference between the collectivist societies that many of the children come from, and the individualistic society that exists in Sweden.

The mentors met with the children and gave them opportunities to talk about how they perceived their current situation. The mentors also tried to steer the children into various activities, creating opportunities to spend time with adults and other children and adolescents. Furthermore, the children were given individual guidance and counselling to prepare them to live in their own independent accommodation. Various tutoring approaches were used to help the children achieve better school results. The network map was gradually developed during the course of the project, and was used by some mentors (Brunnberg, Borg, Fridström, 2011). A revised version of this network model is shown in Figure 4. These young people have very complex networks.
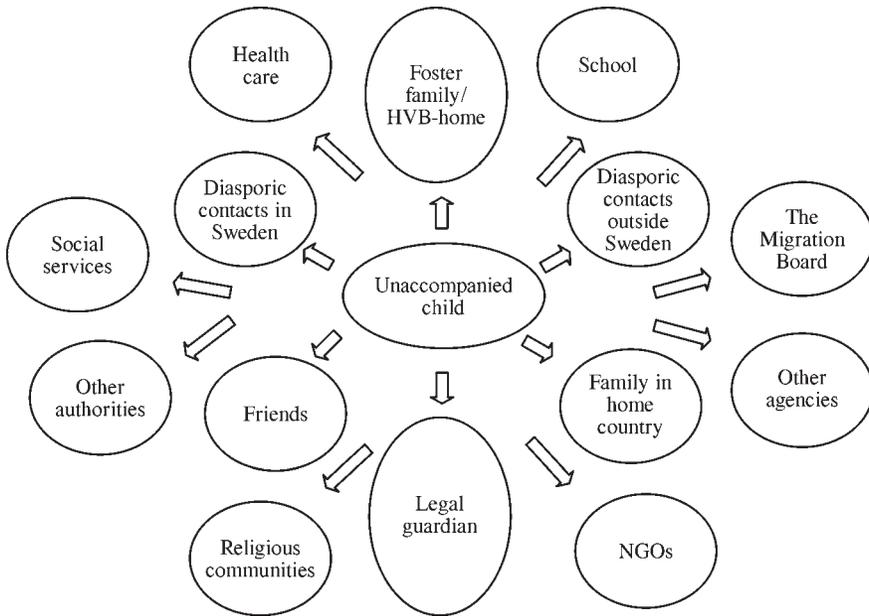
Source : Adapted and extended from Brunnberg, Borg, and Fridström (2011)

Figure 4. *Expanded Network Map for an Unaccompanied Child*

Children needing support in school could receive help with homework, and were offered contact with adults who got involved in their school situation. The children were also offered emotional support, guidance and counselling. When the children were abused, bullied or neglected in their foster family or family they received emotional support from the mentors and help finding a safe place to live. Financial assistance was given to cover fees if the children wanted to take part in such things as sports activities. The RC helped children take part in organised outdoors and health-oriented activities, such as forest outings to pick mushrooms. The children also received information on the Swedish health-care system and how to prevent illness.

RC was open a few hours a day on weekdays, mainly afternoons and some evenings a week. The children could arrange times for individual meetings. The mentors applied a guiding and not a controlling approach in their work with the unaccompanied children. The children were contacted primarily through their legal guardians, but were also reached via information sent to schools and the social services. The center was pioneering, and offered resilience social work to empower unaccompanied children in foster care.

The RC's interim goals

In this section, we discuss five of the six interim goals. The sixth interim goal of documentation is discussed in publications about the project.

Reaching the target group

One of the RC's interim goals was to reach out to all the unaccompanied children who had been placed in foster families, or in their own accommodation in the municipality. The outreach work was to be conducted in an active and engaging way. At the end of the project, on 31 December 2011, 51 children were registered in the project. Many of them had difficult experiences including violence and threats. Not all of them were able to talk very much about their experiences. They told minimalistic stories that could become more detailed over time as their trust in the mentors grew. When they did speak, the experiences they described could be very traumatic. For example, one of the unaccompanied children said : 'I've seen dead people, mutilated corpses missing body parts. There was a lot of bombing where we lived, because we lived near a main road and American military bases. I myself have been a victim of abuse.'

Another child said : 'It was war, and a certain group wanted me to join them, otherwise they would kill me.'

