

## **The possibilities for effective child protection – The Finnish research perspective**

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### *Abstract*

*This article focuses on effectiveness in child protection in the Finnish context. Its aim is to set out and analyse the challenges and opportunities that relate to effective social work practice and effectiveness research in relation to child protection services in Finland. As part of this analysis, we examine findings our research project Needs, processes and outcomes in child protection (Vornanen et al. 2008). The article maintains that the prerequisites for such effectiveness can be categorized into societal and organizational factors that are related to the characteristics of child protection work in Finland. Whilst not providing precise answers to the challenging questions on effectiveness in child protection, this article clarifies the fundamental questions we need to ask in order to start to provide those answers.*

### **Introduction**

*An example: Notification of a child in need is received by child protection social workers during the evening. Neighbours have been worried about a three-year-old child who is wandering alone in the stairway of a block of flats. Drunken parents had gone to the local pub and left the child alone at home. The case immediately becomes the prerogative of child protection social work, and immediate child protection measures are taken. Social workers are obligated to react in order to protect the child; they have no choice whether or not to act, or whether or not to plan the work with careful considerations of effectiveness.*

The above example represents a case in which child welfare or child protection can be likened to a terminal station in services for children and families. The problems can be described as indivisible problems, meaning that they cannot be divided into parts and given to other professionals. A child's and a family's situation is often very complicated, involving different problems and networks in the situation. In many instances other professionals may have worked with the child or the family but without any worthwhile results. A child protection social worker has the challenge of helping a child who has been at risk for a long time. Other challenges related to this may include demands for social workers to achieve immediate results (i.e. in a very short period of time), when actually, the problems and needs of the child need to be treated by long-term and intensive care. One of the basic questions in child protection social work concerns the kind of assessment, working models and interventions that are relevant and successful in helping the children and their families with varied needs and problems. By raising this question we are actually considering the issue of effectiveness in child welfare or protection services.

This article focuses on effectiveness in child protection in the Finnish context. The aim is to specify the challenges and opportunities that are relative to effective social work practice and effectiveness research with regard to child protection services in Finland. We also introduce our research project *Needs, processes and outcomes in child protection* (Vornanen et al., 2008) by briefly describing its subprojects. When studying effectiveness, the prerequisites for effectiveness can be categorized into societal and organizational prerequisites that are related

to the characteristics of child protection work in Finland. This article does not provide exact answers to the challenging questions of effectiveness in child protection, but rather clarifies the fundamental questions.

In general, effectiveness can be defined as the ability of the services to accomplish expected outcomes. For the most part, these outcomes can be assessed after the service has taken place, and they manifest themselves as some kind of changes in a client's situation (Lumijärvi 1999, 15). For child welfare purposes, one definition of effectiveness is the ratio of units of client outcome to a standard unit, in which the standard may represent the maximum improvement or deterioration possible in any given problem area or a minimal level of adequacy as legally or culturally defined (Magura & Moses 1986, 4). Effects or outcomes may be analyzed as societal effects, organization-level effects or effects among clients.

Child protection social work is a part of the social welfare system. As a "last resort" or tertiary prevention, child protection must take the responsibility in cases in which families, the service system and overall child and family policy have not been sufficient for the needs of the child, or in instances in which they have failed in supporting the child. Effectiveness is required in work processes in which child protection social work comes as "the last" and often somewhat unwelcome visitor to a family.

Social work literature has focused widely on effectiveness (e.g. Cheetham et al., 2000) and child protection is one of the areas of expertise of social work where effectiveness is needed. According to Eileen Munro (2009:15) child protection deals with an unusually complex set of risks and has an unusually poor knowledge base. One major reason for the need to develop good practice and increase the knowledge base is to discover more about the kind of interventions and methods that are effective – and for whom. Good practice in child protection is that which is most likely to lead to good immediate and long-term outcomes for children. In social work practice, it is also necessary to clarify the administrative and professional processes connected with decision-making in child protection.

In Finland, the state regulates child protection through policies and legal means (e.g. the Child Welfare Act 417/2008), resources and information. Municipalities are required to act according to the law, but there are still differences in how the work is organized, and how the actual resources (personnel, time, financial resources, etc.) for children and families are administered. Furthermore, the working orientations and methods available and used in social work may vary between municipalities. The current Child Welfare Act (417/2007) is a skeleton law that does not specify exactly the conditions under which social work ought to intervene. It does, however, state more clearly than before the timeframe according to which social workers must react to child welfare notifications (in seven days) as well as the timeframe for carrying out the assessment (in three months).

The previous Child Welfare Act (1983) introduced a comprehensive welfare framework for child protection in Finland. Instead of protection, it is the welfare of children and their best interests that have been given first priority in the law. Care in the natural family setting, and social, psychological and financial support to the family are the priorities, and are so-called 'open care' measures. Taking children into care is a last resort of intervention. These open care measures include a wide variety of social services, for example, day care and domestic help from family workers. The social worker is a key player in assessing the needs of children and in planning the support for a child and a family. The social worker has a fair amount of

discretionary power to decide what constitutes a threat so great to a child's development and health that interventions are needed (see Hearn 2004: 36-37).

The Finnish Child Welfare Act (417/2008) does not contain detailed guidelines for social workers on how to assess the child's situation or the family, nor how to put the law into practice or how to act in different situations. The Act contains the idea that a professional and well-educated (Masters level training in social work) social worker should have the capability to assess and make decisions concerning the needs and protection of a child. Thereby child welfare is based strongly on social workers' expertise.

