

Understanding the importance of the physical environment in meetings between children and child welfare workers at the social services – A scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that the physical environment, such as meeting rooms and offices, affects prerequisites and outcomes in various forms of human services. This study focuses on the importance of the physical environment in meetings between child welfare workers and children within the Social Services' activities. The conduction of the study has been inspired by the framework stages for a scoping review described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Results show that there is a clear lack of research on this matter. The small number of studies that do exist emphasize that physical and spatial factors clearly affect how contacts and relationships between welfare workers and children are shaped. Included studies show that spatial factors affect children's participation in assessments, decisions, and the setup of support. The importance of the professionals' ability to acknowledge the unique needs and desires of each child while at the same time recognising how to benefit from the physical environment where their meetings take place is stressed. Studies show that there is a trend towards contemporary child welfare work shifting from a focus on relational factors to gathering and dealing with information. In general, this field is under-theorized warranting more research with deeper theoretical aspirations.

1. Introduction

Social work related to child welfare and child protection constitutes a major part of the duties of the Social Services in Western countries. In research, several different factors have been raised as being of importance for the interaction between child welfare workers and children. For example, it has been highlighted that child welfare workers at the Social Services need to establish a close and trustful relationship with the children in question, to be able to capture all the parts and aspects of the children's life situation (e.g., Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017; Munro, 2011; Winter, 2009). Another important aspect is that the child welfare worker enables the child to participate in the assessments and decisions (e.g., McLeod, 2007). It is crucial that the child's voice is encouraged and that unequal power relations in the work around the child can be balanced (e.g., Augsberger, 2014). Research has shown that many children in general have negative expectations of the role of child welfare workers, which highlights the importance of them being able to challenge these preconceptions (e.g., Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Lindahl & Bruhn,

2017). Further, research has also emphasized the importance of the child welfare worker treating and understanding the child as a unique individual with unique needs and desires (e.g., Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Lindahl, 2021). However, as a consequence of increased bureaucratization and standardization, many children are processed and treated as categories with common needs (e.g., Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018; Ruch, 2005).

Another factor that, potentially, can affect the interaction between child welfare workers and children is how the physical environment is constituted and designed in their meetings. This factor has been highlighted in research in other human service contexts. For example, research has shown that features in the physical environment such as accessories, color, furniture, room design, and lighting are of importance for the outcomes of counseling. It has also been highlighted that counselors need to understand how they may create environments that promote recovery, while also enhancing the counseling relationship and process (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001; Sanders & Lehmann, 2019). Another human service context that has taken into account the

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importance of optimally designed physical environments is habilitation centers for children with disabilities and their families. Here, *multisensory environments* (MSE), which are specially equipped rooms, are used to enable optimal functioning (e.g., van der Putten et al., 2011) and facilitate children's communication and active participation (Rydegran et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2009). Another example of a human service context is ordinary housing where home- and healthcare is provided for older adults. Research has shown that narrow working spaces and physical barriers make it difficult to perform safe transfers, to use safe work techniques, and to use assistive devices and equipment (Pettersson, Nilsson, Andersson, & Wijk, 2021). Additionally, research regarding school buildings shows that the physical environment has an impact on the feeling of safety and comfort (Uline, Wolsey, Tschannen-Moran & Lin, 2010).

These examples show that the physical environment and other spatial factors tend to affect prerequisites and outcomes in various forms of human services. How, and to what extent, the physical environment affects meetings between child welfare workers and children is the focus of this research review. *The aim of this article is to present and discuss results from a scoping review of studies on the importance of the physical environment in meetings between child welfare workers and children within the Social Services' activities.*

2. Method

This scoping review was inspired by the framework stages described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005): (1) *identifying the research question*; (2) *identifying relevant studies*; (3) *selecting studies*; (4) *charting the data*; and (5) *collating, summarizing, and reporting the results*.

2.1. Identifying the research question

Identification of the research question is presented in the introduction above, where it is concluded that the physical environment is of great importance in many human service contexts. However, whether and how this is of importance in child welfare work, needs to be examined through a scoping review of research on this matter.

2.2. Identifying relevant studies

The literature search included internationally published research, specifically delimited to peer-reviewed original articles and research reviews. The search also included gray literature, i.e., public reports and conference proceedings. The search was conducted in June 2021 by two information specialists at Örebro university library in close cooperation with the second and last author. Search terms and their combinations are presented in Appendix A. An additional search was conducted in February 2024 in all databases using the same search terms and inclusion criteria without including any further publications.

