The Take-off for Private Consultants in Child Protection Investigations—How Did Sweden Get Here?

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Abstract

The use of private consultants in child protection investigations in Sweden is an evolving practice that occurs under the radar; it is not in the political agenda and it is obscure in relation to legislation. The aim of this article is to analyse the contextual forces, facilitators and intentions behind the ongoing implementation of privatisation in child protection investigations. For this article, both quantitative and qualitative data for the years 2013–2017 were obtained through a telephone questionnaire. Managers of 32 social services departments were interviewed. Statistical data of the year 2018 collected by the National Board of Health and Welfare was also included in the analysis. Applying a mixed-method design, the article shows that some prerequisites in legislation make it possible for privatisation to develop. There are societal changes that act as contextual forces, and there are structures in place from earlier stages of the development of privatisation that facilitate the new practice. Also, there are professional intentions that drive the process. The implementation of private consultants in child protection takes place during a period of high workload for social services. The article concludes with a discussion about the consequences for children and families of this new trend in privatisation.

Keywords: child protection, marketisation, privatisation, profession, social work

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Introduction

The privatisation of children’s social services has been developing since the 1990s and is now well established in Sweden (Söderlind and Sköld, 2018) in terms of purchaser-provider schemes in non-residential as well as residential care (Meagher et al., 2016). However, the practice of risk assessments for children in need has been and still is, according to law, the responsibility of the municipal social service organisation (Mattsson, 2019). Since 2014, there has been a significant increase in the use of privately employed social workers in child protection investigations. Unlike in England where the privatisation of risk assessment is openly debated and criticised for jeopardizing the protection of children (The Guardian, 2016), in Sweden this evolving practice is taking place rather unnoticed. It has not fueled any nationwide political or ideological discussion among political parties or advocacy groups, and the sort of criticism raised so far in newspapers (Expressen, 2017) has been about the rising costs of private consultants in child protection.

In this article, we analyse the contextual forces, facilitators and intentions behind the development of private consultants performing child protection investigations, with the aim to answer the question—how did Sweden get here? Data used to answer the question are obtained via national statistics and a regional in-depth telephone questionnaire including both statistical data and open-ended questions answered by children’s social services managers about their views on hiring private consultants for child protection investigations.

Privatisation of child protection investigations

Sweden, as well as many other Western countries, has experienced privatisation of welfare services within areas such as healthcare, the school system, and child and youth social services partly as the result of implementing the New Public Management (NPM) doctrine with its emphasis on privatisation (Hood, 1991). These far-reaching institutional changes of many parts of the welfare sector have taken place with the wish for increased cost-effectiveness and increased consumer market by choice of care-deliverer. The means have been legal, and the practical changes have led to the implementation of market principles, such as the splitting of purchaser-provider and the outsourcing to private enterprises. These changes have not only taken place in Sweden. Implementing such doctrine in social services has enhanced privatisation of interventions in many regions and countries in the Western world, albeit to varying degrees (Siverbo, 2004; Tynkkynen et al., 2013; Wollmann, 2018). Privatisation can be driven as an active process for example as a political agenda but it can also be passively developed through inaction or drift.
that occurs when public funding and services do not keep up with the demands. Private initiatives can then be developed to answer to needs (Leibetseder et al., 2017).

In England, the country most often mentioned as the utmost example of social work being conducted on the principles of marketisation, developments in the field of social work have been much discussed and criticised. Arguments have been made in the public press by English social work experts including professors (The Guardian, 2016) stating that changes in legislation allowing for-profit companies to take over children’s services will put children at risk. Researchers have pointed out that the privatisation in childcare poses consequences such as loss of accountability and blurred responsibility between contractors and contractees. Höjer and Forkby (2011) illustrate, for example, that social workers do not always find that their view of good practice fits within the general agreements concerning choices of providers in the placements of children. With more actors and fragmentation of communication, there are more gaps for information to slip through (Harris and White, 2009; Jones and Butler, 2019). There is also the risk that when private enterprises no longer find profit, they decide to leave the field and promptly walk away, leaving the municipality with the responsibility to rescue the services (Jones, 2015; Jones and Butler, 2019). Also, it has been argued that the privatisation has led to poorer working conditions for staff and services for clients (Carey, 2008). Finally, it has been proposed that the privatisation development has had as a driving force the perspective of managing risk and protection, rather than a child-centred perspective offering support to families (Munroe, 2011).