Although there has been much development in Finnish child welfare, especially with regard to quality in interventions and child protection processes (for example, Muukkonen & Tulensalo, 2004; Rousu & Holma, 2004; Möller, 2005; Rousu, 2007), we cannot describe Finnish child protection as evidence-based practice in the strictest sense. It can, however, be characterized by the terms quality and good practices, which are documented in many municipalities as well as in many development projects.

With regard to child protection, Finnish municipalities make an annual report of their performance indicators for statistics, and these are collected in national statistics. These child welfare statistics show some trends in child protection and are used as national indicators of well-being, in particular, as indicators of deficits in well-being amongst children.

Studies show that, when a child is taken into care, several risk factors are present in the family, and in many cases, these risks are cumulative (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Heino, 2007; Hiilamo, 2009). In addition to the risks, there are also protective factors and mechanisms in communities, families and services. This knowledge could already be benefited from in the prevention of problems and early intervention in universal services and also during substitute care (Pecora & al., 2010). Studies also suggest that children in substitute care have an increased rate of psychosocial problems (e.g. Rutter, 2000, Shoefield & Beek, 2004), and after the care period, in many respects, the well-being of former child protection clients is worse than that of mainstream young people (e.g. Vinnerljung & al., 2008).

Finland also has data concerning and evidence of problems with regard to the well-being and health of children who are, or have been, placed outside home. The latest cross-sectional study by Tarja Heino and Marianne Johnson (2010), for example, provides valuable information about young people who have been placed outside the home compared with their siblings (group-level comparison). The results show that the educational level is lower among the young people who were placed outside home. The shortest education occurred in a group of men who had been placed at the age of 13-17 years and had had many placements and placements in institutions. Heino and Johnson explain how the results are in congruence with international studies by stating that the greatest risk of exclusion was among those who were taken into custody as teenagers and placed in institutions. Their study also provides information about groups of children who have succeeded in integrating into society. In particular these were girls taken into custody under the age of 12 years and placed in foster care. The study shows the consequences, both educational and otherwise, for children who have had different paths in institutional and foster care.

In Finland, there are still gaps in our knowledge with regard to stating the relationships between life events, social work measures and outcomes in long-term processes concerning

children. We can ask, why are the outcomes for children in care often are so poor? It appears that child protection social workers have the so-called “cursed task” (see Saurama, 2002) of intervening in the families through the means of control and support to do their best for protecting the children. What kind of research would be appropriate to ascertain the basic prerequisites for effective work?

### **A demand for accountability and effectiveness in social work**

Accountability in social services is not a new phenomenon, but it can also be described as “new accountability”, where the focus is on the production of quantifiable outputs and outcomes and its characteristics are working to procedures and working to pre-defined standards/ outputs/ targets or outcomes (Banks 2004:150-153). This development of increasing demands for accountability is also interpreted in the frame of reference of “new public management”, where the work processes are managed by the same processes as in the private or even business sector. According to some critical writers, the development has not been such a good thing for social work. John Harris (2008:676) describes how social work is being pushed in the direction of narrower approaches to practice. These approaches are linked with tight regulations concerning measuring productivity and results, which in turn, determines the worth of the social work practice (see also Tilbury, 2006: 51). For example, in Finland’s neighbouring state Sweden, the development has not yet led to dramatic shifts in child protection. According to a nationwide study by Höjer and Forkby (2011), a new public management system has been introduced in Swedish social services, but its role in child protection services has been limited.

Finland has the same trends of increasing accountability demands for services as in many other countries (see e.g. Juhila, 2009; D’Andrade & al., 2008). Social work has always had this obligation of accountability because it works directly with public bodies, in the role of promoting public good by protecting vulnerable people. Social workers are, therefore, accountable to all concerned and are required to report on the effectiveness of services. The notions of public and professional accountability are at the heart of social professions, and the demand for this is increasing through the requirements of quality standards, contracts, standardized assessment forms and the rights to complain. Different accountability demands may also be controversial and contradictory. The officials and politicians may have aims different to those of clients or citizens. The accountability to children should be the main priority (e.g. Rousu & Holma, 2004: 9).

The demands for stronger accountability in social work are also related to the demands for evidence-based practice. This is a practice and policy paradigm designed to decrease gaps between research and practice, and to maximize opportunities to help clients and avoid harm (Gambrill, 2011:31). Evidence-based practice may be seen as a way to respond to the increasing demands of effectiveness and accountability. As Malcolm Hill (2001:22) has described, an asset of outcome-based evidence is that it is in tune with trends toward greater accountability and notions of best value in public sector services. This means that expenditure should be justified more by measures of achievement; the affirmation that something is useful. In Finland there has been discussion concerning what constitutes sufficient evidence of child protection services. The discussion considers widening the sufficient evidence base towards so-called knowledge-based evidence and best possible evidence (Korteniemi & Borg, 2008).

Effectiveness and accountability focus attention on decision-making processes in social work. Social workers have to know how and what kind of decisions need to be made in order to get results. Evidence-based practice may be seen as an opportunity to help in decision-making and in handling the uncertainty in an honest and informed manner, and to avoid failures in decision making resulting in ineffective or harmful interventions (see Gambrill, 2011: 31.) O'Sullivan (1999: 167-170) writes about *effective decisions*, which achieve the decision-makers' goals and are concerned with the decision outcome. So, in evidence-based practice, this means effective decision making in social work by considering the goals and outputs.

