

Jenni Lohvansuu

Effective engagement in an age of austerity.
Scottish and Finnish perspectives

Master's Thesis

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**Effective engagement in an age of austerity. Scottish
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Effective engagement in an age of austerity: Scottish and Finnish perspectives

A Dissertation Submitted in Part Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Social Work Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences
Stirling University
Scotland

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the extent to which Scottish and Finnish child protection practitioners perceive austerity measures to affect their ability to engage effectively service users. The data was gathered from practitioners in Scotland (n=4) and in Finland (n=4) through semi-structured interviews. A cross-national comparative thematic analysis was used to identify barriers to effective engagement and to explore the relationship between these barriers and austerity. Both Scottish and Finnish practitioners viewed limited resources and service users' negative preconceptions as being the most significant factors that undermine effective engagement. Other factors regarded as challenges related to proceduralism, time restrictions, the power imbalance between practitioners and service users, and practitioners' ineffective use of their core skills.

Overall, participants viewed the relationship between barriers to engagement and spending cuts as intertwined with other socio-political developments and public perceptions. Scarce resources, high workloads, and increased financial scrutiny in particular were attributed to austerity, although more often by Scottish than Finnish practitioners. However, most asserted that their abilities to engage with families remain unaffected by austerity, which highlights their professional resilience. However, Scottish and Finnish practitioners shared a concern that their ability to engage effectively with families may be undermined in the future should austerity persist.

Key words: *austerity, child protection, effective engagement, Finland, Scotland*

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Chapter 1

Introduction and overview

During the past decade, austerity measures, i.e. substantial cuts in public spending, have been implemented across Europe (Mooney 2014; Caverio and Poinasamy 2013). Although social policies differ from one country to another (Kennett and Yeates 2001a), in an age of austerity Western welfare states face shared challenges (Mooney and Scott 2012a). This dissertation examines child protection in an age of austerity in two such countries, Scotland and Finland. The cross-nationalism of the research responds to a suggestion that comparing two small countries that share increasing concerns about the implications of government-initiated austerity programmes on public welfare, income equality, and vulnerable groups such as children (e.g. Lehtelä et al. 2016; McKendrick et al. 2016; Kurttila 2015; Mooney 2014; Caverio and Poinasamy 2013), might lead to a better understanding on how to tackle these common challenges (Mooney and Scott 2012a).

Scotland, with its somewhat social democratic approach to social welfare (Mooney and Scott 2012b), has been seen as drawing lessons from the Nordic welfare model (Stiberg 2014). There are similarities in principles and values that underpin child protection practice in Scotland and Finland, which offers an interesting platform for cross-national comparisons. For example, effective engagement with children and families is acknowledged as a precondition to comprehensive assessments and successful early interventions in both countries (e.g. Lavikainen et al. 2014; Scottish Government 2014b). However, both Scottish and Finnish research suggest that cuts in public spending are linked to diminishing social work resources (e.g. Beatty and

Fothergill 2015; Alhanen 2014), a lack of which is found to be a factor, among others, that hinders a practitioner's ability to engage effectively with children and families (e.g. Alhanen 2014; Gallagher et al. 2011). By exploring the perceived relationship between spending cuts and effective engagement, this research aims to contribute to satisfying the lack of empirical research on this under-researched topic.

My interest in examining the implications of spending cuts stems from the insights into the implications of austerity measures I gained while on placement in a Scottish child protection team during my social work studies. It appeared to me that both practitioners and service users face increasing pressures due to cuts in resources and welfare. Furthermore, growing up in Finland during the early 1990s' financial depression, which hit the country particularly hard compared to other European countries (Alanko and Outinen 2016; Forsberg and Kröger 2009), has given me an awareness of the adverse impact short-sighted welfare policies may have on children and young people. The prolonged mass unemployment and radical welfare spending cuts made in Finland in response to the depression (Kananen 2016; Julkunen 2001) have had long-standing and well-researched detrimental effects (e.g. Alanko and Outinen 2016; Rinne and Järvinen 2011; Satka et al. 2007; Julkunen 2001). Nonetheless, the Finnish government continues to implement further welfare cuts (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015), which may lead to the current austerity bringing adverse outcomes for yet another generation of children.

1.1 Aims and objectives

By drawing upon the shared challenges of promoting the wellbeing of vulnerable children in an age of austerity, this dissertation aims to explore Scottish and Finnish child protection practitioners' perceptions of the impact of spending cuts on their

ability to engage effectively with service users. An explorative approach (D'Cruz and Jones 2004; Hantrais and Mangen 1996) was adopted to work towards the overarching objective of the research, i.e. to generate insights and increased understanding in relation to the possible implications of austerity on frontline child protection practice.

The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the most significant challenges or barriers to effective engagement with children and families at the initial stage of child protection assessment?
2. To what extent do child protection practitioners perceive the challenges or barriers as resulting from austerity measures?
3. How do practitioner perceptions in Scotland and Finland differ with regard to the impact of austerity on their abilities to engage with families?

The aim of the research design was to gather sufficient qualitative data for credible cross-national analysis. The data was gathered in an adaptive manner (Layder 2013) through a small number of semi-structured interviews that were completed verbally or in writing, and interpreted through an adaptive and descriptive thematic cross-national analysis (Layder 2013; Hantrais 2009).

Special considerations in a cross-national study

To achieve the above-mentioned aims and answer the research questions successfully requires, firstly, an understanding of 1) the broad socio-political context of the welfare state, and 2) the particular context of child protection practice in both countries (Kennett and Yeates 2001a). This includes acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between austerity and child protection. As discussed in Chapter 2,

welfare systems both in the UK and in Finland have been, and continue to be, subject to large-scale reforms, and it is challenging to separate the impact of recent austerity measures from those of long-term policy developments (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015; Jones 2014).

Secondly, credible cross-national comparison requires careful linguistic and cultural consideration of the key concepts that guide the formulation of research questions and inform interpretation of research findings (Carey 2013; Bryman 2012; Hantrais 2009). While the chosen concepts are introduced in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 includes an account of the continuous self-critical reflection (D'Cruz and Jones 2004; Finlay 2002) that was applied throughout the research process to acknowledge and account for personal and method bias (Hantrais 2009).

1.2 Scottish and Finnish child welfare – comparable contexts?

Scotland and Finland are significantly different countries in terms of social policy. Scotland is a non-sovereign nation-state (Law 2012) within the liberal welfare state of the UK (Kennett and Yeates 2001b) that is traditionally characterised by class-political dualism and persisting inequalities in welfare distribution (Esping-Andersen 1990). In spite of the devolution of administrative powers and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the current Conservative-led UK government controls social security, and employment legislation (Guthrie 2011) and hence continues to control Scottish social welfare (Mooney 2014).

In contrast, Finland is a young democracy with its constitution dating from 1919. Finland has adopted a social democratic Nordic welfare model, which is underpinned by social liberalism and principles of universalism, equality, and social justice (Kananen 2016; Stiberg 2014; Satka et al. 2007; Kautto et al. 1999; Esping-

Andersen 1990). In the social democratic model, the state is seen as primarily responsible for the welfare and social security of citizens (Satka et al. 2007; Hearn et al. 2004), whereas in the liberal model employed in Scotland a significant portion of welfare services are provided by the market and civil society (Kennett and Yeates 2001b; Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Esping-Andersen 1990).