Their reason for choosing Sweden could be that the family knew someone or they had relatives there, but it could also have been the human smugglers' idea :

I didn't know where I was when I arrived here. … (Unaccompanied child)
My mother gave a man money and I just followed him. … (Unaccompanied child)
We didn't know anyone in Sweden. There was a woman who was distantly related to mother ;
we lived with her and her family as a foster family. … (Unaccompanied child)
My uncle lived here. … (Unaccompanied child)

The unaccompanied children in foster families had varying relationships with the project. During 2009-2011 eight children had mentors who met with them only very occasionally, while 43 children had closer contact. Some children had been in contact for a long period, and periodically had very intense contact with the centre.

Almost 60 % of unaccompanied children in the municipality had contact with the RC, even though the centre was primarily intended for those children placed in foster homes. Approximately 50 % of unaccompanied children in the municipality lived in foster homes in autumn 2011. A few can have grown up and moved into their own accommodation, but continued to have contact with the mentors at the RC, and others may have moved from foster homes to other types of accommodation. This suggests that the RC reached out to the unaccompanied children, and the professionals at the centre supported the unaccompanied children. This could be for many different types of problems both within the foster family and outside the family but in society.

Increasing children's contact with civil society

Another interim goal was to improve children's relationships with civil society. The ambition to improve the contact network of unaccompanied children was in many cases limited for obvious reasons : the children had not lived in the country very long and could not speak Swedish very well.

There are various definitions of civil society (Trägårdh, 1999 ; Svedberg, 2005). In our evaluation, we used a broader conception of civil society, comprising neighbours and other people, groups or activities outside the children's immediate vicinity (those with whom he/ she lives) such as friends, organised sports, cultural and other associations such as religious, social or political organisations, and also entertainment (cf. Svedberg, 2005).

Interviews with mentors revealed that they faced difficulties establishing contact with Swedish clubs and associations and encouraging unaccompanied children to join them. The mentors tried to establish contact, but failed for various reasons. One of the mentors described some difficulties as follows :

> No, we haven't had so much cooperation in [city name]. There wasn't much. And so I tried various parties' youth organisations, such as SSU [The Swedish Social Democratic Youth Association]. Some of them are now in SSU. The Swedish Green Party, they were going to send someone to the RC to give information to the young people, but it never happened. I called them two or three times … but no, there's not much. (Mentor)

Leisure activities are one of the areas closely linked to civil society. Leisure activities in which only children from the same ethnic group participated decreased significantly in 2011 compared to 2009. We saw no significant change between 2009 and 2011 for leisure activities in which virtually only immigrant and refugee children take part, as well as activities in which Swedish children also participate.

Another interesting result was that children's dependence on activities organised by the RC was significantly lower in 2011 than in 2009. This probably means that the children found new arenas for their leisure activities. Results regarding children's social relations, as a measure of contact with civil society, showed no significant reduction in terms of contact with children from the same country, but contact with Swedish children increased substantially, from five out of 17 (2009) to 12 out of 15 (2011). The results from the question about children's isolation also show that the mentors did not feel that the children were isolated, with mentors reporting that 15 out of 17 in 2009, and 14 out of 15 in 2011 were not isolated. On both occasions, the mentors indicated that all children had regular contact with children of the same sex. The second survey showed that some of the children lacked contact with similar-aged children of the opposite sex. The overall assessment is that the children did have increased contact with civil society, but there were still major shortcomings in this area.

Helping children become better equipped to deal with everyday life

The RC had as interim goal for the children to become better equipped to live in their homes. Of course, the aspects related to other interim goals helped the young people feel more confident about managing their everyday lives. There are also other important aspects to consider, as described below.

The mentor surveys in 2009 and 2011 showed that stability in care deteriorated over the two years. Care was stable for 14 of 17 children in 2009, but in 2011 it had dropped to 11 of 15 children. In the same period, unstable care increased from one child to three. In 2009, four out of 17 children had legal guardians, but none had legal guardians in 2011. All children about whom the mentors provided information had had legal guardians at some previous stage, and the fact that none had legal guardians in 2011 is partly because several of the children turned 18 in 2009. Unaccompanied children who are 18 or above are no longer entitled to a legal guardian.

The results from the surveys showed that nearly half of the children felt they could influence key decisions in their everyday lives, and more than half felt they dared to plan their future, and felt they could adapt to and deal with new situations. Children's interaction with their surroundings, which is an important component of being equipped to deal with everyday life, was examined though estimation scales in the survey. Estimation scales, here used by mentors who knew the children well, and by the same group on both occasions, concerned the child's perceptions of friendship, self-confidence, and social skills.