The pressure on social work effectiveness comes both from internal social work sources and also those that are external. Juliet Cheetham and her colleagues (2000: 3-6) see this combination of inner and outer pressures as positive, because it creates a positive climate for studying the effectiveness of social work. At the same time, many social workers are worried about the trend that they perceive as crude managerialism with oversimplified indicators of performance (Hill, 2001: 22).

Outer pressure and demands for social work may be experienced as a threat to autonomy in social work and its power to define its own goals, means and outcomes. This may cause a so-called counter-speech for effectiveness and outcomes, in which social workers start to defend their right to make decisions in their legitimate position and professional field. We argue that some kind of counter-speech is needed to defend the professional autonomy in social work.

This autonomy means that social work has to develop the area of effectiveness as a part of the knowledge-base and theory-building in social work. We can say that social work effectiveness rests on the knowledge-base of social work, and it is crucial for social work, that social work as a study field and professional practice can develop a sustainable and sound knowledge-base for effectiveness and evidence in social work.

### **Effectiveness demanded in child protection social work**

Already several decades ago, Stephen Magura and Beth Silverman Moses (1986:1) described how the age of accountability poses difficult challenges for the field of child welfare. In many countries outside Finland, and in particular, the United States of America (USA), the discussion and development of outcomes began earlier than it did here (see also Mullen, 2004). Recently in Finland, however, there has been increasing pressure and demand for effectiveness in child protection social work (see, for example, Rousu, 2007). There are many possible reasons for this. Here we outline four possible reasons for the need for discussion and development concerning effectiveness in child protection.

The *first reason* is related to the age of the clients. Children are among the most vulnerable groups in society, and therefore, social work among children has to have strong legitimacy and duty in society, mandated by the state. Children cannot defend themselves, and they need adults to protect their rights and safety. Finland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in 1991, and in its Constitution, has committed to promote children's rights, including protection. With regard to effectiveness, the issue is to make the kind of interventions that cause the least harm to children, while generating as much safety, continuity and well-being as possible, taking into account the age and unique situations of the children in question.

The *second reason* is related to the previous one, and is essentially that interventions have both short-term and long-term effects and outcomes (see e.g. Blom & Morén, 2010), and these are not easy to predict or evaluate. It is possible to separate different kinds of effects in studies of effectiveness. Effects or outcomes may be analyzed as societal effects, organization-level effects or effects among clients. In Finland, we have data on statistics and trends in the use of child welfare services, but we know less about the effects of those services on clients. These effects may be qualitative or quantitative. A service, for example, may be sufficient in terms of quantity but insufficient in the terms of quality or intensity. Effects may be subjective or objective. If social workers evaluate the effects in a client's life, the evaluation may be based on defined (objective) criteria. When a client evaluates the effects, we may speak about subjective criteria of effectiveness. Effects may be short-term or long-term effects, and it depends on the research design whether we reach the long-term effects. Effects may be also positive or negative and expected or unexpected effects (Meklin, 2001).

The *third reason* is related to the rights of child protection social work to intervene in families; the most private institutions in society. Social workers have the right to intervene, but at the same time, they must respect both the children's rights and those of the parents. They must also try to stabilize the impact of interventions on these sensitive relations. Social workers must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of not intervening versus intervention. This means that they have to evaluate the consequences of their actions in order to find optimal interventions (see Munro, 2002).

The *fourth reason* is that the interventions have effects both at the mental level, which also have an influence on the identity of a client, and at the level of concrete everyday living conditions. Through taking children into custody and placing them outside home, social work may make permanent changes in family structures and the relationships between children and parents. Child protection interventions are one of the strongest interventions in western countries, which respect the rights of freedom and the privacy of family life.

In conclusion, we may say that, in order to help the most vulnerable children, social work has to intervene in the most private cell in society; families. To achieve this, social work must make interventions and decisions that, in many cases, will make permanent changes to the course of life of some individuals. Munro (2009: 1016) has described how child protection social work has a dual preoccupation with the safety and welfare of children. These two factors can be in conflict in specific decision-making contexts, since safety concerns tend to focus on immediate dangers, while welfare assessments take a longer view. A child's immediate safety may be achieved by removing the child from abusive parents, but his or her long-term welfare is highly likely to be damaged by separation from established relationships. The social worker's decision involves a complex weighing of negative and positive outcomes, both immediate and long-term. There is a profound and justifiable reason for raising the issue of consequences of social work with families and children.

Adults, as clients in social work, are in a different position to children. This pertains to them as clients in the terms of age, self-determination and rights. For this reason, we can say that the ethical pressure to make *right* decisions is far more important in child protection than in working with adults. It is also important to realise, however, that one of the challenges in child protection work is to support parents, foster parents and other people in the children's networks. This means that social work with children is always connected with social work with adults.

## **Societal prerequisites for effectiveness in child protection**

Finnish family policy aims at supporting families in their up-bringing task. Family policy and child policy are built on universal principles. This means supporting all the families through allowances and services. In addition to the universal services for children and families (day care, school, health care, etc.), there are special services. One such service is child protection, which is arranged in every municipality (Child welfare Act 417/2007). Child protection at the municipal level aims to secure growth environments for all children, but it also means work at the case level with children in need and their families. The consequences of individual client outcomes for the wider community may be defined as social impacts. To have these social impacts, client outcomes must be stable over time and pertain to social goals. Social impacts are a form of social return from the child welfare system to society in exchange for resources invested (Magura & Moses, 1986: 4).