2.3. Selecting studies

Studies were selected based on the following inclusion criteria for the above-mentioned published research during the years 2000–2021. In the additional search in February 2024, the search period was extended to 2000–2024. All of these four criteria had to be fulfilled for publications to be included: (1) a focus on child welfare work with individuals < 18 years of age, (2) a focus on the physical environment in child welfare workers interactions and meetings with children at the Social Services, (3) a focus on child assessments and/or investigative dialogues with children and/or their family, and (4) Western world contexts. Studies that focused on institutions, therapeutic dialogues and countries outside the Western world or in a language other than English, Swedish or Danish were not included.

The Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), *The Social Services Abstracts* and *Scopus* were searched. During two meetings with

information specialists from the university library search terms were discussed, which resulted in the following search terms that were used in all three databases: *social work*, *room* and *child*. Using the search terms in the three databases, resulted in 4984 titles (ASSIA $n = 968$, the Social Services Abstracts $n = 1343$, Scopus $n = 2673$). After duplicates ($n = 1514$) were removed, 3470 records remained. The study selection was performed stepwise. First, a research assistant scanned all titles and abstracts and tagged these as relevant, possibly relevant and irrelevant. In parallel, the second and third author scanned one half each of all titles and abstracts independently using the same procedure as the research assistant. The vast majority of the abstracts were not relevant for the aim ($n = 3247$). The titles and abstracts of the remaining 223 records were read independently by the second and third author. Out of these, 162 records were excluded according to the exclusion criteria, e.g. studies that applied a general communication method or focused on other aspects of social work than the physical environment. The assessments were discussed, and a mutual understanding was reached on abstracts for 61 publications that could be included into the next step.

2.4. Charting the data

In the next step, the second and third authors independently read and evaluated full text versions of the 61 publications, and marked publications as *relevant*, *possibly relevant* or *irrelevant*. Thereafter, the first author read full text versions of the publications marked as relevant or possibly relevant. Among these studies, it was found that some of them clearly met all the criteria to be included in the study ($n = 8$). All of these deal with the physical environment, the Social Services and the client group is children. These studies were placed in level 1. However, some other studies were found to contain results of relevance to the focus of this review, even though they did not unequivocally meet the inclusion criteria. To capture the results of these studies as well, the authors chose to include two additional levels. Level 2 ($n = 3$) consists of studies that deal with the physical environment and where the client group is children, but where the social work does not specifically consist of work within the Social Services. Level 3 ($n = 3$) consists of studies that deal with the physical environment in social work in general and with client groups that are not only children. Here, it is important to stress that more publications relevant for level 2 and 3 would probably have been found with other search terms, but that is not the focus and aim of this article. Publications included in level 2 and 3 are adjacent to the aim, but only complementary in the understanding of how the physical environments affect work with children within the Social Services.

In the next step, the reference lists of publications classified as level 1 were also reviewed, resulting in one more study added to level 1, one more study added to level 2, and two more studies added to level 3. The reference list of the study added to level 1 was reviewed, but no further relevant publications were found. Thereby, the authors draw the conclusion that the search process could be considered saturated. In Fig. 1, a flow diagram adapted from PRISMA (Liberati et al., 2009) illustrates the search and selection procedure.

2.5. Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results

The study selection process resulted in a final sample of 18 publications classified as level 1 ($n = 9$), level 2 ($n = 4$) and level 3 ($n = 5$). In the results section below, the included publications are presented on the basis of these different levels. Within each level the results are presented in text to describe the main common themes of the included publications. Since level 1 contains publications that are specifically relevant for the aim of this study, the presentation of the results is mainly concentrated to level 1, while publications in level 2 and 3 are more briefly presented. Additionally, a table (Table 1) of publications in level 1 is presented in the beginning of the results section, to provide an overview of the most relevant publications.