The Scottish child welfare legislation and policy has drawn upon the Children Act 1989 which established framework for the current child protection system in England and Wales, and lessons learned from significant case reviews conducted in the UK since the 1970s (Guthrie 2011). A concept of 'significant harm' is used as a threshold to child protection interventions that are underpinned by principles of promoting parental responsibilities and children's rights (Guthrie 2011; Hearn et al. 2004; Children (Scotland) Act (C(S)A) 1995). In the Nordic countries, however, child welfare has traditionally focused on structural prevention of social problems (Hietamäki 2012; Forsberg and Kröger 2009; Eydal and Satka 2006) through comprehensive preventive and family-oriented services (Hearn et al. 2004).

A significant difference between the countries is that in Finland, unlike in the UK, the discourse of abuse and neglect does not characterise child protection (Hietamäki 2012; Hearn et al. 2004). In fact, the first public inquiry into social and health services following a child's death was published in Finland only recently following the death of 8-year-old Vilja-Eerika in 2012. The review concluded with a demand for more resources in frontline practice to ensure effective early interventions (Kananoja et al. 2013). Overall, the recent Finnish child welfare discussion has centred primarily on tackling social exclusion and promoting children and families' participation, not

only in child protection processes but also in the society as a whole (e.g. Halme et al. 2014; Lavikainen et al. 2014; Bardy 2013).

However, Scotland and Finland are both situated on the outskirts of Northern Europe and have relatively small populations of 5.4–5.5 million (National Records of Scotland 2016; Statistics Finland 2016). Both have also undergone similar reforms typical for advanced post-war welfare states and hence are facing similar challenges, as discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the Nordic welfare model is viewed in Scotland as a source of inspiration for reform (Nordic Horizons 2017; Stiberg 2014), which is arguably related to the Nordic countries' low child poverty and mortality rates (Stiberg 2014; Forsberg and Kröger 2009), and achievements in education (Dorling 2014) and social and economic progress (Porter et al. 2016; Stephens 1996).

A recent example of this modelling is the Scottish National Party's decision to provide a free maternity package to new parents (Heydecker 2016), similar to which has been granted to all families in Finland for the past 80 years. Another example that suggests that Scottish and Finnish child welfare are underpinned by similar values and are shifting closer to one another is the Scottish Government (2012) initiative *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC). This approach is underpinned by principles of early intervention and inter-agency collaboration between social, health care, and education services. In other words, a frontline practitioner's responsibility to promote child welfare is understood to extend beyond the local authority duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of 'children in need' (C(S)A 1995 s. 22). A similar preventive approach to child welfare is incorporated in the Finnish Child Welfare Act (CWA) 417/2007. Thus, it may be argued that Scottish and Finnish child welfare

systems are similar enough for credible comparison. In addition, findings may contribute to informing further policy developments in an age when governments expect practitioners to continue improving outcomes for children with fewer resources (Jütte et al. 2015; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015; Scottish Government 2014b; Paasivirta 2012).

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between austerity and effective engagement in Scottish and Finnish child protection practice through a selective literature review. Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology and design. Chapter 4 introduces the findings in relation to challenges to engagement. Chapter 5 examines the findings from a temporal perspective. The final Chapter 6 summarises and evaluates the findings of this research and examines its potential implications.

Chapter 2

Child protection in an age of austerity

This chapter explores child protection in an age of austerity where practitioners are expected to ‘deliver with less’ (Jütte et al. 2015, p. 8). First, austerity is examined in a broad socio-political context and then Scottish and Finnish child protection systems are introduced. The exploration of previous research indicates that the relationship between spending cuts and social workers’ abilities to engage effectively with families is a relatively under-researched topic. The chapter concludes with a summary of gaps in the current research, on the basis of which the research questions (Chapter 1) were formulated.

2.1 Austerity in Scotland and Finland

In this research, austerity is understood as government-initiated measures that aim to reduce budget deficits in response to an inauspicious economic climate (McKendrick et al. 2016), which includes cuts in public expenditure, welfare services, and benefits (Mooney 2014). The literal translation of austerity (*talouskuri*) entered Finnish usage recently (see e.g. Pye 2016; THL 2016) and the concept has not yet been adopted widely in research or literature. However, an increased concern regarding the impact of public spending cuts (*julkisten menojen leikkaukset*) on social welfare emerges in both countries in policy and research (e.g. McKendrick et al. 2016; Lehtelä et al. 2016; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015; Scottish Government 2013), media (e.g. Paterson 2016; Arola 2015), and critical socio-political literature (Pugh and Connolly 2016; Tynkkynen et al. 2016; Kokkinen 2014; Mooney 2014; Julkunen 2013).

In Scotland, current austerity measures are seen to be linked to the EU-wide economic crisis (Cavero and Poinasamy 2013) and the decisions made by the UK Conservative-led and coalition governments in response to the global economic crisis that developed in 2008 (HM Treasury 2016; 2015; Mooney 2014; Scottish Government 2013). Currently, public sector services and local authorities in Scotland are experiencing the financial squeeze through limited funding available to them from the Scottish government, which in turn receives its budget from the UK parliament (Unison Scotland 2016; Mooney and Scott 2012a; Mooney 2011).

However, austerity does not solely result from a financial crisis, but is rather a complex manifestation of continuing and interrelated changes in the economic, social, and political climate that have shaped Western welfare states since the 1970s (Kananen 2016; Veilahti 2016; Julkunen 2013; Dominelli 1999). In spite of the wider economic constraints, governments hold considerable power to make decisions about public spending that shape the welfare service sector (Wren 2001). Admittedly, these political decisions have complex social, economic, and ideological underpinnings (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015), which explains the competing interpretations as to whether austerity should be seen as 'vital' (HM Treasury 2016, p. 16), a 'necessary evil' in the current economic climate (McKendrick et al. 2016, p. 455), or an 'assault on welfare' (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013, p. 93).

From a sociological perspective, both Scottish and Finnish austerity is linked to post-industrialist pressures to renegotiate, restructure, and modernise a post-war social contract and collectivist approach to social welfare (Kananen 2016; Pierson 2001; Wren 2001). In general, during the past few decades, the aim of social policy reforms has been to restrict public spending (Julkunen 2001). This has partly been

implemented through renegotiating the relationship between the state and the citizens (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013). The promotion of personal responsibility and service user empowerment and choice (Scottish Government 2016a; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015) can be seen as an example of these developments, which, although potentially liberating, simultaneously attempts to transfer the responsibility and risk from the state to the individual (Welbourne 2011).

Austerity as a means to control public spending is linked to neoliberal social welfare reforms that have sought to revise the Western welfare states over the past decades (Clarke et al. 2007) by introducing the idea that public services should be managed like private sector businesses (Rogowski 2012). Neoliberalism has been dubbed as one the most significant challenges to Western post-war welfare states (Kananen 2016; Jones 2014; Satka et al. 2007; Harrikari and Satka 2006; Dominelli 1999). Hence, it must be acknowledged that cost-efficiency has been promoted in Western welfare states even before the current age of austerity. Admittedly, it is not austerity alone, but rather the cumulative impact of spending cuts, economic crisis, and welfare reforms that pose a challenge to social welfare (Mooney and Scott 2012b).