One of the challenges in framing the effectiveness of the above is that we do not know the extent of the need for child protection at the population level (Heino, 2007). We only know the amount of child protection clients and services used in Finland (in 2009: in community/open care over 70 000 children and in care and placed outside home over 16 000 according to Child welfare statistics 2009). There are, however, regular national data collections on older children's well-being and its deficits (e.g. School Health Study) and statistics on the amount of children using psychiatric services, special education and services for young offenders which may include children also in need of child protection services. The total amount of children in need, however, is hard to estimate, and we still are waiting for reliable national child welfare indicators.

Children become child protection clients through different routes: after the notifications or referrals from other professionals, or by their own requests by children and families, or gradually when parents are clients because of income or other problems and the issues of children are noticed by a social worker. There has been increasing interest in Finland to know more about the background of clients in child protection. Some recent studies show that the socio-economic status of child protection client families is weaker by many measures than that of the average population (see Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2010).

We can ask whether the intervention threshold is lower for people in a vulnerable situation and those belonging to poor socio-economic groups than in the average population. When considering the question of effectiveness of services, we may ask if the child protection system is supposed to find answers to problems that may have roots in the structure of society and in the inequality of population groups. The profound questions of effectiveness in human services are rooted in the definition of the problems that are supposed to be solved and in the goals and obligations that services have in society. Social work cannot solve all these indivisible problems.

Social work has always been concerned with poor and unprivileged people. The interpretation of social problems has changed, and individualization has also had an impact on child protection, in which problems are interpreted more on an individual and family basis than as social problems related to stratification, inequality and poverty and other social problems such as health problems, problems with alcohol or drugs. If the social stratification is taken into consideration, child protection must also be evaluated by criteria concerning how it alleviates the consequences of poverty or how it can prevent it. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the principles of protection, provision and participation. The results of child

protection may be evaluated at a general level in the light of these principles: how child protection can protect children, but at the same time, promote the provision of societal resources and support the participation of children and families.

Politicians and managers in municipalities often see child protection from the perspective of cost-effectiveness of services, that is, productivity. Research on effectiveness is related to societal and political issues. This raises several matters. The first concerns how effectiveness is defined, and the other concerns whether effectiveness is emphasized in different ways by social workers and politicians. What are the ultimate goals in child protection and how should these goals be reached?

Hannu Kauppi (2004: 75–76) sees effectiveness especially as societal effectiveness, as this not only includes the effects of actions, but also their consequences in the long run. He emphasizes that evaluation of effectiveness means something different to measuring productivity. From the socio-economic point of view, productivity has been seen as process output compared with process input (immaterial and material resources) where effectiveness is seen as the final outcome of actions (long-term impact in welfare) (see Pusa, Piirainen & Kettunen, 2004:30).

We stated earlier that it is possible to separate different kinds of effects in studies of effectiveness (reason number two) and offered some explanation of the nature of these. By effectiveness we mean the long-term effects of actions, and when we speak of the effectiveness of public services, we mean the long-term effects of actions on the clients' (the objects of the actions) welfare (compared with the goals that are set). The term effectiveness includes an idea evaluation: if an action or procedure affects another thing, action or person in the long run - i.e. has effectiveness - a change in some direction occurs. The challenge is, how the difference between the time of examination and the beginning can be measured, and how effectiveness can be evaluated. Meklin (2001: 108) emphasizes that inactivity can also cause a change. Examples of these are if a vaccination is not given or when the police can prevent crimes merely by existing. At this time, it is important to bear in mind that evaluation always includes some idea of setting a value on something. When evaluating something, we always take a position on or set a value for the change that has happened (e.g. positive/negative; better/worse, more/less, more expensive/cheaper).

In many ways, child protection social work is related to child and family policy and the values of society. The criteria and prerequisites for effectiveness are also interrelated with the societal conceptions of what is culturally normal and acceptable behaviour, and what the accepted ways of caring for children are. One important issue also concerns the status of children and families in society and ascertaining the role of social work in helping vulnerable families. From the research point of view, it is essential to understand the child protection system in its context, and at the same time, to attempt to crystallize the universal principles of children's rights and knowledge based on previous research on effectiveness in child protection. This may help when considering the ethical and political issues around the topic.

Child protection has been a topic of contention in many countries, and the knowledge base in this discussion may be weak and fragile, and different views not equally presented. According to Lorraine Fox Harding (1997), it is important to focus on legislation and policy in order to understand the framework and child protection as a part of society. Fox Harding's perspectives in child care policy can also be useful in studies of effectiveness, because they provide some basic values and arguments for child policies and the framework for child

protection: why and how children should be protected, what the threshold is for interventions in families, and what kind of services are offered to families (see Fox Harding, 1997).

### **Child welfare as a context for studies on effectiveness in Finland**

In order to study effectiveness in child protection in Finland, we have to remember that child protection is an area that has long traditions in social welfare and in municipal administration. The development of welfare services' policy and legislation has long roots in history. Through this development, child protection in Finland has been developed as a combination of psychosocial and legal-administrative social work.

