



The Prerequisites of Success in Child Welfare Open Care

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1 Background

In Finland the child welfare services consist of three areas: (1) the universal basic services delivered for all people living in Finland, (2) the preventive child welfare services and (3) the child-specific and family-specific child welfare (this consists of an investigation of the need for child welfare measures, the provision of support in open care, emergency placement of the child, taking the child into care, substitute care and after-care) (Taskinen 2007). According to the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) the municipal body (social workers) responsible for social services must provide support in open care without delay if “the circumstances in which the children are being brought up are endangering or failing to safeguard their health or development; or if the children’s behaviour is endangering their health or development.” To support a child and his family in child welfare open care is based on the voluntariness of the family (Child Welfare Act 417/2007). For further information on “lastensuojelu” (child protection) in Finland, see Hearn et al. (2004).

2 The aim of the study

The child welfare statistics collected by the National Institute for Health and Welfare show that the number of children who have been the subject of child welfare interventions in community care is increasing continuously. In Finland, there is an emphasis on prevention and early intervention in child welfare services. For example, the National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care (in Finnish known as KASTE) states that “The number of children placed in care outside the home in relation to the age group will begin to decline”. However, there is very little research concerning the relevant factors and mechanisms through which the children and their families could be helped. This study focuses on the prerequisites of success in child welfare open care in Finland from a probabilistic view. The aim of this research is to supplement the knowledge base and conceptual understanding of the factors and mechanisms contributing to the success in child welfare open care and by this to contribute to the improvement of the effectiveness of open care (Weiss 1998, 4). The main research question is:

What are the critical factors that (probably) promote or inhibit the enhancement of the life situation of an under twelve year old child receiving support in child welfare open care and through what kinds of mechanisms do these factors (probably) impact to the outcomes?

3 Defining basic concepts

Effectiveness means the extent to which desired goals are achieved due to the program itself (e.g. Schalock, 1995). Effectiveness evaluation is often understood as managerialistic endeavour to maximize efficiency and reduce costs. This is not my point of view. I use the concept of success instead of the concept of effectiveness.

What is success in child welfare open care? Success means reaching a client outcome target (Rousu & Holma 2004, Laulainen 2005; Rousu 2007). Sirkka Rousu (Rousu 2007, 246) has proposed that the client outcome target in child welfare open care could be that a child's life situation enhances from the condition at which the child entered open care with the consequence of the support in open care. In fact, the aim of open care is that the child's situation enhances by any kind of means. I have defined success as enhancement of the life situation of a child. The ultimate goal in open care is to prevent unnecessary placement of children into foster care. Thus, the best client outcome is that the family will cope without any further need for open care services.

4 Previous studies

The effectiveness of the measures to enhance the wellbeing of children and families in order to preserve the family has been widely studied internationally. In Finland the child welfare evaluation has been mostly qualitative with constructivist orientation (e.g. Oranen 2006, 7). There are although studies concerning for example the clients in open care (Heino 2007; Huuskonen & Korpinen 2009). Also some critical factors considering the success, effectiveness or profitability of open care (Laulainen 2005; Bardy & Öhman 2007; Rousu 2007) have been identified. It is possible that the critical factors are at different levels from structural prerequisites, for example availability of services (Östberg 2010), to client's characteristics and fit between family problems and types of services that are provided (Littell & Schuerman 2002). The main shortcoming in Finnish child welfare research is the lack of statistical research of the effectiveness of child welfare open care (Eronen 2007). On national level there is no sufficient knowledge about what open care measures are used in municipalities and to what extent they are available throughout Finland.

5 Data

I will apply both data and method triangulation. The data analysis is mostly quantitative, but appropriate qualitative methods are also applied. Data will be analysed with statistical SPSS program and with a suitable structural equation modelling program (SEM). The data will consist of two national surveys and an individual level retrospective follow-up data of the children who have received support in child welfare open care. The first national survey will yield information of the open care services repertoire and availability and another is a survey of Finnish child welfare social workers. I also consider interviewing an number of clients and social workers about their experiences.

The theoretical frame of reference of this study is Urie Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development together with the principles of risk and protective factors. This means analyzing risk and protective factors at the level of a child, at the level of his or her family, and at the broader societal level (Pecora 2006, 28). Scholars have found ecological theory helpful for example in evaluation of residential care (Palareti & Berti 2009). The surveys will be done in collaboration with research groups, which maybe answers to some concerns that rose because of the challenges with different databases. The follow up data (case files) will be important source to capture change mechanisms.

6 Method

Social work researchers are recommended to consider hierarchical statistical modelling when appropriate to contribute the knowledge base in social work. I apply structural equation modelling (SEM) in studying the factors that contribute to the success of open care. This is a new kind of methodological endeavour in Finnish child welfare research. I apply critical scientific realism, where the reality is seen as real, and stratified into three levels: real, actual

and empirical. Causality is seen to be generative, that is, based on properties and tendencies of things (see e.g. Bhaskar 1975; Blom & Morén 2010).

7 Expected results

This study aims at describing, what open care measures are used in Finland, formulating a path model of how (probably) to succeed in child welfare open care and developing conceptual understanding about the open care and the prerequisites of success in open care in Finland.

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