In Scotland and Finland, neoliberalism is evident in the welfare reforms that have taken place since the 1990s in response to continued international pressures to privatise public services (Kananen 2016; Koskiahio 2015; Hirvonen 2014; Rogowski 2012; Banks 2011; Taylor-Goodby 2011; Forsberg and Kröger 2009; Dominelli 1999). Although increasing economic growth at the expense of income equality does not fit as well with the Nordic welfare model (Timonen 2004) as perhaps with the liberal model, critics in both countries have noted that privatisation and marketisation of welfare services has sought to generate profits to a rich minority while limiting

opportunities available to the generally less well-off welfare recipients (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Helminen 2009; Laatu 2009).

In order to understand current austerity in Finland, it is helpful to briefly consider the financial depression of the early 1990s that impacted the country particularly hard compared to other Nordic and European countries (Kananen 2016; Forsberg and Kröger 2009) and brought about prolonged mass unemployment (Kananen 2016; Julkunen 2013). This marked the end of expansive social welfare (Julkunen 2001) and triggered a radical reorganisation in the Finnish welfare state, which included privatisation of services (Hirvonen 2014), tightening eligibility criteria, and large-scale cuts in public spending (Julkunen 2013; 2001). Although the current austerity is less drastic in Finland compared to the spending cuts implemented in the UK (Mänttärivän der Kuip 2015), similarities can be drawn between the current inauspicious economic situation and that of the early 1990s (Lehtelä et al. 2016). The long-standing adverse effects of the 1990s welfare cuts on public wellbeing are well documented (e.g. Alanko and Outinen 2016; Kananen 2016; Forsberg and Kröger 2009; Satka et al. 2007; Julkunen 2001; Stephens 1996), yet the Finnish government continues to implement further welfare cuts (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015). This suggests that the far-reaching consequences of austerity are not fully considered (see Lehtelä et al. 2016; Kurttila 2015).

In critical literature, the rich minority, which is seen to be behind austerity and neoliberal policies, are labelled a capitalist 'elite' (e.g. Dorling 2014; Crouch 2011) that seeks to influence public opinion in order to protect their own interest (Dorling 2014; Crouch 2011). The most recent Eurobarometer examining public perceptions of poverty demonstrated that, although Finland is one of the most equitable rich

countries (Dorling 2014), a majority (58%) of Finns view 'much injustice in our society' as causing poverty, whereas only a third of the UK population feel the same (European Commission 2010). Interestingly, the proportion of the UK population blaming people's laziness or lack of will power for their poverty (24%) is amongst the highest in the Europe after Malta and Poland, whereas only 12 per cent of Finns regard this as the cause. Although these findings do not necessarily describe current public attitudes in Scotland, they may reflect the message about unsustainable social welfare that has been conveyed to the public to legitimise spending cuts in the UK (Dorling 2014; Ferguson and Lavalette 2013; Clarke et al. 2007).

It has been noted that in an age of austerity, the rights and needs of vulnerable groups such as children are in conflict with the interest of public spending cuts (Alhanen 2014). However, welfare has wide public support in affluent states such as Scotland and Finland, which is why it appears unlikely that these welfare states would be completely dismantled (McKendrick et al. 2016; Kananen 2016; Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015; Timonen 2004; Pierson 2001). In fact, persisting austerity is already affecting people's attitudes towards spending cuts. According to a social attitudes survey (Clery 2016), only a decreasing minority of the British public supports the overall objective of reducing welfare spending.

To summarise, austerity is a complex concept and interrelated to various other socio-political factors. However, austerity appears to be here to stay (Pierson 2001) and the renegotiation of the social contract will continue in Scotland and Finland through further restructuring of services around the pressures to increase cost-efficiency and limit public spending in order to sustain social welfare (McKendrick et al. 2016; Jütte et al. 2015; Hirvonen 2014; Mooney 2014). Hence, as the growing

body of research (e.g. Lehtelä et al. 2016; McKendrick et al. 2016; Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015) suggests, the impact of spending cuts on citizens and welfare services is both concerning and warrants further exploration.

2.2 Child protection: Scottish and Finnish perspectives

Child protection has been chosen as the topic of this research due to the adverse impact austerity has on vulnerable children (Kurttila 2015; Dorling 2014; Scottish Government 2014a; 2013; Children's Commissioner 2013) and low-income families on benefits (Lehtelä et al. 2016; Moisio et al. 2016; Policy in Practice 2016; Mooney and Scott 2012b). Increased income inequalities and child poverty in Scotland (Scottish Government 2015; Mooney 2014) and Finland (Kurttila 2015; Kananoja et al. 2013) have been attributed to both austerity and welfare reforms (Honkanen and Tervola 2014; Mooney and Scott 2012a).

Poverty has multi-dimensional and well-researched adverse effects on children's outcomes (Harker et al. 2013; Hakovirta and Kallio 2014; Marmot 2010; Preston 2005), which are acknowledged in child protection reviews (Kananoja et al. 2013; Munro 2011), handbooks (Hothersall 2014; Bardy 2013) and policy (Scottish Government 2014a; Scottish Government 2011; STM 2010). In general, material deprivation resulting from poverty is linked to an increased likelihood of poor physical and mental health, social isolation, and feelings of shame that stem from public discourse around poverty (Walker et al. 2013). Furthermore, increasing social inequalities may undermine people's opportunities to make life choices because their social and cultural resources are limited (Clarke et al. 2007).

Thus, there appears to be a connection between austerity and a continuing demand for effective child protection services, especially where more families are becoming

vulnerable to problems that may lead to child protection interventions. In fact, in conjunction with the levels of child poverty, the number of children receiving child welfare services has increased throughout the 21st century, both in Scotland (Jütte et al. 2015) and Finland (THL 2015). In part, this may reflect the outcomes of welfare cuts and persisting income inequalities (McKendrick et al. 2016; Mooney 2014). On the other hand, it may reflect increasingly defensive practice in response to high profile case reviews and early intervention policies recently introduced in both countries that have broadened the scope of child welfare from statutory child protection to encompass universal services, thus potentially generating more referrals (Heino 2014), and perhaps influencing public perception about child welfare services.

As briefly outlined in Chapter 1, Scottish and Finnish child protection systems have well-established legal and policy frameworks that share some underpinning similarities, but also have somewhat different emphases. In both countries, child protection is underpinned by children's rights in line with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989). The key aspects of the Convention, including the child's right to necessary care and protection from abuse and neglect, as well as the principles of family preservation and the best interest of the child, have been incorporated into Scottish and Finnish child welfare legislations (CWA 417/2007; C(S)A 1995). Furthermore, both Scottish and Finnish child protection interventions are underpinned by the duty of local authorities to promote the welfare of citizens (Sosiaalihuoltolaki 1301/2014 s. 1; Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 s. 12) and to safeguard the welfare of children (CWA 417/2007 s. 11(1); C(S)A 1995 s. 22).

In both countries, child protection social work means helpful interaction with children and families and professional interventions, which attempt to solve social problems and enable change in unhelpful behaviours that endanger the child's health or development (Calder et al. 2012; Anis 2008). In Finland, child protection has been traditionally characterised as family-focused (Muukkonen and Tulensalo 2004; Hearn et al. 2004; Granfelt 1998) and explicitly child-centred approaches have been adopted into child protection policy and practice quite recently (Lavikainen et al. 2014; Pösö et al. 2014; CWA 417/2007; Muukkonen and Tulensalo 2004). In the UK child-centred approaches have been promoted for decades (Hearn et al. 2004) and more family-oriented approaches have been adopted recently (Scottish Government 2012). These changes in policies suggest that Scottish and Finnish child protection practices are underpinned by similar values and influenced by similar managerialist and neoliberal welfare reforms, and thus shifting closer to one another.