The results from the surveys showed that the children had an overwhelmingly positive perception of friendship. It is interesting that none felt they completely lacked interaction with friends. School can be an important arena for satisfying the need for interaction with peers, while friendship may be found in other arenas (cf. Brunnberg, 2003). Perceiving friendship in terms of mutual understanding and as a process is an aspect of friendship that appeared to grow stronger in the group of children between 2009 and 2011. Perceiving friendship as a relationship from which the children get something but do not have to give anything back weakened over the two years. Perceiving friendship as something that satisfies and affirms the child through various activities also seemed to weaken between 2009 and 2011, which could be interpreted as indicating their greater confidence in interacting with their surroundings. We also noted that mentors' assessments indicated a trend towards greater self-confidence.

The results of the estimation scales also showed that the number of children who reported feelings of insecurity when not with friends decreased from nine to six, while those who reported feeling like a natural and necessary member of the group, sometimes acting as leaders, and seeing themselves as 'normal' children increased from three children in 2009 to five children in 2011.

In line with assessments of friendship and confidence, mentors' assessments of the children's social skills show an improvement in their interaction with their surroundings or, in other words, at the meso-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, aggressive or otherwise dismissive behaviour that makes it difficult for children to make friends decreased over the two years, from four children to two, but two of the 15 children still had problems with peers and making new contacts, according to mentors' assessments.

According to mentors' estimates, there was a significant improvement in interaction with the social surroundings for these children between 2009 and 2011. The improvements observed were as follows: the children had two or three close friends with whom they met often and shared mutual experiences; they could also have relationships with older, younger, and same-aged members of the opposite sex; they remained friends for a long time; they could be leaders; and they found it easy to initiate new friendships. However, more than half of the children still had major difficulties creating and maintaining friendships.

The majority of the unaccompanied children told in the interviews that they had regular contact with people at the micro-level, for example with parents online or via mobile phone in the transnational contexts. Online parenting and family relationships are another aspect of importance for dealing with everyday life in a new country. For example, one of the children had contact with '… mother and siblings on the phone once or twice a week', while another child answered a question about contact as 'Very good. Call and talk a lot. With mom, cousins, grandparents The unaccompanied children may have contact with a parent daily, much less often, or not at all. However, online parenting, for example through Skype or mobile phone, may take place in addition to ongoing foster care and social work. The ability to maintain contact with parents and siblings through modern technology is a major advantage compared to unaccompanied children in the Second World War. The RC could provide access to computers and the Internet, but it is not easy for the child to have a distant parent while living in a foster family in another country. These contacts across borders show the importance of a transnational perspective (cf. Alinia, 2004; Cohen, 1997; Emanuelsson, 2005; Gustafsson, 2007, 2008; Khayati, 2008; Sheffer, 1986). The unaccompanied children could have lost contact with their parents, but after some time in Sweden regained contact with one or both parents and relatives. At the centre the children could use the internet to find and keep transnational relationships within their previous network. Other children completely may have lost contact with their biological parents.

Helping the children achieve good school results

Providing support to the children in order to help them achieve good results in school was one of the RC's interim goals. Having greater contact with civil society and being better equipped to deal with everyday life also help children do better in school, but some other aspects, described below, are more closely linked to good study results, according to mentors' assessments.

The RC's homework help was one of the activities that was important for school results. The opportunity to receive tutoring from mentors was highly appreciated by the young people, both those with a functioning and stable life in general, and those who had a vulnerable situation. The mentors also appreciated the opportunity to help with homework. It brought them closer to the children, which made it possible to work with other things as well, according to one of the mentors : 'You had a great relationship with the young people when you sat with them and did homework. They [the municipality] have taken all of that away now.'

Between 2009 and 2011, the proportion of children attending school decreased, which might partly be explained by their being two years older and not continuing to post-secondary education. All 17 children were in school in 2009, but only 10 out of 15 were in school in 2011. In 2009, 12 out of 17 children attended a school for newly-arrived children, while only 2 out of 15 children attended such a school in 2011. The proportion of children who had transferred to a regular school class increased in 2011 (9 out of 15) and fewer students were attending classes for newcomers (2 out of 15), which is the opposite situation to that in 2009.