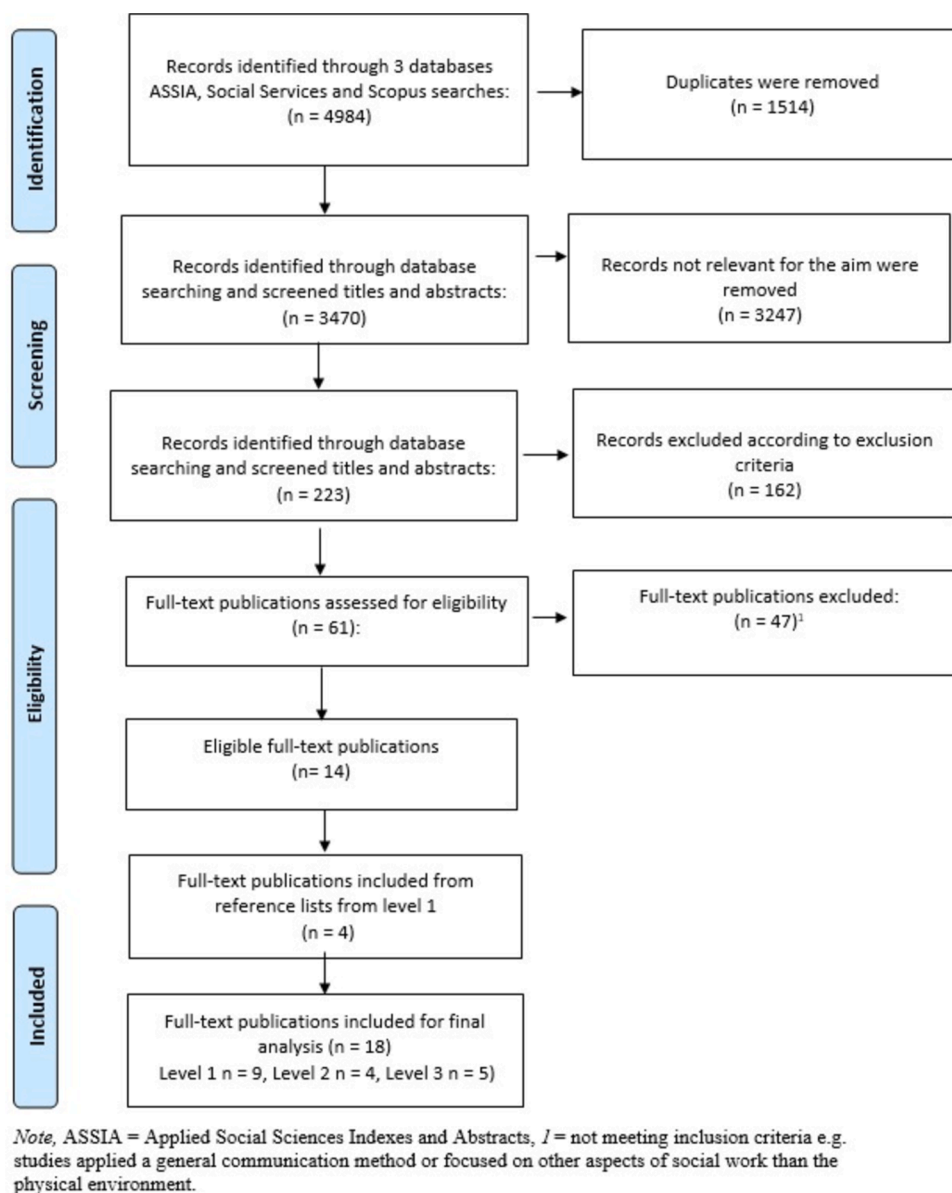


Fig. 1. PRISMA 2009 flow diagram.
Adapted from: Liberati et al., (2009).

3. Results

3.1. Level 1: The physical environment, children, the social services

The fact that only nine publications were found and classified as belonging to level 1, points out that there is a clear lack of research on how the physical environment affects child welfare workers' meetings with children within the Social Services' activities. The lack of research within this area is also highlighted by several studies included within this level (e.g., Jeyasingham, 2014, 2016; Stanley et al., 2016). However, several of the studies stress that the physical environment is of great importance for child welfare and child protection practices. For example, in many of the studies it is emphasized that physical and spatial factors clearly affect how relationships between child welfare workers and children are constituted and shaped (e.g., Drake et al., 2019; Leigh, 2015; Stanley et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2017;). Many included publications highlight that the physical environment also affects the children's participation and agency in assessments, decision-making and the formation of support (e.g., Bolin, 2018; Drake et al.,

2019; Kennan et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2016). Both the relationships between child welfare workers and children, and the children's participation, are affected by the children experiencing that their meetings take place in safe environments (e.g., Bolin, 2018; Kennan et al., 2019). Studies put forward that children's opportunity to choose where meetings with child welfare workers take place, often is a form of participation that goes hand in hand with other participatory elements (Drake et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2016). Many studies that highlight relational and participatory aspects, emphasize the importance of child welfare workers being able to capture the unique and specific factors that are characterizing the individual cases, and the ability to tailor the physical environments after these unique factors (e.g. Kennan et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2017). Such unique factors can be the children's self-images and interests (Drake et al., 2019).

