

## **The Skolfam working model - a concept description**

*A preventive school venture in the Swedish foster care*

### **1. What is Skolfam - and why is Skolfam?**

Children who are subject to foster care generally reach lower school results than other children. Doing well in school is an essential preventive factor for societal exclusion. Skolfam is a school venture aiming to improve foster children's school performances. The venture sets an example for an attempt to compensate for these children's school related disadvantages.

Skolfam is founded on a right-based perspective, on the basis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[14]

The intervention of Skolfam is managed by a team with multiple professions; a psychologist, a special needs educator and the child's social service handler. The team's main mission is to create prerequisites for the child to maximize their ability for learning – and by extension minimizing their risk of societal exclusion. The Skolfam-team works closely with the child, the child's school and his or her foster parents.



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### The Skolfam working model

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## 1.1 The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Education serves as a vital part of children's development. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child every child has the inherent right to the maximum extent possible development [article 6(2)]. Article 28(1) expresses children's right to education. To comply with this obligation, it is expressed that the right to education implies the basis of equal opportunity, and as mentioned in article 29 directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Skolfam, aiming to level out the disadvantages of foster children's schooling, is of great importance to comply with the obligations of the Convention. [14] The main mission of Skolfam is for the child to achieve eligibility to apply for Upper Secondary School.

## 1.2 Historical background - Skolfam

Skolfam started out as a development project in Helsingborg, Sweden, between 2005 – 2008. The project was tried out to evaluate an intervention that might level out the disadvantage foster children experience in school[10]. The design was a classic model of baseline mapping – intervention – evaluation mapping. The intervention, which was based on individualized educational and psychological support, was provided for two years where after the child's progress was being evaluated. Both the baseline and evaluation mapping were carried out through age standardized tests and questionnaires. Since the project showed promising results it was being transformed into a permanent organisation and replicated in another municipality in Sweden between 2008 – 2011 [11]. Since then, around 40 Skolfam-teams have been established in more than 28 Swedish municipalities.

## 1.3 Background – children in foster care

Children in foster care is a group exposed to higher risk of societal exclusion, compared with normal population. This adversity ranges from poor physical and mental health [1], dental health [2], trauma and neglect experiences [3], substance abuse, teen pregnancy [4] to poorer school performances and lower educational achievements [5, 6]. As a result, this group experiences higher risks of societal exclusion as adults [7], representing both higher human suffering and substantial costs. Skolfam is a way to address higher risks for a vulnerable group of children in society, by the means of ensuring non-failure in school.



### **1.3.1 Fact sheet foster children's education:**

- Prevention of problems is far more efficient than remedies.
- Not failing in school is the most potent protective factor, reducing risks for societal exclusion by 30-50%, and enhancing chances of reaching higher education by almost 100 %. [8, 9]
- Making children succeed in school is an adult responsibility, not an issue to be resolved by the child.
- Teachers often have expectations based on group performances and low expectations are highly correlated with low achievements in school. Individual mapping of conditions of learning and actual gained knowledge can create a better understanding of individual "proximal learning zones".
- Collaboration between social services, the school and the foster parents is essential since children's development and welfare depend on all of these agents.

## **2. The three basic values of Skolfam**

### **2.1 Inclusion rather than exclusion**

Skolfam includes all children placed in foster care in the municipality where the model is implemented, regardless of having problems in school, social or mental needs or not. No other criterias for inclusion is needed. Providing Skolfam for all children in foster care is essential for the basic value of equal opportunities and non-exclusion. Exceptions are those children that already have a highly individualized school setting, for example children with developmental intellectual disorder.



### **2.2 Interprofessional collaboration**

A significant key factor is the variation of professions within the team. The composition is based on the idea that children's educational progress depends on more factors than his or her teacher. Different professions also contribute with different valuable tools to favour the ability for learning. The main idea is that it should be based on shared responsibility and an active collaboration - from authority boards to daily executive level. The interprofessional collaboration should be reflected in all parts of the implementation, from the funding and management to the intervention.

Therefore, the responsibility is assigned both school and social services agencies. The collaboration between the team and these other agents is of great importance for the idea of interprofessional collaboration as a success factor. As illustrated in the picture above the inherent idea is placing the child at the center of his or her own schooling with the support of multiple professions. The team, as well as the school and the foster parents are working on behalf of the best interest of the child.

## **2.3 Measurability**

Skolfam's third basic value is measurability. The standardized tests serve as an important tool to assess the child's strengths, problems and knowledge gaps. They further ensure that assessments of children's conditions to learn optimally, and teacher's possibilities to adapt teaching to those conditions, are based on as objective data as possible. Repeated age-standardized tests make the level of progress, or lack of progress, visible and thereby measurable. Properly used, it might also serve as a motivation for teachers, foster parents and especially the child.