The organizational structure of public child protection in Finland has deep roots in Finnish society because the local municipalities have been the central providers of services since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the basic characteristics of child welfare and child protection in Finland is that it also includes income maintenance and is organizationally part of the municipal provision of social services. It is based on law, and the legal side of child protection has meant that legal actors and institutions have become more important than they used to be (Hearn et al. 2004:38.). On the other hand, child protection in Finland has the tradition of psychosocial work with families based on the principles of case work, so the helping process includes both psychosocial work as well as very structured legal procedures. As psychosocial work, child protection tends to be more preventive than remedial and more family and community oriented than individual-oriented (see Hearn et al. 2004:38).

In Finland, the sphere of child welfare in municipalities is broad and covers preventive measures and the processes of placing a child outside the home, as well as fostering and institutional care services. Municipalities may organize services in different ways. In some municipalities social work is integrated, which means that child welfare social work with children and families is also part of social work. In bigger municipalities, services and work are specialized and divided, so that some social workers concentrate on only child welfare or some parts of it, for example, on assessments of children in need or foster care services. There are also private services and NGOs working in the field.

Child welfare in Finland is based on the principle of mild intervention, which means that the mildest ways of interventions come first, and the strength of measures gradually increases if there is a need for stronger interventions. The Child Welfare Act (417/2007) obligates public sector authorities to support families in their upbringing task, and this is done through family policy and through different basic services such as school, day care or health services. If the basic services are not adequate for the needs of a child and a family, child welfare and child protection may assess the situation. Sometimes the assessment process alone may provide the help for the child and there is no need for further procedures. On the other hand, the process may be continued and the situation assessed for planning the help. This is done by making a personal care plan for the child. This open care or community care process may comprise different forms of support measures, and it aims at helping a child to stay at home with the parents. If these open care support measures appear not to be adequate or appropriate, and the child cannot be helped through them, or her health and development is endangered, then it becomes possible to take the child into custody and place her outside the home. According to Blomberg et al. (2010: 36) child welfare services in municipalities have many similarities with other Nordic countries. Services are divided into preventive work, referrals and the investigation of these referrals, voluntary and open care measures and a long-term residential child care. Social workers also can be seen to work in a rather integrated manner.

Research on effectiveness is not merely the evaluation of single interventions and procedures, but should also focus on the service system (see Rousu, 2007). In Finland, the development of services has taken place over decades, but the need to clarify the child welfare processes in municipalities remains. We need continuity and predictability in services, but the possibility to change practices if necessary must still exist.

The existing research on effectiveness in municipal services in Finland has created a good basis for evaluating the social service system in municipalities including child welfare services (Laulainen, 2005; Niiranen & Laulainen, 2006; Rousu, 2007; Kemppainen & al., 2010). Sirkka Rousu (2007) has conducted a study of the assessment of child welfare effectiveness in Finnish municipal organizations. Her study has been one of the strongest contributions in the area of effectiveness in child welfare in Finland. The results show how the preconditions for effective work may be constructed at organization-level and the level of work-processes. Rousu (2007:275) also maintains that the social workers have plenty of silent, tacit knowledge about the interventions leading to positive or negative outcomes in the life of the clients, but this data has not been compiled and made explicit.

Rousu (2007: 282-289) found five groups of critical success factors that influence child welfare effectiveness. Three of these success factors were related to prerequisites, and these were: 1) a stable client-oriented organization; 2) competence corresponding to current demands within child welfare; and 3) processes empowering clients. The two critical success factors related to effectiveness were: 1) clients experience an improvement in their quality of life; and 2) that the conditions in which children and young people grow up become less risky. According to Rousu, this would guarantee cost-effectiveness in child welfare activities. In client work, the continuity of personal relationships and the quality of interaction are the key success factors. It has been recognized that measures based on working in relationships, timing and intensity with multiple measures helped in complicated problems (Bardy & Öhman, 2007). A major factor influencing success is goal-oriented care. This involves a service plan drawn up together with the client and its shared analytical assessment with the client (e.g. Muukkonen & Tulensalo, 2004; Möller, 2005).

In conclusion, the characteristics of Finnish child welfare in municipalities are the following: a combination of psychosocial and legal-administrative processes and procedures which are developed as a part of municipally-organised services; a combination of preventive and more remedial measures; interventions which gradually increase in intensity; and expertise and relative freedom of action among social workers. Social work practice has been developed towards good or best practices, but we cannot yet describe Finnish child welfare as evidence-based practice.

One of the efforts to develop a knowledge base for child welfare social work is the project *Needs, processes and outcomes in child protection* (Vornanen & al., 2008) in the University of Eastern Finland funded by Academy of Finland. We have constructed different research designs in studying effectiveness in child welfare. Sub-studies focus on different phases in child protection processes. A variety of methods are used.

The first part of our sub-study focusing on processes and outcomes of open care measures in child welfare is based on the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005) and a risk and protective factors paradigm (e.g. Rutter, 2000). The study is a re-analysis of existing data on risk and protective factors for children's coping and competence. It originally included a cohort of 592 ten-year-olds in one city (Pölkki, 2001) and had follow-ups at the age of 12,

and – in a smaller sample – also at the ages of 13, 15 and 18 years. The material includes the pupils' self-evaluations, assessments of the children's growth environment by parents and assessments of pupils' competences by their teachers. A new analysis using social office documents will be added to clarify the reasons and use of welfare services.