Some of the included studies highlight examples of factors that have negative effects on physical and spatial elements of child welfare and child protection practices. Horwath (2016) highlights that the pursuit of economic efficiency within social services often leads to offices and meeting rooms not meeting the complex needs that exist. Lack of

Table 1

Included studies specifically relevant for the aim (Level 1, n = 9): The physical environment, children, and the social services.

First author, year, setting (country)	Title	Aim	Research design and methods	Main results
Bolin, A. (2018). Social services and children (Sweden)	Organizing for agency: rethinking the conditions for children's participation in service provision	Scale up the level at which investigation of the role of children's agency in support provision is carried out. Raise the understanding of the bidirectional nature of worker – client relationships at the organizational level. Recognize children's participation as an imperative both morally and as a means of enhancing service efficiency. Create spaces for children's agency as part of everyday practice routines.	Ethnographic studies in schools; three organizational innovations are described. Ages and numbers of children are not mentioned.	The study describes three physical environments to promote children's participation in social service delivery: An on-site social service delivery at a socio-economically disadvantaged school including an office located in the school corridor and social workers involved in classroom support. Talk sessions with pupils and parents take place in the most inviting environment, "the living room".
Drake, G. (2019). Part of a multisite study of 25 countries across the globe: local child groups, (Australia)	Is there a place for children as emotional beings in child protection policy and practice?	Present an alternative to earlier positivistic and quantitative approaches that describe children as objects that, through development, become adults. Argue against attachment theory and investigates children as emotional beings through qualitative methods.	Qualitative child participatory methodology. Fieldwork including sessions 2–3 h, interviews 20–30 min or focus group. Mapping of important places, people and activities, diverse methods: photography, video, drawings and sand play. Children 8 to 16 years of age: diverse group including intellectual disability. N = 100.	Children express the importance of safe places. This may encompass feeling safe of physical harm, feelings of familiarity to places, feelings of autonomy and control in a place and places that increase agency i.e. the capacity to act. Attachment to places may be as important as attachment to people. Attachment to diverse cultures.
Horvath, J. (2016). Family and children's social work (Great Britain)	The Toxic Duo: The neglected practitioner and a parent who fails to meet the needs of their child.	Explores the impact of culture and climate on practitioners' engagement with families regarding the neglectful organization.	Literature review on needs of practitioners in social work.	<i>Economic imperatives reduce space:</i> hot desks, agile working or home office as a result. Reduces teamwork and sense of cohesion. More electronic ways of communication than face-to-face. Lack of space suppresses the ability of the practitioner to work creatively and interact meaningfully with children. Rural settings increase violence as do environmental settings with furniture that may be used as weapons. <i>Physical needs, practitioner safety, emotional needs, educational needs, supervisory needs:</i> In order to establish an effective working alliance with families, practitioners must have their own needs met. Workers are most likely to have their needs met if they work in emotionally intelligent organizations. <i>Spatial practice:</i> Implicit set of norms in social practices. Certain meetings only take place in particular locations for a certain length of time. Time away from the office often is scheduled with time before and after in the office. Office spaces are separate from the surrounding area and at a distance from the social work patch. Social work <i>space-time</i> is often everything but "the here and now" as compared to police work. Social workers claim to know neighborhoods intimately which they don't live in i.e., don't have personal relationships with. <i>Spatial representation:</i> The region, the local authority, the area which social work teams cover, particular streets and the homes. Social workers appreciate the structural and economic roots of poverty, the
Jeyasingham, D. (2014). Social service and children (Great Britain)	The production of space in children's social work: insights from Henri Lefebvre's spatial dialectics	To theorize the impact of space in social work practice by including spatial dialectics.	Literature review of ethnographies across various locations and time about space in social work studies.	