Sweden, often described as a strong social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990) moderately altered by the NPM doctrine, has still undergone marketisation and privatisation of welfare services, certainly within the field of children’s social services and child protection. The process of privatisation of child social services started after the implementation of the Social Service Act in 1982 and some changes in the law statutes that allowed for a purchaser-provider split between municipal contractors and private companies as providers (Mattsson, 2019).

Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the proportion of privately employed staff in services for children in child protection non-institutional care, from 7 per cent in 2003 to 36 per cent in 2015, and almost all are employed in for-profit organisations (Lundström et al., 2018). In institutional care during 2000, more than 70 per cent of the places were private. Meagher et al. (2016) describe the development in institutional care for children occurring in three phases, starting in the 1980s with small family like companies. In the second phase during the 1990s, changes took place within regulation and professionalisation processes that contributed to the growth of private, for-profit companies to become bigger and offer a large range of services. During the third
phase, further regulation and concentration of the residential care system took place and large private corporations (holding three or more care units) nowadays operate 20 per cent of the homes. This latter situation, with an existing market inhabited by large corporations providing a multitude of services for children and families, continues after 2010; however, still at this point, the risk assessment in child protection is the responsibility of the public municipal social service and is almost always conducted by publicly employed social workers.

Jones (2015) calls the privatisation of risk assessments ‘the end game’. Despite that Sweden historically has been denoted as moderately influenced by the NPM doctrine, it has undergone the same transformation and is now rapidly approaching ‘the end game’ of privatisation in child protection with the purchaser-provider split in assessments.

Child protection in Sweden

Child protection departments in municipalities in Sweden are most often divided into several specialised units. (1) There is a reception centre that receives the report of suspected child maltreatment and assesses whether the report is to be fully investigated or not. Sometimes there is already an investigation going on, and therefore no new investigation needs to be opened. (2) If the reception team decides that the report must be fully investigated, a case is opened and assigned to one or two social workers who are responsible for completing the investigation. In some municipalities, the investigations are divided in different teams, for example, for newly arrived unaccompanied children or for children who have been victims of violence. The practice of doing investigations could also be assigned to a social worker contracted from a private company. (3) The decision of the assessment will formally be signed by a manager, and in some cases, such as if the assessment involves out-of-home placement, the municipal social service board consisting of elected politicians will take the decision. In the case of compulsory care, the District Court will judge on the basis of the social worker’s investigation. (4) If the child and/or the parents are assigned some support or interventions, the service is provided by other municipal units or it could be contracted out to private enterprises (Höjer and Forkby, 2011).

In the absence of national data about the number of children assessed in child protection investigations, the Swedish National Health and Welfare reported that in 2018, 38,800 children received an intervention from social services. Earlier research has found that approximately just 20 per cent (Östberg, 2010) of the assessments result in any intervention for children.

Today, Swedish legislation states that the investigator must be a social worker with a bachelor degree in Social Work. The investigation is
conducted by a social worker employed by the municipality, but increas- ingly common by a social worker employed by a private company hired by the municipality for doing child protection investigations. The decision of every assessment is then taken by a manager, and in cases where there are decisions on out-of-home placements, the decision is taken by the municipal welfare board consisting of elected officials. Also, the Social Services Act states a time limit of four months to conduct an investigation.