An example of shared underpinning ideologies is the emphasis on early interventions emerging in both countries since the turn of the 21st century (Scottish Government 2014a; 2012; 2009; Harrikari 2006; Karjalainen and Sarvimäki 2005). In Scotland, early intervention is promoted through the national GIRFEC practice model (Scottish Government 2014b; 2012) elements of which are incorporated in legislation (Children and Young People (Scotland) 2014). Principles of early intervention are also included in the Finnish child welfare legislation (CWA 417/2007 s. 4), and despite the lack of national assessment framework akin to the GIRFEC model in Finland, early interventions in both countries are underpinned by similar principles, e.g. conducting ecological child-centred assessments and working in partnership with families (Scottish Government 2014b; 2012; CWA 417/2007 ss. 26-27).

Drawing upon these shared underpinnings, this research focuses on examining child protection practice at the initial stages of child protection assessments. The Finnish term for 'child protection' (*lastensuojelu*) is sometimes used in literature interchangeably with 'child welfare' to encompass a wide range of preventive services (Forsberg and Kröger 2009; Anis 2008; 2005; Hearn et al. 2004). However, in this research it is limited to describe statutory social work with children and families where a referral, i.e. a child welfare concern report (*lastensuojeluilmoitus*) has been made to a local authority social work department by a member of the public or another agency that has a duty to report concerns (CWA 417/2007 s. 5; C(S)A 1995 s. 22).

In both countries, a social worker carries out an initial assessment (*alkuarvio*) in response to the concern report, i.e. an enquiry regarding the child's circumstances to determine whether the child is in need of welfare services, at risk of harm, or whether a more comprehensive assessment is required (Jütte et al. 2015; Scottish Government 2014b; Harris and White 2013). The aim of the initial assessment is to draw up a comprehensive view of the child's circumstances and needs including concerns, risks, strengths, and resilience factors (Calder et al. 2012; CWA 417/2007 s. 27).

It must be acknowledged, however, that initial assessments are not the same in Scotland and Finland. For example, in Scotland, child protection practitioners use the concept of 'significant harm' to guide their responses to child welfare concerns (Scottish Government 2014b), whereas Finnish discretion-based practice (Hearn et al. 2004) is more dependent upon the individual practitioner's perceptions of risk and need. A further difference is that in Finland the state provides a variety of low-

threshold 'open care' family support services (*avohuollon tukitoimet*) that must be given precedence over more intrusive child protection interventions (CWA 2007/417 s. 4), which means that Finnish social workers are involved in assessing and addressing perhaps a broader range of needs than their Scottish colleagues are.

In the interim, there is only limited empirical knowledge about the way austerity affects child protection in Scotland and Finland. However, service cuts, growing emphasis on short-term interventions, increased demands for efficiency (Alhanen 2014; Walker 2012; Banks 2011), and the higher numbers of child protection referrals suggest that spending cuts create increased pressures for practitioners (Walker 2012) who are expected to continue delivering services with fewer resources (Jütte et al. 2015; Paasivirta 2012; Satka et al. 2007). Concerns are voiced in both countries that social services are becoming more reactive and less preventive (Saarinen et al. 2012; Scottish Executive 2006a). Even early interventions that are promoted as an effective tool for preventing complex social problems (Karjalainen and Sarvimäki 2005) may be seen to be more cost-effective for governments than more intensive interventions are (Jütte et al. 2015).

In an age of austerity, social work fulfils a mediating role between the state and citizens who may feel themselves increasingly excluded and powerless (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013; Walker et al. 2013; Davis and Wainwright 2006; Ferguson and Woodward 2009). Managerialism brought about by neoliberalism has been suggested to have a particularly damaging impact on social workers attempting to make a difference to families' lives where budgetary considerations are prioritised over social work values (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013; Ferguson and Woodward 2009). Although growing demands for accountability aim to improve practice through

increased oversight, there are concerns about it leading to a 'culture of blame' (Scottish Executive 2006a, p. 11) that is shifting the social worker's role towards monitoring behaviours rather than supporting people to make changes. Where a tragedy occurs, both politicians and media remain unsympathetic to social workers coping with significant managerial and resource-related constraints (Ferguson and Woodward 2009).

A recent large-scale (n=817) research has touched on this topic and explored work-related wellbeing of frontline social workers in an age of austerity (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015), and concluded that social workers experience conflicting demands and increasing work-related economic constraints in their daily practice that affect their ability to meet statutory assessment timescales and provide early interventions. In other Finnish research, inadequate resources have been noted to have adverse effects on child welfare services (Kananoja et al. 2013), practitioners' work-related wellbeing (Saarinen et al. 2012; Sipilä 2011), and their ability to make accountable and ethical decisions (Alhanen 2014; Sipilä 2011).

In Scotland, child protection practice in an age of austerity has been explicitly examined in two small-scale qualitative dissertation studies, one of which found that increasingly limited resources makes it challenging for practitioners to balance their time between paperwork and direct relationship-based practice with services users (Secmezsoy-Gault 2014). Tate (2010) concluded that stringent resources and high caseloads hinder practitioner ability to engage in multi-agency work, a conclusion akin to findings in Alhanen (2014). While these studies offer a glimpse into the complex impact of spending cuts on child protection, the growing interest in both Scotland and Finland to study the topic, and the limited available research indicate

that there is scope for further analysis in relation to the impact of austerity on frontline child protection practice.

Shared emphasis of effective engagement

Effective engagement (*vaikuttava vuorovaikutus*) has been identified as a precondition for effective social work practice since the 1970s (Forrester and Harwin 2011; Kuronen 2004; Granfelt 1998). It can furthermore be defined as the meaningful contact a practitioner establishes with a service user (Stevenson 2012) in order to develop a cooperative working relationship (Scottish Government 2014b) that is based on respect, empathy, and effective communication and interaction (Lavikainen et al. 2014; Thoburn et al. 2005; Granfelt 1998). In other words, effective engagement means taking time to establish trust and share information with the family in an appropriate manner (Lavikainen et al. 2014; Scottish Government 2014b). The depth and quality of the assessment is dependent upon the effectiveness of engagement (Harris and White 2013; Walker 2012; Gallagher et al. 2011; Munro 2011) and hence, it is a particularly significant skill in the initial stages (Lavikainen et al. 2014; Scottish Executive 2006b).

The practitioner's ability to affect change in a family's circumstances is also dependent upon trust (Thompson 2015; Munro 2011; Crittenden 1999; Farmer and Owen 1995). Hence, effective engagement is closely linked to the concept of partnership (Scottish Government 2014b; Walker 2012; Forrester and Harwin 2011; Carnwell and Carson 2008), which has become a key principle in Scottish (Scottish Government 2016b; 2014b; 2012; Scottish Executive 2006a) and Finnish (Anis 2008; Karjalainen and Sarvimäki 2005) child protection practice over the past two decades (Hinton et al. 2008).

The increased promotion of service user participation can be seen as a result of two different policy developments, i.e. the rights-based approach that promotes social justice, and the marketisation and personalisation of social services brought about by neoliberal welfare reforms (Gallagher et al. 2011; Carnwell and Carson 2008; Satka et al. 2007; Scottish Executive 2006a). Thus, partnership touches both ends of social work's dual role in a contemporary neoliberal 'risk-society' (Webb 2006, p. 40) where practitioners are expected to both promote rights and welfare of citizens and ensure the safety of vulnerable groups and the public in general. In other words, partnership is aligned to the children's right to participate and have their views considered (Lavikainen et al. 2014; Scottish Government 2014b; CWA 417/2007 s. 20; C(S)A 1995 s. 16; United Nations 1989), and the service users' right to self-determination (SSSC 2016; BASW 2012; Talentia 2007). On the other hand, it reflects the discourse of marketisation that has sought to transform citizens into consumers (Leemann and Hämäläinen 2016; Clarke et al. 2007), which fits poorly with child protection where service users may have little choice regarding interventions (Trotter 2006).