## **3. In practical context – step by step**

### **3.1 Consent and information**

All the following steps of the working model bears the stamp of children's right to information and participation. To initiate Skolfam an informed consent from the legal caretaker of the child is required. The consent is required to conduct the standardised tests and to share information within and between the involved actors. When the consent has been obtained information is given to the child, foster parents, school and in some cases even the birth parents. The access to information precedes children's right to participation.



### 3.2 Premier mapping

After obtaining the consent the team conduct the premier mapping of the child. The purpose is to collect information about the child's strengths and potential knowledge gaps and needs. The psychologist and the special needs educator are primarily responsible for this part of the intervention. The tests can, a bit simplified, be divided into two parts, 1) the psychological and 2) the pedagogical part. The child's psychological conditions, such as cognitive and intellectual profile, mental health issues and adaptive behaviour is assessed by the team's psychologist. The special needs educator assesses language and mathematical skills. It is further left for the child to decide whether the tests should be conducted at his or her school or elsewhere. The results are thereafter analysed together, linking cues to strengths and difficulties across psychological, social and educational domains.

### 3.3 A plan for the child's development



Next, the Skolfam-team presents the outcomes from the mapping to the child, foster parents and the school staff. These outcomes are supposed to lay the foundation for the development plan that is now to be made. The school staff and foster parents are invited to suggest actions addressing competences, skills and needs when formulating the plan. The results from the analysis combined with suggested actions becomes what we call the "Skolfam-plan", the plan for the child's development. The plan contains stepwise objectives that are possible to evaluate.

### 3.4 The intervention

With the Skolfam-plan as a starting point the actual intervention can now take form. The progress is monitored in follow-up meetings at the school approximately three to four times per year. During the meetings the child's, teachers' as well as the foster parents' perspectives are frequently requested and taken into consideration. The participation of all the involved actors is crucial to evaluate and follow up the child's progress. During the meetings the Skolfam-team serves as an advisor/tutor for the other participants.

### 3.5 Evaluating mapping

24 -36 months after the initial mapping the same tests are repeated in order to evaluate the child's progress. The use of age-standardised tests enables the measuring of progress, or lack of progress. The analysis of the progress determinates whether to continue the intervention as before or if there is a need of revising the psychological or pedagogical support in some way. The results from the analysis of the children's premier and second mapping also becomes a part of the evaluation of the effect of Skolfam that are annually conducted by a researcher and the children's welfare foundation. These results are compiled in an annual Skolfam report and published at Skolfam's and the children's welfare foundation's website.

These five steps serve as a short introduction to the practical implementation of Skolfam. Not to forget is that the intervention is given until the child finishes primary school. Therefore, the years a child is given Skolfam differs on at what age he or she first commenced Skolfam.



### 3.2 The organizational implementation

In Sweden, municipalities are responsible for both educational and social services, which is why Skolfam is run by the municipalities. On a national level Skolfam is coordinated by the Children's Welfare Foundation, a Swedish governmental foundation working with children's rights. Since the core of Skolfam is more of a concept than a fixed system it could probably be implemented at other levels of societal welfare organisation as well. Regional authorities could for example serve and collaborate with local authorities in their region. Basically, there are plenty of potential ways to set up and fund the Skolfam-model. The main idea is still that the organizational responsibility should - in line with the practise of Skolfam - be based up on collaboration between different actors concerned with children's welfare.

#### 4. Results and experiences so far

Since 2005, 28 municipalities have started more than 40 Skolfam-teams in Sweden. In smaller municipalities there is normally solely one team established while bigger municipalities most often establish more than one team to be able to cover all children in foster care. Local evaluations on the effect of Skolfam have shown good results, even though numbers are too small to make reliable and generalizable conclusions. An effect evaluation of Skolfam, with a quasi-experimental design, was published in 2017 [12], comparing 54 Skolfam foster children with 37 foster children not receiving Skolfam. The results indicated minor improvements for the children receiving Skolfam and a decline in virtually every measured domain in the control group. A randomized controlled study from Denmark [13] compared a Skolfam-inspired school intervention, a foster-family literacy training, and a control group. Results showed low cognitive conditions at baseline for all children, and significant improvement in the school intervention group (LUKoP).



In Sweden, an annual survey to all Skolfam-teams is performed. The survey from September 2017 shows that 812 children had ever started Skolfam, whereof 465 had been through the so called second/evaluating mapping. 145 had completed primary school. Of these, 113 (78%) achieved eligibility to apply for upper secondary school. As a comparison, registry data from 2015 shows that only 55 % of Swedish children in foster care qualify to upper secondary school.

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