Theoretical understanding of ‘take-off’ in privatisation of child protection

Privatisation as a concept does not command a widely accepted definition (Powell and Miller, 2014). The concept has both narrow interpretations focusing on transferring the production of goods and services to private ownership and more broad frameworks that include contracting out to private providers (Savas, 1989; Shanks et al., 2021). In this article, ‘privatisation’ describes the contracting out of the investigation practice to private, for-profit companies, in terms of them doing the investigations, writing up the reports, and suggesting a decision on the child risk assessments.

Privatisation can also be categorised as political, spontaneous, or demand-driven. The privatisation that is political is the process in which the public sector, for financial or ideological reasons, contracts out the activity it previously had full control of private actors. This process could also be spontaneously driven by other actors who set up services and sell them to the public, or it can be demand-driven as a result of a general view that the public sector is not providing the service or not with the preferred quality (Starr 1989). Dellgran and Höjer (2005) argue that the privatisation process of welfare services can also be profession-driven.

In analysing the development of professional fields, Brante et al. (2019) use the concept ‘take-off’. A take-off happens when a professional field has a breakthrough and quickly expands, establishing a new structure in the mindset of what constitutes practice. A quantitative take-off is when the professional field grows rapidly in the number of members or practitioners. This change can be fuelled by political or other forces, such as a technological innovation. It could also be the consequence of new knowledge or new ways of providing services or products, such as privatising products or services. In this article, we use ‘take-off’ to describe the formative moment in time when private consultants rapidly increase in number in the child protection field. According to Brante (2013), negotiations and contracts with the state have been more important in the Nordic countries for the development of
professional fields than in Anglo-Saxon countries that rather emphasise the activities of the profession. In the take-off of private consultants in the child protection risk assessments in Sweden, the state and the politicians have not played an active part; so in this article, we try to define the actors and the movements in this particular moment in time to unveil the underlying processes of the implementation of private social workers.

**Method**

**Material**

The article is based on data from a larger study of privatisation in child protection investigations. For this article with a mixed-method design as described by Creswell (2015), there are two primary sources of data. Quantitative data are taken from the national statistics of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, and both quantitative and qualitative data are obtained from a regional survey through a telephone questionnaire with the municipalities. The national data of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare from 2019 includes 87 per cent of the municipalities and city districts in the country. The regional survey contains data from four regions. This data was obtained through a telephone questionnaire including both open-ended and close-ended questions, conducted with the head managers of the social service departments or a senior manager of the child protection unit in altogether thirty-two social service departments located across ten city districts in a large city (more than 200,000 inhabitants), three middle-sized cities (more than 40,000 inhabitants) and nineteen small municipalities (less than 40,000 inhabitants). The questionnaire comprised fifteen closed-ended items about budgets, ratios of child protection investigations, contracts with enterprises, number of private consultants during 2013–2017 and competence among employed social workers and hired consultants. The open-ended qualitative questions answered by the managers were about their reasons for using or not using private consultants in child protection investigations, their demands when hiring prospective consultants in terms of requirements, qualifications and skills, and their overall view and experience of having private consultants doing child protection investigations in their work area. The three researchers each conducted one-third of the interviews.

The questionnaire was used to collect data from the period 2013–2017. In 2018, the National Board of Health and Welfare started to collect national data about the use of private consultants in child protection investigations. We used data from 2019 in this article in order to describe further development.
External loss of data was limited to three municipalities and two city districts. Within the study, there was some internal loss of data concerning the statistical part of the survey, since not all municipalities could provide the requested data through their records. Therefore, to obtain validity, we have refrained from using data with internal loss of more than 25 per cent. Data from the questionnaire was computed in SPSS for descriptive statistics.

The qualitative data was transcribed to a separate sheet under each question. Then the qualitative data and quantitative descriptive data were analysed as a whole, independently by the three researchers, searching for themes related to the developing practice of privatisation. Take-off was agreed upon as an overarching theme to describe and characterise empirically the time period of the study. Take-off is also a theoretical concept that defines an event in time (Brante et al., 2019) connected to various factors that drive the take-off. Next, we performed a qualitative analysis of data in order to find underpinning categories that could help explain the event of take-off for the privatisation of child protection investigations. We then agreed upon three most important categories that defined the process of take-off; contextual forces that describe an important context such as changes in legislation, facilitators that capture who or what changes facilitated the development, and professional intentions among social workers and managers that steered the course of practice.