Furthermore, the inevitable power imbalance between social workers and service users in child protection (Harris and White 2013; Kuronen 2004) makes it challenging to establish trust with families, particularly where they are required to engage with social workers involuntarily (Trotter 2006). Moreover, in the UK literature, 'partnership' is more often used to describe interagency cooperation (e.g. Scottish Government 2016a; 2014b; Calder et al. 2012; Munro 2011; Francis et al. 2006) than working with families, which suggests that a genuine collaboration between social workers and service users may remain at the level of rhetoric (Carnwell and Carson 2008).

Previous research examining child protection in the UK and Finland has identified several barriers to effective engagement, particularly in relation to scarce resources, proceduralism, and rigid timescales. In general, stringent resources have been suggested to limit the social worker's ability to establish professional relationships with service users (Pitkälä 2012). A recent research analysis on challenges in Finnish child welfare services (Alhanen 2014) found that the child protection practitioner's ability to make comprehensive assessments and engage with families is hindered by 'absurd' caseloads (p. 41) and limited human resources. As a result, practitioners were found to be too busy to establish trusting working relationships with individual families.

In addition, research has identified excessive bureaucracy (Rogowski 2012; Forrester and Harwin 2011) and proceduralism as a barrier to effective engagement in child protection (Gallagher et al. 2011). A Scottish qualitative study that focuses on engagement with families in child protection (Gallagher et al. 2011) reached the same conclusion as Alhanen (2014) by stating that heavy caseloads hinder the practitioner's ability to form relationships with families. Alhanen (2014) also found that child protection practitioners are concerned about their ability to engage effectively with service users where bureaucracy and procedures are emphasised over person-centred practice.

Furthermore, rigid statutory timescales have been found to challenge relationship-based practice and keep child protection practitioners busy in both countries (Alhanen 2014; Gallagher et al. 2011). A research on child protection and inter-agency collaboration in Scotland (Francis et al. 2006) found that limited timescales make it challenging for practitioners to gather information effectively. The result is

similar to research conducted in England (Booth et al. 2006), which found that statutory timescales hinder the practitioner's ability to establish trusting relationships, and thus affect the credibility and comprehensiveness of child protection assessments, particularly when working with vulnerable groups.

Finally, multiple practitioner- and service user-related factors have been identified that pose a challenge to effective engagement. Factors related to practitioners are, for example, their communication and planning skills (Munro 2011; Allen and Langford 2008) and their lack of time to develop these skills (Forrester and Harwin 2011), practitioners' unhelpful assumptions and prejudices about service users' capacity to change (Jokinen and Nousiainen 2014; Anis 2008), and their work-related wellbeing (Allen and Langford 2008). Service user-related factors include their resistance to social work involvement (Scottish Government 2014b; Unwin and Hogg 2012; Talentia 2007), their aggressive or offensive behaviour (Allen and Langford 2008), and the lack of basic trust required to establish a collaborative relationship with social workers (Crittenden 1999; Granfelt 1998).

Although the research highlighted above has comprehensively identified several barriers to effective engagement in frontline child protection practice, the relationship between spending cuts and these barriers has not been extensively analysed. Interestingly, Mänttari-van der Kuip's (2015) research on the impact of austerity on Finnish social work practice suggests that economic restraints do not affect the practitioner's direct work with service users as much it affects other aspects of their practice, e.g. their ability to meet timescales and perform early interventions. However, since her research focused on work-related wellbeing in social work in general, there is scope for further analysis on the perceptions of child protection

practitioners and the extent to which public spending cuts affect their ability to engage effectively with children and families.

2.3 Summary and conclusion

Austerity has undoubtedly had a complex yet inevitable impact on frontline child protection practice, which deserves further exploration. Due to the cumulative impact of spending cuts, the EU economic crisis, and welfare reforms, the level of income inequalities as well as the number of referrals to child welfare services are increasing in Scotland and Finland, which makes the chosen topic relevant in both contexts. The Scottish and Finnish child protection systems share similar underpinning values, which is particularly evident at the initial stages of child protection assessments. In both countries, early interventions are guided by principles of effective engagement and partnership. However, these aspects of practice are challenged by stringent resources, excessive proceduralism, and rigid timescales. Despite a growing body of research on the topic, there is currently limited empirical knowledge on the relationship between spending cuts and effective engagement.

In conclusion, there is scope for further exploration of challenges and barriers that Scottish and Finnish frontline practitioners perceive limiting their ability to engage effectively with families at the initial stages of assessment, and the extent to which they perceive these challenges to be linked to austerity measures. The following chapter aims to describe the cross-national comparative methodology and research design chosen to explore this topic.

Chapter 3

Methodology and research design

This chapter introduces the explorative and comparative methodology employed in this study and describes the research design that was developed to address the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. It outlines the data collection process and thematic analysis and considers the way in which self-critical reflection and reflexivity guided the research. The chapter concludes with a summary evaluating the strengths and limitations of the research design.

3.1 Explorative and comparative methodology

Explorative research is underpinned by a constructivist view that reality is subjective, and all knowledge relative and context bound (Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Comparative research allows researchers to explore relationships between social phenomena and social reality (Hantrais 2009). Both approaches are suited to studies that attempt to generate new insights to and a deeper understanding of previously relatively under-researched social phenomena (Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Hence, the methodology was selected with the understanding that new empirical knowledge regarding the relationship between austerity and child protection practice might be generated by exploring Scottish and Finnish practitioners' perceptions, provided their particular contexts are carefully considered (Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004).

A cross-national perspective was chosen due to its effectiveness in enabling systematic comparisons across two contexts (Hantrais 2009). Advantages of this approach are highlighted in previous research, e.g. in a recent study examining child

protection across five European countries, findings of which were used to inform the development of Swiss child protection policy (Spratt et al. 2015). Other large-scale quantitative studies have compared child welfare services across the Nordic countries (Pösö et al. 2014) and across the Nordic countries and Scotland (Connelly and Matheson 2012). In addition, a small-scale qualitative dissertation study (n=12) examined social work with immigrants through a grounded theory approach and comparative analysis of data that was gathered via interviews with British and Finnish practitioners (Koskimies 1999). The findings underlined a shared need for clear policy that regulates working with minority ethnic groups in both contexts (Koskimies 1999). These studies demonstrate the way in which cross-national comparisons of varying scale and methodology may be used to identify common challenges and objectives, and to inform the development of policy and practice (Mooney and Scott 2012a; Hantrais 2009).

One of the challenges of the cross-national perspective is the complexity of studying social phenomena across different countries where cultural and socio-political context and terminology differ (Hantrais 2009). Although a phenomenon does not necessarily need to be functionally equivalent in both contexts for it to be examined cross-nationally (Hearn et al. 2004), issues around conceptual and linguistic equivalence needed to be carefully considered and robust systematic analysis applied to avoid ambiguity and overgeneralisations when interpreting findings (Hantrais 2009; Harkness et al. 2003).