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Table 1 (continued)

First author, year, setting (country)	Title	Aim	Research design and methods	Main results
				physical environment and spatial isolation. Places as racial markers. Spaces where childcare referrals come from. Social workers incomplete representation of space, the scale of the household and its' immediate visible surroundings. Positioning some spaces as global, part of the city and connected, but service users' spaces as isolated and unconnected to the city or to global interactions.
				<i>Lived space</i> : Emotional and embodied experience of practice as a mean into exploring lived space. Emotional and psychic impacts material aspects of homes have on practitioners, through atmosphere and reverberations. Gesture and posture as central in producing space. How bodily movements change possible conclusions made. New technologies change social practice to informational from social.
Jeyasingham, D. (2016). Social service and children (Great Britain)	Open spaces, supple bodies? Considering the impact of agile working on social work office practices	Architectural and geographic discussions on how spaces influence social interaction. Explores in particular how the shift to agile working affects the quality of social workers' practice and experiences in office spaces.	Ethnographic study of two social practice spaces: one small open-spaced office not using an agile approach and one agile office. Observations, analysis of space material and interviews with social workers, family support officers and other professionals.	The open non-agile office spaces operate in a range of ways. Private spaces are provided but at the same time visible to colleagues. In these open spaces social workers model particular values and understanding of their role. Tacit knowledge are conveyed through ways of talking and moving through space.
				The agile office "The Forest House" is perceived differently by different social workers. But, commonly for all is the negative impact of high noise levels when all social workers are present at the same time. Early, traditional offices are sometimes nostalgically referred to without clear examples of <i>why</i> they were good. Voices express feelings of loneliness, fractiousness and a loss of space or material attachment when working in hot desks.
Kennan, D. (2019). Child protection and welfare services (Ireland)	Space, Voice, Audience and Influence: The Lundy Model of Participation (2007) in Child Welfare Practice	Shares examples of how practitioners working in Ireland's child protection and welfare services implement the concepts Article 12 in practice.	Practitioners' personal testimonies and inspection reports published by Ireland's social care inspectorate. Health and Information Quality Authority reports (n = 53). Of these results a questionnaire was constructed. This was responded by 370 staff members (social workers predominantly).	Creating a safe space included taking young persons to play activities and to involve in play with young children, or walking away from a place that does not feel safe. Inclusive spaces means acting upon and adapting communication to children's needs.
Leigh, L. (2015). Child protection agencies (Belgium and England).	Crossing the divide between them and us: Using photography to explore the impact organizational space can have on identity and child protection practice	Explores how visual methods can be employed in social work research as a means of understanding the impact of space and environment in child protection practice.	Comparative ethnography: participant observation, interviews and document analysis. Uses photography to visualize two very different social work agencies in England and Belgium. England setting: 36 social workers, 10 managers, 2 service unit managers and 1 assistant director. Belgium setting: 10 professionals from different disciplines such as psychiatry, social work, mental health, ortho- and educational pedagogy, psychology and counselling.	Both settings have links to education. Belgium setting is located within a school building and England setting was once a school. Both countries used puppets to encourage conversations when working with children.
				Belgium setting is situated on the top floor in a grey four floor building with a very discrete sign. The building was chosen deliberately to blend in with the surroundings, to be discrete. Not revealing those who are visiting the agency for issues of child abuse and those who are going into the school to be educated. All

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Table 1 (continued)

First author, year, setting (country)	Title	Aim	Research design and methods	Main results
Stanley, N. (2016). Social services (Great Britain)	Rethinking place and the social work office in the delivery of children's social work services	This paper draws on the national evaluation of social work practices (SWPs) in England undertaken between 2009 and 2012. One distinguishing aspect of the work of the SWPs was an emphasis on the place in which professionals were situated and services delivered to children and families, and it is this aspect of their work that is examined here to explore the meanings conveyed by and attributed to the environment of the social work office.	A mixed methods approach and data from interviews with 121 children and young people in out-of-home care, 19 birth parents and 31 interviews with SWP staff which explored their views and experiences of the SWP offices. Unstructured observation notes on their fieldwork based on several visits amount of contact with the SWP pilot and they had ongoing contact with their children.	social workers have their own office. Creative methods were used, such as a box of unusual items, art symbols and wooden boxes with old case files for facilitating communication with parents and children. The objective in using these materials, is to send a message to the visiting families that they are not alone, for as they can see, there have been countless families who have come before them and who, like them, have struggled with certain issues in their lives. What is also significant about the use of organisational space in this setting is that each of the professionals working here has his/her own office. England setting is a red one-floor-building surrounded from all sides by parking lots. In contrast to the Belgium setting it has a large sign about its objective. Not all social workers have their own desks, a few have to hot desk depending on the shifts they are working. No consideration was given as to how the building might be seen by those who are forced to visit. Practitioners' focus is on visiting the family within their home as it is 'the most fundamental act in child protection practice'. Children and young people were alert to the stigma which could attach to social work premises and appreciated offices which were planned and furnished to appear less institutional and more 'normal'. Daily interactions with staff which conveyed a sense of recognition and value to service users also contributed to a view of some SWP offices as accessible and welcoming places. Both children and parents appreciated offices that provided fun activities that positioned them as active rather than passive. Staff valued opportunities for influencing planning decisions about offices and place was seen to confer a value on them as well as on service users.
Winter, K. (2017). Social services (Great Britain)	Exploring communication between social workers, children and young people.	The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) project had three phases: the first was ethnographic, involving observations of social workers in their workplace and during visits. This paper discusses findings from the first phase.	Ethnographic, observations of social workers in workplace and visits: video stimulated recall with children and social workers, online material was developed. In total, 82 social worker encounters were observed in interactions with 126 children and young people ranging in age from babies who were a few months old to seventeen-year-old young people.	Inadequate office space, incompletely equipped with regard to play materials prevented optimal communication.