Findings

This section presents the contextual forces, facilitators and intentions behind the development of private consultants performing child protection investigations. First, we describe the take-off of privately employed social workers who perform risk assessments and the public response to this practice. Thereafter, the circumstances that made this process possible are analysed according to the prerequisites set in the legislation, the contextual driving forces, and the facilitators, with the aim of trying to answer the question—how did Sweden get here?

Take-off for privately employed social workers in child protection investigations

During the period of 2013 up until 2017, there is a rapid quantitative take-off in privately employed social workers performing child protection investigations in the municipalities in the study. The increase takes place both in the minor municipalities as well as in the big cities.
Table 1 shows that there is a rising trend of private consultants used in child protection investigations during 2013–2017 starting from a very low level. The table also shows that the use of consultants is uneven, where some municipalities do not use private consultants at all during the entire time period, while others engage in a considerably high rate of use during the same period. The take-off is shown in the increasing maximum numbers of consultants used between 2013 and 2017. This illustrated development can be described as a take-off for private consultants in numbers during this period.

How did this happen then, and why? In the analysis, we searched for the underlying prerequisites for this change of practice, the facilitating circumstances that have fuelled the process, and the actors who reveal some intentions that made this development possible.

One prerequisite—a loophole in the legal framework

The practice of child protection investigations is clearly an exercise of public authority, which is the responsibility of local and governmental agencies and must be prescribed by law. The Swedish Social Services Act, Ch. 2, Sec. 5 states that the municipal authority can sign a contract with a private person or enterprise to perform the services provided by social services. However, assignments that include the exercise of public authority are not to be contracted out. Still, there is a take-off of private consultants in social services performing child protection investigations. How is this then even possible?

In a precedent case, the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman stated that there is some margin for maneuver to hire private consultants within social services to investigate child protection cases. The requirements are that the specific person is employed by the authority directly and therefore is under the supervision of the municipal management, and the person is subject to current legislation under the same terms as the municipal social worker, for example, concerning professional confidentiality and official accountability. It is not possible to hire a private
company or to let the company decide who the specific person to do the investigations should be (Hollander and Madell, 2003; Mattsson, 2019). In this sense, the interpretation of the law offers a loophole that is used by municipalities to hire private consultants. Mattsson (2019) points out that it is important to follow up the development of how municipalities interpret and write contracts using general procurement as a first step, and secondly, how the contracts are formulated for the private consultants who are employed.

Specialisation and work division

Another prerequisite which enabled the privatisation of risk assessments is the specialised and fragmentised organisation of child protection across different departments. Work division is often described as a consequence of specialisation within a profession (Freidson, 2001). Also, specialising in specific tasks is often understood as enhancing good quality in services; however, the reverse side is that as a consequence, work tasks become fragmented and divided among specialists. In practice, a child protection investigation is divided among different units and more or less specialised social workers. When a child protection report is submitted to a social service department, a social worker at the admission unit performs an ex ante evaluation of whether the report should go on to a full investigation. If so, the report is transferred to a unit and handed to a social worker who performs the actual investigation and suggests a decision. The actual and formal decision is taken by a manager in most cases. Then any service or intervention is provided by other staff at other service units. This division of work tasks makes it possible to make the investigation a delimited, administrative practice that the consultant can take on and then easily step out of. It also means that every child and his/her family must meet and form a relationship with and trust in more than one social worker.