A further disadvantage of an explorative small-scale qualitative study is the inevitably limited representativeness of the sample, which affects the generalisability of the findings (Carey 2013; Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). However, when

conducted carefully, even a small-scale qualitative study can offer a fresh perspective and new insights into a phenomenon and contribute to the formulation of general propositions (Hantrais 2009, Fook 2002). It is justified to say, then, that this research has the potential to elucidate the shared reality of child protection practitioners in Scotland and Finland in an age of austerity.

3.2 Research design

Data collection: an adaptive qualitative approach

Given the practical limitations of this small-scale study, an adaptive approach was used in data collection. In other words, the process was problem-driven rather than methods driven with the aim being to shed maximal light on the research topic (Layder 2013). A purposive problem-sampling method was chosen to identify a sufficient sample of informants based on their relevance to the research questions (Layder 2013) in order to collect enough data for credible comparison and analysis to deepen understanding about the relationship between spending cuts and child protection (Carey 2013; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). In practice, this meant identifying a small number of frontline child protection practitioners with experience in conducting initial assessments, and who would be capable of providing insights into the everyday frontline child protection practice in an age of austerity.

Once my research proposal had been granted ethical approval from the University of Stirling Ethics Panel, I approached a local authority in Scotland and another in Finland. The local authorities were chosen based on their demographic similarities, which promotes data comparison. Both local authorities are small cities of more than 70,000 inhabitants but less than 100,000, a significant percentage of which live in rural areas (Statistics Finland 2016; National records of Scotland 2011). Research

access was negotiated with these local authorities according to their respective procedures. The sample of informants was identified through social work departments of the local authorities and with the assistance of child protection team leaders and service managers who invited volunteers to participate in the study. Eight frontline practitioners in Scotland (n=4) and Finland (n=4) with four to seventeen years' experience in conducting initial assessments volunteered to share their thoughts about the relationship between spending cuts and their ability to use effective engagement.

Throughout the research process, confidentiality and participant safety was taken into account according to ethical social science research guidance (BPS 2013; 2014; SRA 2002). This included obtaining an informed consent from the participants in writing (Appendices 1A; 1B) and informing them of their right to withdraw from the research at any point. The participants were also made aware that in case they disclosed information that would make me concerned that a person was at risk of harm, I could forward this information to their manager who acted as a liaison between the participants and me. In order to avoid any potential work-related harm to participants, the local authorities and individual participants were informed that the aim of the research is not to scrutinise participant local authorities or their individual managers or practitioners, but to explore the way in which the wider socio-economic climate is reflected in the frontline practice in this current age of austerity.

The data was gathered through a semi-structured interview, which is an effective tool for gathering qualitative data and allows developing an in-depth understanding to informants' experiences (D'Cruz and Jones 2004) in line with the interpretive and explorative methodology underpinning the research. In order to eliminate method

and sampling bias (Hantrais 2009; Van de Vijver 2003) and to promote a more inclusive experience, the participants were given a choice between completing the interview verbally or in writing. Of the total of eight interviews three were completed in writing by the Finnish participants. The use of a combination of verbal and written data is justified in a small-scale qualitative research where an adaptive approach generates findings that are more robust and a more comprehensive picture of the social phenomenon under study (Layder 2013). However, it must be acknowledged that despite identical questions in both types of interviews, only a verbal interview enables the researcher to follow up on responses and to generate more in-depth responses compared to the written interviews (Bryman 2012; D'Cruz and Jones 2004).

The aim of the interviews was to gain insights into practitioner perceptions and to identify and understand factors that hinder their ability to engage effectively with families, and the ways in which they perceive these barriers to be linked to spending cuts. Practitioners were asked questions around two key themes, i.e. their perceptions of barriers to effective engagement in their direct practice with service users at the point of initial assessments, and the relationship between these barriers and austerity measures (Appendices 2A; 2B). The interview questions were based on and sought to provide answers to the research questions. A combination of open and closed questions was chosen to allow participants' free narrative while focusing on the particular research topic. Completed interviews were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

In order to minimise construct bias (Van de Vijver 2003), the wording in both English and Finnish interview schedules was carefully considered. The aim was to maximise

functional and procedural equivalence of concepts, and to avoid conceptual vagueness and inconsistency that could affect data comparability (Hantrais 2009; Harkness et al. 2003). In other words, when translating interview questions, priority was given to the meaning and purpose of original questions rather than the literal equivalence of sentences in order to retain the stimulus, i.e. to provoke similar reactions in practitioners in both countries (Hantrais 2009; Harkness 2003). In practice, participants were given definitions of 'initial assessment', 'effective engagement', and 'austerity' as presented in literature to set the context and to promote shared understanding of the topics under study. This allowed participants to explore their perceptions of the concepts, which promotes the meaningfulness of the data and validity of the findings (Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004).

Thematic cross-national data analysis

A method of descriptive thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns, i.e. similarities and differences emerging from the data, and to consider how this new knowledge provides answers to the research questions and relates to existing literature (D'Cruz and Jones 2004). First, all the data was thematically analysed to explore barriers to effective engagement and the relationship between these barriers and austerity as perceived by Scottish and Finnish practitioners. Finally, the data was examined from a cross-national perspective through a systematic comparative analysis to explore the extent to which these perceptions differ across the two countries.

As required in an explorative qualitative study, data analysis was a dynamic process (D'Cruz and Jones 2004) which began by writing reflective field notes during data gathering, and progressed through a careful examination of the transcripts to a

structured thematic framework. An adaptive approach was applied in the thematic content analysis, which included using literature-based preliminary concepts as an explorative tool to examine data, and which then were supplemented and modified by data-emergent concepts (Layder 2013).

An initial analysis demonstrated that the data corresponded closely to the literature in terms of practitioner perceptions of effective engagement and austerity, as well as the factors they perceive to hinder their ability to engage effectively with families. Hence, a literature-based provisional coding frame (Layder 2013) was formulated and the data was organised in the following preliminary categories: practitioner perceptions of effective engagement and austerity, perceived challenges and barriers to effective engagement, and the perceived relationship between these barriers and austerity. Furthermore, the following six orienting sub-categories (Layder 2013) were drawn from literature where practitioners are described as encountering challenges and barriers to effective engagement in relation to:

1. limited resources (e.g. Pitkälä 2012);
2. power imbalance between social workers and service users (e.g. Kuronen 2004);
3. proceduralism (e.g. Gallagher et al. 2011);
4. rigid timescales (e.g. Alhanen 2014); and several
5. service user- (e.g. Allen and Langford 2008); and
6. practitioner-related factors (e.g. Jokinen and Nousiainen 2014).

During the coding process, key themes and issues arising from the data were identified and the classification scheme was tested and revised several times (Fook 2002). To avoid forcing data to conform to the orienting concepts (Layder 2013), the predefined categories were renamed (e.g. 'rigid timescales' turned into a broader

category of 'time restrictions') and new sub-categories (e.g. 'increased workload' and 'financial scrutiny') were added in response to the themes emerging from the data. Incorporating participants' terminology into the analysis framework promoted an 'inclusive' approach to social science (Fook 2002, p. 88) where priority is given to the knowledge arising from the frontline practice rather than to pre-existing formal theories. Moreover, a new temporal perspective to the impact of austerity emerged from the data and hence three new data-emergent categories were added to the analysis framework: 1) perceived abilities to engage with families before the age of austerity; 2) current engagement abilities; and 3) concerns for the future practice.