resources often results in meeting rooms not providing the safety that both child welfare workers and children need, which entail unnecessary emotional stress. The deficient rooms also make it impossible for the professionals to work creatively and to interact in ways that are perceived as meaningful. Jeyasingham (2014) raises that there has been an increased focus on technology in social work in recent years, which has led to a shift in focus from social aspects to information. This has resulted in meeting rooms that are constructed for effectively dealing

with information, which can be counterproductive for relational work with clients. However, Jeyasingham (2016) also highlights that conceptions about the rooms at the child welfare services often are characterized by nostalgic arguments, such as 'it was better in the old days', even though the rooms often are old and worn out and need renovation and development.

Other included studies highlight the good examples, and what we can learn from them. Kennan et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of

child welfare workers ‘thinking outside the box’ in their pursuit of meeting children in environments that are perceived as safe and pleasant – such as going to a café or a park, to practice a sport, and to play together with the youngest children. Bolin (2018) highlights some good examples of how child welfare services have been organized to enable and improve children’s participation. One example is placing the child welfare workers’ offices in schools in order to make the workers familiar faces for the children. This has proven to reduce imbalance of power, with positive effects such as more children seeking help, and children with support achieving increased participation. Another example in Bolin’s article is the context of a resource school where social workers had therapeutic talks with children in rooms at school that were designed and modelled as a family living room. Bolin (2018, p. 6) writes:

The ‘living room’ environment signaled a departure from the vertical power-structures normally governing interactions between case-workers and clients, and which are symbolically represented in the institutional furnishing of social work offices. As a practice routine, holding talk in this living-room setting was intended to enhance client participation.

Another study that highlights good examples was conducted by Stanley et al. (2016), and it focuses on a pilot with so called *social work practices* (SWPs). SWPs were organisations providing services for children in out-of-home care, with explicit attention to environmental and spatial factors. In the pilot project conclusions were drawn that social work offices often are attached to institutionalized and negative perceptions of stigma, and therefore SWPs were designed and furnished to appear less institutional and more welcoming. Both the children and their families expressed, in the study, that they appreciated the SWPs since these facilities often were experienced as pleasant. Furthermore, the SWP facilities were also experienced as offering rooms where the children and their families could be active instead of passive. Stanley et al. (2016, p. 86) summarizes as follows:

Recognising the importance of place and how place is constructed through relationships between people as well as through the physical environment appeared to be key to creating offices that combated the stigma attached to out-of-home care. Those leading and managing children’s services should explore ways of involving local communities in planning social work offices and turn attention to making these offices accessible, welcoming, places.

Generally, it can be concluded that research publications within this area do not have any clear theoretical aspirations, with only a few exceptions. Drake et al. (2019) and Leigh (2015) pay some attention to the understanding of the concept of *identity*. For example, Drake et al. (2019) emphasizes that, in order to establish a safe setting, it is important to have meetings in physical environments that instill feelings of belonging and that are perceived as well fitting with the client’s own identity. This is especially important in meetings with clients belonging to marginalized groups. Leigh (2015) stresses that both professionals’ and clients’ self-images and identities are strongly affected by the concrete objects, places, and facilities at the social services – in the same way as the identities are shaped by current discourses. Another example of a study containing an explicit use of theory is Jeyasingham (2014) who used Henri Lefebvre’s theory on *spatial dialectics*, with the focus to understand how rooms are constructed and produced in child welfare and child protection practices. This theory is described as being of importance, since it contributes to the understanding of how research on social work discourses tend to focus on language and communication instead of material, physical, and spatial factors. With help from the theoretical perspectives of Lefebvre, Jeyasingham highlights that child welfare workers’ home visits often are based on a simplified idea that it is only in the child’s home that their welfare can be observed – instead of understanding that the child’s life is characterized by a complex network of different places. In this study, Jeyasingham also emphasizes that understandings of time and space often tend to go hand-in-hand. For

example, home visits are often based on the premise that the focus is *here and now*, while meetings at the offices of the social services often focus on events in the past and planning of the future.