Contextual driving forces

Even if there is a loophole in the legal framework that can be taken advantage of in order to use private providers, there needs to be a catalyst that starts the process and creates a demand for consultants. This could be ideological, like in England where municipalities took political decisions to start using private companies on a trial-basis to perform risk assessments (Jones, 2015). In Sweden, this practice is not due to political initiative, but rather to a few coinciding occurrences in the years 2013–2015. In 2014, there is a further obligation for social services to investigate and assess the need for protection of every child who has witnessed
violence in the family (SOFS 2014:4, 6 chapter 1§). It is not known how
many children are affected, but estimations are that 85,000–190,000 chil-
dren are affected by violence directed towards their mother (Annerbäck
et al., 2010; Broberg et al., 2011), although a recent prevalence study
shows a decreasing trend over the past 10 years (Kvist et al., 2020).
Hence, investigations of children witnessing violence within their home
would have increased the workload at any children social service depart-
ment, and this duty started to come into effect in 2015.
Moreover, in 2015, an extraordinarily large number of unaccompanied
refugee children arrived in Sweden requiring social services to conduct a
child protection investigation for every individual child in order to ap-
point a guardian and to find a home for each. In 2015, 35,369 unac-
 companied, underage children sought asylum in Sweden, meaning that all
had to be assessed by social services. This is a high increase in number
compared to both 2014 when 7,049 unaccompanied children sought asy-
lum and two years later, 2106, when the number went down to 2,199
children (Swedish Migration Agency, 2020). Many municipalities quickly
set up specialised units for investigation and support for these children.
The need to hire staff quickly for these units further underlined the
pressure on managers to find experienced staff who could take on heavy
case loads.
Hence, during this period, there is an increase in reports on child mal-
treatment and children in need, requiring action by the social service
departments. This significant rise occurs in 2015.

Table 2 shows the rise in child protection investigations during 2015.
Bearing in mind that according to law (SoL 11, chapter 2§) a child inves-
tigation must be completed within four months, the changes described
put immense pressure on the municipal social services. Managers
reported that social workers worked overtime constantly, the number of
staff on sick leave rose, and some managers stated that the whole group
of staff in their department resigned.

'It was an unstable time in 2014–2015. We had high turn-over of staff,
and we had to recruit new staff, with many inexperienced with child

Table 2. Mean, maximum and minimum number of child protection files during the period 2013–
2017.

|        | 2013  | 2014  | 2015  | 2016  | 2017  |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| N      | 4,847 | 6,817 | 9,338 | 7,706 | 8,469 |
| Number of social service dep. | 19 | 19 | 21 | 21 | 22 |
| Mean   | 255   | 359   | 445   | 367   | 385   |
| Min    | 78    | 140   | 139   | 110   | 73    |
| Max    | 788   | 1,013 | 1,149 | 1,002 | 1,213 |

N = Total number of child protection files in all social service departments together during the
specific year.
protection investigations. Few stayed on’, says one manager from a city district. The managers point out that with rising workloads, the staff resigned, and when staff resigned, the workload became even higher in a situation where there were few other social workers to employ. This knock-on effect became difficult to break. In 2015, most managers in our study turned to private companies in order to hire private consultants. The consultants were needed to uphold the law and complete investigations on time. Some managers, however, also sought experienced social workers, since the staff they could employ were inexperienced social workers right out of university with no work experience with child protection. In this time of pressure, one manager from a middle-sized municipality says, ‘We needed staff that could do the work independently and efficiently and did not need supervision or mentoring; there was no time for that’.

However, some municipalities did not employ private consultants; in some cases, they managed to keep staff by providing them with a good work environment. Some of these municipalities were not taking on the same number of unaccompanied children, since the cases were very unevenly spread over the country. Other managers explained that they tried to recruit private consultants; ‘but there were none to be found’, said one manager from a small municipality, who had to rely on the existing staff and herself working overtime for a long period.

Over the decade, the child protection departments have gone from being the high status core of the social work profession to being understaffed and with a high percentage of social workers employed with little work experience (Regeringskansliet, 2017). A national report from Vårdaanalys (2019) based on interviews with managers in social services concluded that child and family support, including child protection, is the most difficult field to recruit social workers to.

The events impacting practice in child protection during the 2010 decade placed demand on managers of social services for children to find new solutions within their jurisdiction of power in order to staff their units, and hiring private consultants was one.