English and Finnish data were analysed in parallel to one another, which allowed examining participants' responses within their given socio-political and linguistic contexts, as well as drawing initial validity promoting comparisons across the countries, i.e. checking that the interview questions were functionally equivalent and had provoked similar responses in both countries (Van de Vijver 2003). Working on English and Finnish concepts in a parallel manner also enabled identifying shared attributes and transforming the preliminary literature-based categories into data-emergent equivalent indicators that then were used for cross-national comparison (Hantrais 2009; Van de Vijver 2003).

At this stage, linguistic and context-related factors were considered to minimise item bias (Van de Vijver 2003) and to maximise pragmatic and theoretical equivalence (Hantrais 2009). For example, Finnish practitioners described effective engagement to involve 'encountering' (*kohtaaminen*) the service user in way that helps them to 'overcome' their initial reluctance to engage. Scottish participants respectively spoke more explicitly about the use of 'empathic engagement' to reduce service users'

initial 'anxieties'. Acknowledging shared underlying meanings despite of differences in the terminology allowed developing conceptually sufficiently equivalent thematic categories. Once the data was organised in these categories, patterns emerged that allowed identifying the most predominant challenges and barriers to effective engagement and examining the extent to which the practitioners in both perceive these to be related to spending cuts. This led a way to systematic cross-national comparisons across these patterns.

Although complete comparability of cross-national data is somewhat impossible to achieve (Hantrais and Mangen 1996), examination of the thematically analysed Scottish and Finnish data showed them to be sufficiently comparable. All practitioners held substantially similar perceptions of the concepts of effective engagement and austerity, and had experience in conducting initial assessments, which suggests that the sample was adequately representative for the purposes of this research (Layder 2013). Furthermore, comparisons across two quite similar affluent Western countries such as Scotland and Finland are less susceptible to bias than comparisons between more different subject groups (Van de Vijver 2003), which further promotes the credibility of the findings.

Working around bias: reflection and reflexivity

Credible cross-national and qualitative research requires considering multiple factors that contribute to the research process and outcomes, including the researcher objectivity (Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Continuous self-critical reflection was used throughout the research to identify and consider my underlying assumptions and value positions to promote comparability of the data, credibility of the analysis and the truthfulness of data interpretation (Hantrais 2009; Van de Vijver

2003; Finlay 2002). Reflection allowed me to remain reflexive, i.e. to acknowledge the contribution my own persona makes to the research process and its findings, and apply this understanding when making decisions about research methods or interpretation of the findings (Fook 2013).

For example, I acknowledged my dual role as a Finnish researcher studying Scottish practice, and a Scotland-based researcher studying Finnish practice during the data gathering. Being transparent about my background with the participants was a reflexive decision that promoted trust between me and practitioners and in this way contributed to the credibility of the findings. During the data analysis self-critical reflection supported my subjective interpretations and helped me to minimise personal bias and consider the participants' responses meaningfully in their context (Silverman 2013; D'Cruz and Jones 2004; Finlay 2002).

Admittedly, the decision to examine child protection in Scotland and Finland from a cross-national perspective is in part influenced by the literature outlined in Chapter 2, and partly by my personal interest to gain more in-depth understanding on the topic. Likewise, once a temporal dimension unexpectedly emerged from the data, I made a reflexive decision to include this perspective in the findings (Chapter 5), which was informed by my personal interest in the topic as well as the notion that ethical social work research aims to generate social change (D'Cruz and Jones 2004), and hence, the practitioners' views deserve to be heard.

3.3 Summary and conclusion

The research design outlined above has several advantages and disadvantages. The strength of the explorative and comparative cross-national methodology and the qualitative data-gathering method lies in their potential to generate new

comprehensive understanding about the implications of austerity on child protection practice from a fresh perspective (Bryman 2012; Hantrais 2009; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). The disadvantages, on the other hand, are the complexity of studying social phenomena in a small-scale cross-national study where findings are not generalisable beyond the sample (Carey 2013; Hantrais 2009). To address these challenges, continuous self-critical reflection was used to consider context and bias-related factors in order to provide a truthful interpretation of both Scottish and Finnish practitioners' perceptions. In conclusion, despite the challenges, comparisons in a small-scale cross-national research are possible and worthwhile as they enable exploration of the relationship between social phenomena and social reality (Hantrais 2009; Fook 2002). The results of the above-described research design are outlined in the following two chapters.

Chapter 4

Challenges to effective engagement

This is the first of two chapters introducing the empirical findings of this study and seeking answers to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. All participating practitioners perceived effective engagement as a vital part of their practice and their ability to engage with families as generally sufficient. However, they identified factors that pose a challenge to establishing trusting relationships with service users. This chapter describes these challenges in six categories, as presented in Table 1, and which explore the extent to which they are regarded as being related to spending cuts. In order to explore that connection effectively and to provide a coherent overall picture of the implications of spending cuts on frontline practice, perceptions of Scottish and Finnish practitioners are examined parallel to one another and in discussion with existing literature.

4.1 Challenges from practitioners' perspectives

Limited resources

Resource limitations in child protection are well acknowledged (e.g. Kananoja et al. 2013; Gallagher et al. 2011), and hence it was not surprising that all participants, save one Finnish practitioner, perceived stringent resources as a challenge to effective engagement. Half of both Scottish and Finnish practitioners regarded the recent policies promoting multi-agency collaboration and early intervention as contributing to the increase in referrals as suggested by Heino (2014). In line with literature, most participants referred to the detrimental and

Table 1 – Challenges and barriers to effective engagement

	Scottish practitioners (n=4)	Finnish practitioners (n=4)
1. Limited resources		
• increased workload	4	3
• cuts in services	4	1
• fewer workers	3	2
2. Power imbalance		
• being the face of authority	2	1
• use of compulsory legal measures	2	1
3. Proceduralism and bureaucracy		
• increased financial scrutiny	3	1
• heightened thresholds for support	2	1
• increased amount of paperwork	1	0
4. Time restrictions		
• managing busy schedules	2	3
• statutory assessment timescale	2	0
5. Service user-related factors		
• fear and mistrust due to preconceptions	4	4
• resistance and non-engagement	4	3
• unrealistic expectations	0	1
6. Practitioner-related factors		
• skills and methods	3	1
• values and attitudes	2	0

disproportionate effect of austerity on vulnerable families (McKendrick et al. 2016; Beatty and Fothergill 2015) and viewed spending cuts as playing an indirect role in increased child protection referrals:

We've had people whose circumstances have changed because of austerity. If in terms of parental mental health and parental emotional health, the impact [on] the poverty and deprivation would be immense in terms of exacerbating that. And ... that [can] have quite a knock-on effect in terms of their capacity to meet the needs of their children. – Scottish Practitioner I

Most Scottish participants believed that cuts in local authority-funded preventive services had undermined their ability to signpost families to agencies that offered practical support, which then rendered negotiating shared outcomes with families challenging. In contrast, most of the Finns acknowledged that austerity had led to cuts in public services, but they did not perceive this to affect their engagement with service users. Furthermore, Finnish participants did not mention cuts in voluntary services. This might reflect participants' socio-political context as the role of civil society is more prominent in liberal welfare states than it is in the Nordic states (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Esping-Andersen 1990). Hence, cuts to these services appeared to impact Scottish participants more than their Finnish colleagues.