3.2. Level 2: The physical environment, children, social work in general

As mentioned above, the second level includes publications focusing on the physical environment in social work with children and young people – not specifically within the social services but in social work in general. Also in these studies, it is highlighted that there is a lack of evidence within this field (e.g., Ainsworth & Fulcher, 2006). Another example of joint results between level 1 and level 2, is that studies within this level also emphasize the importance of physical rooms and environments being designed with the children’s unique needs and desires in consideration (e.g., Bank & Nissen, 2018). For example, Stevens (2006) focuses on residential care environments and raises the importance of children participating in the selection of furniture and decorations, but also less salient details such as heating and cooling in the rooms. Borenstein (2006) analyses the therapist’s office in children’s therapy and describes the uniqueness in the spatial factors as a consequence of the unique interaction between the specific professional and the specific child.

The psychological meaning of my office is created by the child in psychotherapy. Some children enter the office, look around and open a cabinet, wanting to know what is inside. /.../ Another child will enter the office and seem only to want to talk with me as if there were no office, no external world at all to engage and explore, not knowing how to use or psychologically take in the office as space to be explored and understood. (Borenstein, 2006, p. 26)

Similar to results within level 1, studies within level 2 raises problems and challenges related to the physical environments in social work with children and young people. One example is that physical rooms used in counselling with young people with addiction problems often are clearly perceived as pastoral and disciplinary, like being similar as prison cells, interrogation rooms or schoolmasters’ offices (Bank & Nissen, 2018). However, at the same time as problems and challenges are highlighted, positive examples are emphasized. Bank and Nissen (2018) argue that it is important to create *liminal* spaces, manifested by physical elements in the rooms that enable joint activities for the professional and the client. For example, to play a game or to solve a puzzle together may bridge harmful power imbalances. Ainsworth and Fulcher (2006) focus on group treatment of children and young people and raise several crucial physical and spatial factors, such as whether the geographic location of the treatment centre enable learning and development for the children, whether the internal design of the centre facilitate interactions between children and professionals, and whether the physical design of the centre support the professionals in their assignment to create developmental opportunities for the children. Ainsworth and Fulcher (2006) also raise the issue of that there is a tendency to view a focus on physical and spatial factors as a downplaying of relational aspects of the work, but it should instead be emphasized that relational and physical factors often go hand in hand. Borenstein (2006) stresses the importance of the professional feeling physically safe in the meeting room, especially in the contact with violent and aggressive children and young people, and that this is a crucial prerequisite for the professional being emotionally available in the meeting.

3.3. Level 3: The physical environment, clients in general, social work in general

The third level includes publications focusing on the physical environment in social work in general – neither specifically work with children and young people, nor specifically within the social services. As within the other levels, the connection between the physical

environment and clients' participation is highlighted here. For example, when the physical environment appears as institutionalized or stigmatizing, it will clearly affect clients' participation in a negative way (e.g., [Shdaimah & Alexander, 2018](#)). [Ball and Niven \(2005\)](#) raises that when clients are given the opportunity to take part in the planning of facilities for social work, they obtain a sense of ownership, which may counteract the stigma that normally is attached to public service premises. [Jack \(2010\)](#) raises that social work research and practice tend to focus heavily on the importance of children's attachment to different persons in their lives – but this has to be supplemented with an understanding of the importance of the attachment to different places. On the basis of perspectives from human geography and environmental psychology, important understandings can be reached of how children's identities, safety, and sense of belonging are affected by children's attachment, or lack of attachment, to places in their lives.

Another important aspect of the understanding of how spatial factors affect social work is mobility. [Ferguson \(2008; 2009\)](#) put forward that physical rooms in social work tend to be understood as static. By analyzing social work in cars, such as when social workers are driving clients to and from care, conclusions are drawn that mobile meetings can provide better prerequisites for counteracting imbalances of power between the professional and the client. For example, in cars, both the social worker and the client are literally travelling together towards the same goal.