In the autumn of 2011, none of the children had completed upper-secondary school in a national programme with grades in all core subjects, so none of them were qualified for higher education, according to statistics we received from the municipality for 2012. The results showed that it is important to be able to progress from individual programmes to a national programme as quickly as possible, in order to become qualified to apply for higher education.

The unaccompanied children often changed schools, and for various reasons most of them attended at least two different schools in Sweden. There were some children who had attended several schools. In relation to the children's interest in and commitment to school, some of the children were not attending school at all at the time of the last survey. All 17 children were active in school in 2009, and 10 of the 15 children were active in school in 2011. This result shows that most of the children were interested in schooling although the level of interest declined a little in 2011.

If we combined 'Often' and 'Sometimes' in the responses to the question on need for help with homework, we can see that almost half of the children needed help in both 2009 and 2011, according to mentors' estimates, while others rarely had such a need. In some cases, mentors believed that the children were subjected to bullying and/or harassment in school. The results also suggest that the numbers decreased slightly over the two years.

Six of the eight children who answered questions about school stated that they went to school in their home country, while two children said they did not attend school or only did so occasionally. More than half of the children felt encouraged by their biological parents to do well in school, and half of the children reported that their foster parents emphasised the importance of schoolwork ; this is important for the interaction between the micro- and meso-levels in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, this did not necessarily mean that they could get help with schoolwork in the foster family, and the homework help from mentors was very much appreciated by the children.

Developing a more optimistic outlook

Another interim goal for the RC was for the children to gain a more optimistic view of the future. Attaining the other interim goals helped the children to do so. In this section, we view children's physical and mental health and personal support as factors that significantly affect their view of the future. In the second interim evaluation (Fridström, Aytar, Brunnberg, 2011), we discussed the children's outlook on the basis of other factors.

The results of the mentors' survey showed that various health problems could affect the children's views of the future. Their physical health seemed to improve and was good at the end of the project. A total of 14 out of 17 children in 2009 and 15 out of 15 in 2011 were considered to be in good physical health. In 2009, half were assessed to be in poor mental health, but this had fallen to one-third in 2011.

The children's mental health was not as good as their physical health, but some improvement could be seen between 2009 and 2011. However, many children seem to have to deal with loneliness, nervousness, anxiety and worry. Several children also reported psychological disorders and insomnia.

In terms of psychosomatic disorders, the mentors as assessors responded 'Don't know' for eight of the 17 children in 2009. This may be due to difficulties in assessing such health conditions without medical investigation. The corresponding rate for 2011 was four out of 15 children. Regarding the children's difficulties sleeping, we see a decrease from 2009 to 2011, but four out of 15 young people still had insomnia in 2011, according to the mentors' survey. The proportion of 'Don't know' responses is also interesting. Children's concentration difficulties showed a similar improvement, and the proportion of 'Don't know' responses also dropped. A clearer trend of improvement was seen for traumatic experiences that the children went through either at home or on the way to Sweden. A total of nine out of 17 children felt the effects of traumatising experiences in 2009, but only two in 2011. The response rate for 'Don't know' is also interesting for this issue.

The mentors' surveys also show that one child was disabled, one had a chronic disease, and one was in a state of crisis in 2009. In 2011, one child had a chronic illness. The crisis state of one of the children seems to have been treated, while it is not clear what happened to the child with a disability. Some children were still suffering from traumatising experiences that occurred at home or on the way to Sweden, and there were also cases of children being subjected to abuse in family homes in the municipality.

There are examples where even being reunited with their biological family did not create a good environment for children. One of the mentors explains this as follows:

> She was here [in Sweden] by herself, living with her uncle. Managed to get her family here. Mother and father and several siblings. And that's when the hell started for her, when the family came. Because after a while, she was supposed to move in with her family. And it turned out that the father was quite strict. Suddenly, this girl was not allowed to go out. …It got so bad that we ended up filing several complaints with the social services. And they got help, the mother and the children, with sheltered living. … (Mentor)

It is important that these children are given personal support, and also are helped to find a new place to stay, away from the abusive or bullying family or foster parent. The mentors' efforts have largely involved helping the unaccompanied children to get ahead in life ('bounce up'). One of the mentors explains this as follows:

The young people have had widely varying situations. For some, it's been a question of making their world more secure. Perhaps helping them get away from an unsafe relative foster family to something else. In such cases that has been the biggest part of the job. Someone else may have come here and wants to receive help with chemistry and physics in school, and has come quite a long way in her life, obviously on her own.