Facilitators—existing private companies

The events of the 2015 take-off take place in a context where there is already a set field of medium-sized and large companies (Meagher et al., 2016) offering various kinds of services and interventions in childcare. So, the stage is already set when there is a sudden demand for social workers in child protection. The established structure of the private companies allows for quick action in opening up employment of social workers who can be contracted to perform child protection investigations.
The already existing array of companies who are experienced in structuring, administering and offering services to municipal social services allows the take-off in 2015 to be as quick and large as it was.

Intentions—professional

Finally, the privatisation would not have taken place if the social workers had not chosen to seek private employment alternatives. Fifteen years ago, Dellgran and Höjer (2005) showed that almost 50 per cent of the responding social workers in Sweden then could consider starting their own private practice. The most important motives given were to have greater autonomy and gain more control over assignments and working hours, a need for change and challenge, and the possibility for specialisation. Hence, Dellgran and Höjer found a professionally driven privatisation. Furthermore, they found that even though social workers expressed a general ambivalence towards the privatisation of services, it did not deter their own decisions to consider finding private employment. Since 2005, privatisation of social services has become an everyday experience for most social workers in Sweden.

Managers in social work mention that they have employed experienced social workers whom had been previously employed by the local authority and then went off to start their own businesses. The pattern in our data does comply with a professionalisation-driven privatisation, showing that the private consultants have more years of experience in child assessment practice than the social workers employed by the local authority.

Future development

From the national figures, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the privatisation of child investigations has slowed down. Most managers in the study have expressed that the hiring of private consultants is an unwanted phenomenon in their department. Some departments who did not employ private consultants during 2015–2017 still do not. Some that did employ these consultants have taken the political decision not to employ them, but rather to improve the working conditions for social workers, such as to offer flexible working hours, raise wages and decrease workloads. These decisions are taken based on the fact that it is expensive to hire consultants and on the reported experience that some managers often have their own staff still go back to the child to do another investigation, therefore making it a very expensive practice.

Figure 1 below presents national data from 2018 from 87 per cent of all municipalities clustered into three groups, showing that it is
significantly (at 0.05 level) more common among small municipalities to use private consultants in their child protection investigations. This figure shows that even if the acute situation with the rising number of child protection assessments has stabilised, there is still a manifest use of private consultants.

Figure 1 illustrates that the implementation of private consultants continues to be a part of the municipal social work with children in municipalities of all sizes, but is significantly more common in small municipalities.

The interviews with managers conveyed two quite differing approaches towards having private social workers in their departments: (1) they use private consultants as an unwanted necessity that they at times manage to avoid, and in periods of higher workloads, they need to use consultants in order to meet legal responsibilities. This perspective is often expressed in connection with the economic argument that employing private consultants is expensive and a bad use of tax money, but also in ideological terms that it is an undesirable development in social work with children who need to build a relationship with the social worker during the investigation to feel trust enough to talk about their life experiences. The consultant’s role is to complete the investigation, and by working in the municipality for a short time, there is a lack of continuity, and the knowledge and the trust gained with the child and the family leaves with the consultant.

(2) A few managers in municipalities in sparsely populated areas see the consultants as a valuable part or even a necessity in their everyday
work, explaining that their municipality has problems in employing and keeping trained social workers. A manager even chose to employ consultants as head of the child protection group for a period of time when there were no applicants for the vacant position of manager.

These approaches taken together show that privatisation is a solution, albeit an unwanted solution, adopted by managers in social work when facing the challenge of recruiting experienced social workers or social workers with specific qualifications.