Starting in 2011, new prospective longitudinal data for the sub-study Processes and Outcomes of Open Care Measures in Child Welfare will be collected to clarify both the administrative and client processes and outcomes for children who are assessed and registered as open care child welfare clients and receive different types of support measures (e.g. economic support, family work, day care). A demographic description of one year's clientele and the working methods used with them will be compiled, after which, the process and outcome measures (concentrating on safety, permanency and the well-being of children) will be developed and chosen. The critical factors for short-term case and client outcomes will be analyzed in a sample.

The doctoral dissertation study of Janissa Miettinen makes some use of the materials described above, and aims at supplementing the knowledge base and conceptual understanding of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of the support in open care in child welfare. The study is theory-based. The theoretical components include the CAIMeR theory (Blom & Morén, 2010), the Bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005) and risk, protective factors and the resilience perspective (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). The study focuses on the critical factors and mechanisms that may contribute to the effectiveness of the support in open care. The research design is based on the assumption that the critical factors and prerequisites of effectiveness of open care are at different levels such as the availability of open care support measures and the characteristics of clients (Östberg, 2010; Littell & Schuerman, 2002).

In a further sub-study, the doctoral dissertation study of Heidi Pohjanpalo, the main objective is to analyze and explain whether when taking children into the care of society, we really get the benefit that we aim for. Other objectives sought in the study are the kind of outcomes that are attained by child protection measures with available resources; the nature of child protection processes; the factors that affect success; and the preconditions for effective placements. The research emphasizes the child's perspective. A random sample of 40 cases (with an additional 4 pairs of twins), in total 261 children taken into care in 1990-1998 in a Finnish town, will be examined. Child protection processes, the course of life from the beginning of dealings with child welfare to the time of the research, and the outcomes of taking the child into care will be studied from documents as a doctoral thesis. An additional 20 cases (and the 4 pairs of twins) will be chosen by a theoretical sample to be studied even more thoroughly as post-doctoral research.

The data collection from the documents (social workers' journals, final acts and different kinds of resolutions, letters, etc.) has already been completed, and the first rough results can be expected this year. The collected data will be analyzed by qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The doctoral thesis will be the beginning of a follow-up study as a post-doctoral study. This study will be conducted through interviews of the various parties in each case, non-active role-play, recalling future methods and the Critical Incident Technique.

We have also collected national survey data from child welfare practices in social work concerning the assessment of children's needs. We will also carry out a national survey

concerning critical factors in developing effectiveness in child welfare in Finnish municipalities. One of the project aims is to develop different approaches in research on effectiveness and here, the different research designs and methods will produce complementary knowledge. A further aim is to develop the theory base for social work with children and families.

### **A need for theory-driven evaluations of effectiveness in child welfare**

It is suggested that in research on effectiveness, there should be a solid theoretical model, which presents the mechanisms of effects and helps to analyze the variables of outcomes and factors that explain those outcomes (Rautava et al., 2009, 5). This is a challenging task in social work, because it is not easy to find theories that exhaustively explain mechanisms in child protection processes. Complexity and context in decision-making, the amount of actors, the scarcity of resources and difficulties in measuring outcomes render the evaluation of effectiveness somewhat difficult (see Webb, 2001).

When we consider the possibilities for effectiveness of child protection services, we should reflect the discussion towards the nature of social work. Social work is a multifaceted practice that aims at promoting individual and societal change towards a positive state of affairs and restoring a certain level of “normality” to the lives of children and their families. The definitions of child welfare may vary; in particular the variety is seen in the typology of services. According to Magura and Moses (1986:2) there is no standard typology of child welfare services. Definitions and divisions can be made by the level of intervention (supportive, supplementary or substitute care), by the purpose of service (for example, protective, preventive or custodial) or by the nature of the problem (for example, abuse or neglect) (Magura & Moses, 1986: 2).

In Finland, child welfare has long been on the research agenda, and the amount of research is increasing all the time. Nevertheless, there is still little theorizing around the topic. There is a need to develop theoretical approaches for theorizing child welfare and child protection services. The need to theorize child welfare is important for many reasons. We need tools to analyse social work practices in child welfare by analysing practical and administrative terms with more theoretical ones. We need concepts and theories to capture the complex systems and processes of child welfare. The studies on effectiveness may focus on certain types of interventions, but in child welfare, the processes may include many parallel interventions and services. As stated earlier, Finnish child welfare has been developed over a long period as a municipal system of services. The terminology comes from policy and law more than theories or social work research. For this reason, there is an urgent need to carry out theory-based research on effectiveness in child welfare.

William Corman & John Devaney (2011) claim that a challenge for practitioners, researchers and policy-makers has been the absence of a shared conceptual framework for considering and responding to the needs of children in care. A second challenge is related to measuring outcomes. They propose an ecological perspective as an organizing framework perspective (see also Palareti & Berti, 2009). Theory-based or theory-driven research has its challenges, but is not impossible to conduct.

One of the challenges in studying the effectiveness of child welfare is that child welfare and child protection comprise many services, and client-processes are long and complicated and include many sub-processes. It is difficult to capture all effects and detect those critical factors

that have an influence on outcomes. The content of interventions, called a black box by Scriven (1994), is often left unnoticed if the question concerns which methods or types of interventions work (Blom and Morén, 2010). This may also be the case in experimental or quasi-experimental studies dealing with causality.