The results show that the variation and complexity of children's vulnerability requires a variety of high-quality activities to strengthen their resilience (cf. Luster et al., 2010). The unaccompanied children are in an unusually tough life situation from which they need to recover or 'bounce up' to get to the same level as other children. Resilient Therapy (RT) involves searching for ways to help children and young people in vulnerable situations so that they can 'bounce up' (see Hart, Blincow, 2007). The methodology uses the expression 'bounce up' rather than 'bounce back' because many children have never been anywhere worth bouncing back to, or even if they have, in the case of unaccompanied refugee children, their life situation has changed so radically that there may be no returning to the past.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this article is to explore success factors and impeding factors in social work for empowering unaccompanied children at a resilience centre for daily activities in a Swedish municipality from a program theory perspective by listening to staff as well as the unaccompanied children's voices. The results of this longitudinal study showed that unaccompanied children's relationships with other children improved during the two years they had stayed in Sweden; they improved socially, and developed their ability to plan and adapt; more children started to attend regular school; and traumatic experiences were processed to some extent. However, there were still significant gaps in participation in clubs and associations and leisure activities, and some children were mentally unwell. The homework help that children received from mentors at the centre was very popular and the need for help with homework continued. This tutoring has also proved to be a good way for the mentors to establish contact with the children. Homework help is not only an educational matter, but is also a socio-psychological activity that helps to establish trust in the mentors and enables them to provide better personal support.

Intervention effectiveness

Our results showed that the attainment of both interim and project goals was varied. Success factors, challenges and risks coexist. Taking care of unaccompanied children on this scale is a new experience for Swedish municipalities, but the RC has shown itself to be a project with highly motivated mentors who did important work for the unaccompanied children in the municipality. Parts of the project will continue and some activities still need further development, for example, psychological support.

The RC's overall project goals focused on helping the unaccompanied children to integrate and establish themselves in society in a positive way, and also on learning more about the children's needs because they came from a variety of different countries with serious conflicts among adults. This study shows that it is very important that unaccompanied children placed in foster care have sophisticated support, because there appear to be serious risks associated not only with the unaccompanied children's experiences in their home country or while travelling to Sweden, but also with some placements in the new country in this case Sweden.

Achieving the resilience support goals in the project would create favourable conditions for unaccompanied children in the municipality and would be in harmony with the program theory perspective on the RC (see Figure 3). However, what brings about integration and positive establishment is not easily measurable. The concept of integration is ambiguous. Definitions of the concept vary according to the focus areas, preferences, intervention form and content, etc. Establishing good interpersonal relationships is considered to be vital for integration and examining the social relationships between individual and surroundings can be one of several indicators of integration (Integrationsverket, 2004 ; Socialstyrelsen, 2008 ; Aytar, 2007).

The relationship between integration and establishment is also not without problems. If integration is perceived as a process, establishment can be taken as a step, phase, or mechanism in this process. Because integration and positive establishment comprised one of the project goals in connection with the interim goals, we will not discuss these concepts beyond what we have written about the interim goals in the previous sections.

Complexity of the children's vulnerability

The health and welfare of unaccompanied children does not only depend on their receiving education and somewhere to live ; they also need psychological support. It is not uncommon for unaccompanied children to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), ill effects due to uncertainty about their asylum status after migration, and depression. It is important that people close to these children are aware of this (Bean et al., 2006 ; Derluyn, Broekaert, 2008 ; Heptinstall, Sethna, Taylor, 2004). Regular screening for trauma-related morbidity should be carried out (Smid et al., 2011). Treatment aimed at relieving symptoms of depression and anxiety can help prevent late-onset PTSD. The unaccompanied children in this study were not specifically referred for investigation or treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, but post-traumatic reactions were described.

The unaccompanied children may have been exposed to four different types of traumatic experiences (see Fazel, Stein, 2002). (1) They have had to leave their family and local environment. (2) They have often been forced to flee because of war or political conflict between adults and may have witnessed violence, torture, and loss of family members and close friends. (3) The journey to the new country may have led to more stress. They may have been exposed to more threatening situations, and many have been in the hands of smugglers. (4) After settling into their new country, the children may also have been exposed to events that generate new trauma. In several cases, events of this type are described in this study as having happened during their time in the municipality, so it is important to improve competence in assessing and responding to unaccompanied children's PTSD. The child might need special therapeutic treatment related to PTSD. Resilience therapeutic interventions together with the child is based on and strengthens the emotional resilience that can be found in children in vulnerable situations. The basic idea of Resilient Therapy is that the adults in the child's environment may help to strengthen the child's resistance (Brunnberg, Hart, 2016).