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

This scoping review shows that there is a clear lack of research on the importance of the physical environment in meetings between child welfare workers and children within the Social Services' activities. However, from the small amount of research that do exist, it can be concluded that all studies emphasize that physical and spatial factors clearly affect how contacts and relationships between welfare workers and children are shaped (e.g., [Drake et al., 2019](#), [Leigh, 2015](#); [Stanley et al., 2016](#); [Winter et al., 2017](#)). One common theme is that physical and spatial factors affect children's participation in assessments, decisions, and the setup of support (e.g., [Bolin, 2018](#); [Drake et al., 2019](#); [Kennan et al., 2019](#); [Stanley, et al., 2016](#)). Research has shown that there is a clear connection between how the physical environment, for example by placing welfare workers' offices in schools, can contribute to a reduction of power imbalances – and this, in turn, has positive effects such as more children seeking and participating in the formation of support (e.g., [Bolin, 2018](#)).

Some studies raise challenges and deficiencies in the physical environments surrounding child welfare workers' meetings with children and young people. One example is that financial cuts have resulted in physical rooms at the Social Services that do not meet the complex needs involved in working with the children, and electronic ways of communicating instead of face-to-face, resulting in interactions that are perceived as less meaningful ([Horwath, 2016](#)). This goes hand in hand with research that raises that contemporary social work with children has shifted from a focus on social and relational factors to a focus on dealing with information (e.g., [Jeyasingham, 2016](#)).

It can also be concluded that theoretical concepts and analyses do not have a prominent position in the included publications. One exception is [Jeyasingham \(2014\)](#) who applies the concept of spatial dialectics in the understanding of how child welfare work needs to adapt to an insight that children's lives are characterized by a complex network of various places and spaces – not only the most obvious places such as their homes or schools. Another exception is studies that links the physical environments to an understanding of the children's identities, and the importance of having meetings with children in physical rooms that are tailored to the unique child's identity and needs (e.g., [Drake et al., 2019](#)). In many of the included studies, with or without the explicit use of theoretical concepts, the importance of child welfare workers' ability to acknowledge the unique needs and desires of each child – with benefit

from the physical environment where their meetings take place – is a common theme (e.g., [Kennan et al., 2019](#); [Winter et al., 2017](#)). Often this requires that welfare workers have meetings with children outside of the Social Service's offices, such as at a playground, in a restaurant, or in any other place that is related to the child's individuality ([Kennan et al., 2019](#)). Research shows that by accomplishing physical meeting environments that instill children's feelings of belonging and that are perceived as welcoming, also enable the counteraction of the institutionalized stigmatized perception often associated with Social Services' offices (e.g., [Stanley et al., 2016](#)).

This scoping review shows that there is a need for more research, in general, on the physical environments in meetings between child welfare workers and children. Since there is a clear lack of research on this matter, it can be concluded that all forms of future research studies are needed – regardless of perspectives and methodologies. However, most of the included studies are described as ethnographic with a clear focus on observations, which calls for future research studies that are capturing the experiences and perspectives of different actors involved – such as interviews and surveys with children, child welfare workers, and professionals that are responsible for the design and planning of these meeting environments. Further, there is a need for research that focus on how the physical environments can be tailored to the unique and specific needs of each child, and research with further and deeper theoretical aspirations. We call for research studies that use theories that are well established in social work, and research that develop these theories so that they can be used as analytical tools to understand, not only social phenomena and relations, but also physical and spatial factors. Future research needs to focus specifically on capturing the children's desires and perspectives, to be able to reach deeper understandings concerning how the meeting rooms can be designed to meet the individual needs of each child. In this future research, a clear awareness of contemporary conditions affecting meeting environments is also required, such as the use of digital and technological alternatives and solutions.

4.1. Limitations of the study

In scoping reviews, it is hard to be certain that correct search terms and relevant databases have been used – which is a relevant concern also in this study. By using different search terms and in other databases it is possible that other publications would have been found and included. Here it should be emphasized that we as an initial measure worked in close collaboration with information specialists at Örebro university library. Broad and all-encompassing search terms have been used to capture all relevant publications, and these search terms have been used in central and comprehensive databases within the field. Another limitation of this study is the fact that a long time passed between the search process was executed and the completion of the article. Therefore, it is important to stress that we conducted an additional search in February 2024 in all databases with the same search terms and inclusion criteria, to ascertain that no further studies had been published.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.108105>.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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