The demand for objectivity in measuring performance is often contested. It is not so easy to prove that it is just performance, “what we do” produces a certain results or outcomes. It has been stated that, because of the many real world intervening factors that are difficult to capture in designs of studies. By doing so, reality may be simplified into one-dimensional causal relationships. (Tilbury 2006:49.) However, quantitative analysis could also be applied in “opening the black box” (Blom & Morén 2010:100), although quantitative research applying a critical realist approach is still notably scarce in the field of child welfare effectiveness research.

Björn Blom and Stefan Morén (2011) have been developing the so-called CAIMeR theory for several years with empirical studies and in connection with social work practice. This theory comprises a conceptual framework and a theoretical model that can help explain how results in social work practice arise from interventions and their contextual contingencies. The CAIMeR theory pays attention to generative mechanisms at different levels, which is necessary if one wishes to understand what is going on in a certain agency, and explain the results in a more qualified way.

In child protection, a client passes through a long-term process or along a path, and it is challenging to compare the situation at the beginning to that at the end of the process, when, for example, a child is leaving care. This process may last almost 18 years and include many side-processes and paths. One critical issue is to discover what the outcomes of child protection are in these kinds of long processes, how we analyze outcomes, and how we open this black box and make reliable and valid conclusions concerning outcomes. Child protection issues cannot be studied in laboratories, and there is always something going on in children’s and parents everyday life. These life processes and events are difficult to include in research designs.

For ethical reasons, studies of effectiveness cannot be built on the pure design of test groups and control groups. Moreover the system of child protection cannot allocate children into different groups, one of which receives intervention, while the other does not. Although experimental studies might be difficult to conduct, experimental designs might – when carefully planned – be applied, for example, so that some clients could have “the treatment as usual” and the test group could be given some structured services that differ from the treatment as usual. Of course, this would mean a sustained and determined research approach that step by step would lead to an increasingly sharpening knowledge-base that is probabilistic by its nature.

## Outcomes for a child and a family?

It is ethically challenging to set the philosophical question of the profound meaning of interventions to children and families (e.g. Hämäläinen, 2011). Can we say that all that is done in social work has a positive effect on the lives of children? We can ask what kinds of presumptions exist in social work with children and families. Do we believe that all types of help and actions may have different kinds of effects, even harmful ones? When child protection social work has to act and intervene, it might be difficult to understand that this may also harm children and families. Future studies should take into consideration the possible interaction between the characteristics of clients and different interventions. Interventions may also have side effects, which are difficult to detect. In the research on effectiveness, one of the origins is that effects may be either positive, negative or zero (see Weiss, 1998). One of the challenges is to evaluate whether we are helping the 'right' children and families through the 'right' interventions and support measures.

The phase of assessment plays a crucial role in the child protection process, and all the interventions and procedures should be based on careful assessments. Munro (2002) has analyzed the possible ways of making either true positives or false negatives, in which child protection has failed to assess the needs of children and families, and this may have caused a course of wrong direction away from effective work. In the studies of effectiveness in child protection, the challenge is to explain the practices in child welfare interventions and processes and to evaluate the system and its capabilities to meet the needs of children and families.

The studies of effectiveness may be focused on the service system from the point of view of availability of services, or use of resources in terms of efficiency or profitability. This kind of research approach may analyze performance-indicators such as procedures or actions carried out with the children and families, but do not provide a great deal of information about the changes among clients (see Tilbury, 2006).

Effectiveness of services among clients is related to complicated psychosocial processes. When designing studies, we must also understand and analyze the logic of the administrative and legal service systems, as well as the complicated processes of helping and the psychosocial processes and factors in the lives of children and families. According to Munro (2009:1020), the complexity of causation in the social world and the minor contribution made by social work to a child's world create problems in determining what effect, if any, the social work intervention has for a child. Munro also sees problems in measuring the outcomes for children's safety and welfare. She shows that even if we know the adverse, longer-term outcomes, such as higher rates of antisocial behaviour and mental disorders, the pathways of these outcomes are very complex.

As Munro (2009:1020) states, "*the current system's reliance on readily measured data provides a very limited account of what happened in work with a family so that it is hard to determine what, if anything, played a significant role in improving the child's safety or welfare*". According to her, it is important to take account of institutional risks and failings in services, but this should be done in a way that provides information on why it is failing. There is a need to do research which reveals the mechanisms and links between inputs and children's outcomes.

Magura and Moses (1986:4) have emphasised the importance of designing research and evaluation which make it possible to gather information so that inferences can be drawn about the influence of programme operations (processes) on programme results (outcomes). Evaluation designs should have plans for dictating when and from whom measurements are gathered during the course of evaluation. In order to do this, one fundamental issue concerns methods for measuring the client outcomes. They suggest three main types of case outcome variables in evaluations of child welfare services: case status, client status and client satisfaction variables.

Case status variables are changes in the stage or phase of a case, in a client's service or legal status (for example, as movement to and from foster care, and the like). Client status variables are defined as changes in a client's (child or parent) behaviour, motives, knowledge, resources or measuring changes in problems, family functioning, and so on. Client satisfaction variables measure the degree to which services have fulfilled the client's subjective needs, expectations or wishes. Case status variables have been used as proxy indicators of client status when more direct measures of the latter are unavailable. Foster care placements, for example, have been used as an indicator for the unstable situation of a child at home. These case status variables have also been used as performance indicators for child welfare services. A low foster care placement rate, for example, has been used as an indicator for successful services (Magura & Moses 1986:5).