Contacts across borders

In terms of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000), the results show that unaccompanied children's migration to a new country can be interpreted as involving changes at various levels such as the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro and global level. Children can begin to establish contacts in new networks, while contact with the previous network, including their parents, can be daily, limited or completely broken off. Children who, alongside their new networking contacts, continue to interact with parts of their former network

and with their parents do so in a completely different way and at a greater distance than ever before, mostly through modern technology (Brunnberg, Borg, Fridström, 2011 ; Fridström, Aytar, Brunnberg, 2011 ; Brunnberg, Aytar, 2012). Social work can also be developed through modern technology. Some social workers have occasional contact with the child's parent in the home country or in another country where the parent may live.

The most important environment for children is their micro-system. The unaccompanied child refugees had been forced to leave their own micro-system, and most entered a chaotic life situation for a period. But the evaluation study showed they can continue to interact with someone in their family in their original micro-environment through transnational links, which form an important part of transnational perspectives (cf. Alinia, 2004 ; Cohen, 1997 ; Emanuelsson, 2005 ; Gustafsson, 2007, 2008 ; Khayati, 2008 ; Sheffer, 1986). In the microsystem, the individual relates to and interacts with family, friends, and other close relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However this form of interaction is completely different ; it takes place at a greater distance than before, and is transnational, with a web-based connection between the micro- and global environment.

Almost all children in this study had fled from a violent or threatening situation in their home country and left their parents behind. However, most of them still have contact with a parent, sibling or other family member by modern technology. The amount of contact with their families can vary considerably. Parents may be dead, may still live in their home country, or may have left for another country. Our results show that the young people's mental well-being is not entirely satisfactory. Many of the unaccompanied children feel lonely, sleep poorly, and are stressed. At the same time they see themselves as happy and are optimistic about the future. This may seem like a contradiction, but does not need to be – it could merely be a sign of the complexity of their lives.

Conclusions for interventions for unaccompanied children in family care, kinship care or independent living

In addition to the above, some more comprehensive conclusions can be drawn from the project. RC was replaced after the project with a resource team with permanent operation. The experiences from RC has still great influence on the care of unaccompanied children. However, it has in 2015 been a much larger number of unaccompanied children arriving to Sweden than before so the caring situation has become increasingly strained in Swedish municipalities. The resource team works with young people placed in support accommodation (Mellanbo), in foster care and kinship care and young people who have moved out to their own. Resource Team works with assistance, housing support, service, and program activities for unaccompanied children 13-20 year old.

1. There is a particular need for professional support for unaccompanied children living in family care, kinship care or independent living
2. The municipality should ensure that mentors working with unaccompanied children are professionals having sufficient expertise to provide substantial information about the welfare system and emotional support in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).
3. Foster families should be professionally vetted before unaccompanied children are placed in them. This level of quality has to be the same for all types of families – kinship families, network families and traditional foster families. The families need to have some basic knowledge about both the traditions in the unaccompanied child's home country and the new country.

4. It is important to identify the children's need for social and emotional support (about school work, contact with parents, PTSD, etc.) and also, in response to signals from the child, to talk with them about why they fled their homes alone.
5. More control, monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the foster care placements is also needed to prevent the unaccompanied children from being subjected to new trauma.
6. There is a need for social work interventions together with the unaccompanied children that are with resilience therapeutic.
7. Modern technology must be put to use. Social workers must be willing to engage in new forms of transnational social work to assist the unaccompanied children in getting a stable, new and perhaps transnational micro system, with online parenting and parenting by foster parents in the new country.
8. Unaccompanied children are mostly boys. The unaccompanied children's migration is a gendered migration. The boys are often coming from a country with a patriarchal structure to a country like with equality as a main value. There is also a difference between a collectivistic and an individualistic culture. Those differences in value systems needs to be discussed.

Notes

1. Our definition of unaccompanied children is based on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (1994, 121) definition : 'Unaccompanied children are those who are separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so', and includes those who are 'below the age of eighteen years', according to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989).
2. The RC centre was funded by the social services in the municipality and the European Refugee Fund.

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