Discussion

This article reports the implementation of privatising the investigation practice in child protection that took off during the time period 2013–2016 and that has been developing ever since. This measure was not due to a politically driven ideology though, but rather was the consequence of multiple processes that coincided in this specific time period. The privatisation process of social services provision has been going on for a few decades, whereby large companies have formed which were ready to expand into new fields. During this time period, there was a significant increase in child protection reports that in turn raised the demands for social workers with experience in conducting child protection investigations. The pressure in 2015 on child protection units in many municipalities was immense, causing social workers to leave the occupation and seek other employment, while some went on sick leave due to exhaustion (Authors’ own). This opened up for private companies ready to remedy a dire situation in which risk assessments had to be completed within four months. Social services managers then used the private consultants as a means to solve a staff crisis within their organisations. Hence, the implementation of private consultants in child protection investigations was largely demand-driven, but facilitated by the already existing structure of private companies that were ready to offer their private workforce.

Although the amount of filed child protection reports decreased in 2016 and stabilised at a lower level, there is still a continuous use of private consultants in all municipalities, with significantly more use in small municipalities. The curve of the number of private consultants in child protection has flattened somewhat, possibly partly due to the endeavours made by many child protection units to improve the work environment and raise the salaries for social workers. Still, the ongoing use of private consultants further outlines that the privatisation in the investigation practice is demand-driven by the need of social services to recruit experienced social workers within their units and their difficulties in doing so. Obviously, this process is also driven by social workers themselves who seek private employment instead of employment in the municipal
social services. The arguments for seeking private employment rather than the traditional employment have not been part of this study; it is the focus for a forthcoming study of privately employed social workers. However, our understanding gained from interviews with managers in social services is that there is a range of possible arguments for experienced social workers to work as private consultants; some of the driving forces mentioned are better payment, setting one’s own working hours, and skipping the workplace demands requiring conference attendance and teamwork.

In summary, the take-off for privatisation in child protection during 2013–2016 has continued into a flight mode at a constant level, possibly still increasing, and this has to be monitored. There are ongoing driving forces behind the need for social services to employ social workers who can do investigations and the profession’s option to engage private enterprises, and what changes are the demands of the context, such as new legislation or external occurrences, in this case global migration. Also, alterations in policies and agendas could change the future development. Wollmann (2018) mentions diverging paths during the last decade towards an emphasised neo-liberal focus on marketisation through EU incentives, but also a comeback of the municipal sector that finds municipal support a more affordable alternative than third sector organisations providing services. In Sweden, a political agenda of trust-based governance (Bringselius, 2018) as a critical answer to the NPM governance principles is rhetorically emphasised. It focuses on trust-based leadership, professional discretion, and openness and better services for citizens. Yet, the ongoing privatisation of social services is happening at the practice level that is obviously steered by marketisation principles of supply and demand. Hence, the development could be described as a rather passive implementation of privatisation. On a regional level, however, in some communities, resistance against the development can be observed as political decisions have been taken to prevent further use of private consultants in child protection investigations. The political disinterest in this issue in the national political discussion could be interpreted in various ways: as a municipal issue of practice that national politics should not interfere in due to the strong municipal self-government or as acceptance of further privatisation of child protection services. Alternatively, the absent national political discussion may indicate unawareness and ignorance of how privatisation is developing and furthermore, how it may affect children in need of protection.

Implications for social work with children

The development presented in this article alters the foundation of the social work practice with children and families. Social work with
children has traditionally been described as family-centred, targeting support for the child and family, and thus incorporating a focus on building a relationship between the social worker and the child and parent/s. Also, social work with children is thought to include preventive measures. The privatisation emphasises the protection part of the investigation and the administrative part of fulfilling the required investigation on time, rather than focusing on building the working relationships with families as part of aiding them.

What stands out as odd is that there is almost no discussion going on about how this trend affects children who are often in a vulnerable situation. This discussion has not occurred among politicians and furthermore, not even among social workers themselves. The core assignment of the social worker profession with children in child protection is to build trust for children who must find enough confidence in the social worker to be able to convey their situation. The private consultant comes and leaves after completing the investigation. How is the trust built with a vulnerable child? Both children and their parents who need long-term support end up meeting a number of different social workers over time, with the risk of losing confidence in the social services being of help. The consequences of privatisation on children and families need to be further investigated.

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