Fattore et al. (2007:7-10) have classified research on children's well-being. They refer to the studies on well-being of children in child welfare or child protection institutions as one study field, in which measures are related to formal service system activities, such as literacy and numeracy, juvenile offending rates and child protection reports. Such measures are used as a proxy indicator for other measures of safety, welfare and well-being. The problem of these measures is that they do not necessarily measure the condition of children, but rather measure the response of the service system to the condition of children, or measure the capacity of agencies to provide services (Fattore et al., 2007: 7-10.)

One challenge in child welfare is how to find enough specific measures for effectiveness. The proxy indicators, concerning performance in child welfare and transfers in case processes, are valuable, but they do not provide much information about the links between performance and outcomes in child welfare. This raises the questions of how to measure services inputs and find clearer causal links between inputs and children's outcomes (see Munro, 2009).

It is important to understand that there are two parallel processes going on, one in a child's life (life world) and the other in child welfare (system world). A child's case process is important and that the proxy indicators of case outcomes are documented in case process, especially in decision-making and the care plan. The case process may include different sub-processes, for example, the initial assessment process, the process of being taken into care or custody and placement in foster care, and so on. Client outcomes may also be documented in care plans and in the child's own case process, but these outcomes may also be other critical factors in the child's everyday life and life events. The ultimate question of effectiveness concerns the well-being of a child during the process and later in life.

## **Discussion**

Effectiveness in child welfare is a very complicated phenomenon, and there are no easy ways to study it or prove it in social work practice. Child welfare is related to cultural and societal

questions of children's well-being and issues on children in need or children at risk. Studies have found cultural disagreements, for example, on what constitutes abuse, best interest of the child and good enough parenting. In addition, child welfare and child protection as casework are also closely connected to the welfare system and system of services. The ultimate societal question concerns the role and task of child welfare.

As a Nordic welfare state, Finland has many strengths in arranging services for families with children (see Eydal & Kröger, 2010). It emphasises good living conditions through tax-financed public services. There are also child and family policy programmes, norms and guidelines to prevent social problems and to support families in their upbringing tasks. The processes in child welfare include both juridical-administrative procedures and psychosocial interventions with families and children. The difficulties in the present practices should not create hurdles for research in this area. The accountability demand for social work may be seen as a challenge, in which social work has an important role in defining and developing a knowledge-base and theory for child welfare social work.

As stated earlier, we lack a shared theoretical framework to be used in the studies on the effectiveness of child welfare, also in multidisciplinary contexts. In our opinion, a general systemic framework would help in orienting and reflecting structures, policies, processes and interventions of child welfare at different systemic levels. A framework is required that would clarify the effectiveness of the different types of interventions and mechanisms contributing to outcomes. One of the promising approaches is the CAIMeR theory by Blom and Morén (2010) that - with critical realism as a basis - aims to offer a comprehensive framework for finding at least partial explanations for the outcomes of child protection and child welfare work.

In addition to developing a general framework, we need systematic literature reviews of research on the effectiveness of child welfare interventions. These can be found more frequently also in national Finnish data bases (e.g. Westman & al., 2005, Bardy & Öhman, 2007). At this phase of research, we also need retrospective and prospective longitudinal studies on work processes and societal and client outcomes of child welfare. In a small country like Finland there should be research programmes and coordination of research for child welfare effectiveness studies (see Heino & Kuure, 2009).

In the arduous efforts involved in longitudinal studies, we would like to see that proper electronic documentation of child welfare services is available and, in future, better serves both administration and researchers who have the obligation to use sensitive materials in an entirely ethical way. The basic information on clientele, as well as the goals, work processes and goal attainments from the professional's and clients' perspective could be documented so that case monitoring would be relatively easy. In addition to this, we need careful research designs – also including comparison groups if possible – which would clarify specific generative processes and outcomes of interventions described in a detailed way.

Child protection social workers sometimes face a gargantuan task. The study of effectiveness may be seen as the study of social work practices and the consequences of the work. We cannot set the effectiveness of measures as a rule to act in child protection, because, as already mentioned at the beginning this article, child protection social workers have to act even if they do not have exact evidence-based guidelines or they are not sure about the consequences of their actions. Child protection social work has to seek compromises between the need for intervention and the justification of effectiveness (see Rautava et al., 2009:9).

Social workers have to act, even though they do not know about the effectiveness of the measures and even though they cannot guarantee long-term impacts on child's well-being. Child and family policy, together with the current legislation, set the demands and limits for interventions, and professional social work has to act according to these obligations.

The tacit knowledge of social workers and other professionals has been discussed when considering the idea of good enough evidence in social work. Tacit knowledge can be tacit understanding of people and situations, routinized actions and the tacit rules that underpin intuitive decision-making. They come together when professional performance involves sequences of routinized action punctuated by rapid intuitive decisions based on tacit understanding of the situation (Eraut, 2000.) While valuing intuitive knowledge we emphasize that there should be a tendency to make implicit work processes as explicit as possible (Kuusisto-Niemi & Kääriäinen, 2005). This information could also give inspiration to new research.

As researchers of social work, we must also occasionally pose the question: What really matters for the well-being and happiness of a human being? Is it the case that good attachment relations (e.g. Andersson, 2005) and being cared for and loved without too much concern about attaining specific goals (Halvorsen, 2009) – wherever these can be found - can carry over troubled waters?

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