Most Scottish and two Finnish participants regarded inadequate human resources as a factor that limited their ability to engage effectively. While the Scottish practitioners primarily blamed austerity for the staff shortage, the Finns attributed the shortfall to a lack of qualified applicants. Although one participant reflected that without public sector salary freezes, child protection could potentially attract more applicants, recent British research suggests that social workers increasingly value reduced stress over a salary increase (Donovan 2017).

Overall, the impact of limited resources appeared to have a cumulative impact on the time practitioners had to devote to working with families:

[In terms of human resources] we have been limited. And in a sense it has affected that we are meeting families fewer times than before ... So if we aim to establish that good relationship ... one meeting is not necessarily enough for that. I think that if we had more resources then maybe we could have more appointments, and in this way our practice could be more effective. – Finnish Practitioner IV

[Frontline practitioners] have got higher caseloads ... reduced numbers of workers within the local authority, and less places to signpost. And [it] does create a barrier in a sense that if we are busy or we've got less resources ... that then has a knock on effect to not being able to do all the bits that constitute effective engagement. – Scottish Practitioner IV

Some participants acknowledged stringent resources as a challenge that does not necessarily need to become a barrier to effective engagement:

If facilities are inappropriate or resources are scarce because of a staff shortage, it may be evident in a meeting [with a family], but you can work around that. You do not need to show the service user that you are in haste, and you can make tight/inappropriate spaces more welcoming.
– Finnish Practitioner II

Power imbalance

Overall, Scottish participants spoke more explicitly about the inevitable power imbalance between them and service users (Harris and White 2013; Kuronen 2004), than the Finns did. The Finnish practitioners stated that effective engagement required finding a 'shared language' (*yhteinen kieli*) and having a dialogue with service users. In contrast, Scottish participants spoke about the importance of having 'full conversations' with service users, but also emphasised the significance of demonstrating a non-judgmental attitude. The differences in discourses may reflect their socio-political context. The participants from an equitable Nordic welfare state (Kananen 2016; Dorling 2014) appeared less concerned about the power imbalance and described engagement in somewhat more equal terms than the practitioners from a liberal welfare state did, where class-political dualism persists (Dorling 2014; Esping-Andersen 1990) and involvement of public powers represent an intrusion into family life (Clarke et al. 2007).

Nonetheless, all participants with the exception of two Finns, argued that the power imbalance sometimes limited their ability to engage effectively with families. Two Scottish and one Finnish participant found it challenging when a family avoided engagement with social workers and compulsory child protection measures are then introduced to ensure safety of the children:

I think getting that real relationship and rapport can be lost when things have escalated to—when they are forced to engage with you. – Scottish Practitioner I

Two Scottish and one Finnish participant also spoke about the challenge of establishing trust when they are representing the public authority in a mediating role between the state and citizens (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013). Only one of them perceived spending cuts as a contributing factor:

[When you make an initial assessment] you are the face of the authority, which has promoted people being in this [difficult] position. So, [you are the face of] our local authority, who is essentially the government, who has imposed these austerity cuts. ... And I think that is part of the whole narrative around about austerity, which is ... 'you are in this position because [of] the choices you have made and that is your fault'. – Scottish Practitioner II

In literature, this type of political discourse that blames the poor for their own woes and is used to justify cuts in public expenditure has been attributed not only to austerity (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013), but also to neoliberal approaches to welfare (Dorling 2014; Clarke et al. 2007), which highlights the complex ways spending cuts relate to wider policy developments.

Proceduralism and bureaucracy

Overall, Scottish participants perceived proceduralism or bureaucracy as a challenge to effective engagement more often than their Finnish colleagues did. Most Scottish and one Finnish practitioner stated that increased financial scrutiny in particular limited their ability to support and engage with families:

We are now close to justifying to an extreme level almost every penny you are spending on a child in your caseload. – Scottish Practitioner IV

I do think assessments are scrutinised a bit more than they used to. – Scottish Practitioner I

Although the participants claimed that scrutiny had increased in an age of austerity, literature suggests that prioritising economic considerations over social work values stems also from neoliberalism and managerialism (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013; Ferguson and Woodward 2009). Two Scottish practitioners and one Finn spoke about challenges around heightened support thresholds and a focus shift in policies, which sometimes limited their ability to make timely responses. One participant identified austerity-exacerbated limited resources as a contributing factor to their role shifting towards crisis management, which made it challenging to respond to the needs of other families in their caseload:

When a family does need you and is seeking you out for your support, and you are not able to provide something ... some kind of response. Then you are not really living up to your part of that relationship. – Scottish Practitioner III

In contrast, one Finnish practitioner stated that their ability to make timely and effective interventions was constrained by policy and legislation requiring the least

intrusive support methods to be exhausted prior to more intensive interventions being offered to the family. Contrasting Secmezsoy-Gault's (2014) findings, only one Scottish participant stated that the increased amount of paperwork was particularly time-consuming to a point where it sometimes created a barrier to engagement, attributing the increase to both austerity and a change in the way caseloads are calculated, which reflects the overall efficiency-promoting approaches applied to social work in recent years (Banks 2011).

Time restrictions

Most participants stated that it was a challenge to manage their busy diaries in a way that promoted effective engagement:

[The most significant barrier is being in] haste. You do not have time to plan client contacts well enough. A contact with children in particular should be planned carefully and thoroughly. – Finnish Practitioner II

Time restrictions limited their ability to engage with families, particularly at the initial stages:

If we do not have that ability to spend the time to reduce people's anxieties about what we are there for ... then we are not going to [get them to] engage [effectively]. – Scottish Practitioner III

This finding reflects literature that identifies rigid timescales as a factor that limits the practitioner's ability to establish trust with service users (Alhanen 2014; Gallagher et al. 2011; Booth et al. 2006). Two Scottish practitioners spoke explicitly about the manner in which assessment timescales can pose a challenge to person-centred practice:

If there is lack of time to build that meaningful relationship. I mean, sometimes there is pressure, you need to respond and—I think we are [usually] proactive. However, I have seen that happen, it's reactive responses and not enough time, so the assessments are not holistic. So we are not specifically identifying with the family what the issues are. – Scottish Practitioner I

When discussing time restrictions in terms of busy schedules or assessment timescales, none of the participants perceived a connection to spending cuts. However, as highlighted above, participants identify spending cuts as a contributing factor to activities that take up their time that they could otherwise devote to direct work with service users.

Service user-related factors

Overall, participants shared the view that certain service user-related factors sometimes undermine their ability to engage with them effectively. These challenges were seen to emerge from fear and mistrust towards social work that might lead to families avoiding engagement. Generally, participants did not blame austerity but attributed this to negative previous experiences or public perception:

What can make engagement challenging, is a service user's negative preconception, the fear of being blamed. Unfortunately, child protection still has a negative reputation ... If the client feels that the practitioner ... is just a threat and frightening, there cannot be effective engagement. – Finnish Practitioner I

I do not know if their resistance is affected by [austerity]. I think that is very much about public perception ... I do believe that the constant attack on social work then encourages people not to engage. – Scottish Practitioner III

Interestingly, both Scottish and Finnish participants regarded public perception of child protection as equally negative despite there being a greater number of significant case reviews conducted and published in the UK than in Finland. Most Scottish and one Finnish participant perceive spending cuts as unhelpful and potentially indirectly connected to service users' reluctance to engage:

[Austerity potentially contributes to negative preconceptions] in a way, that service users might experience a change in the societal set of values, and because of that they may wonder what kind of service they will get, or whether they will get the kind of service they would hope. – Finnish Practitioner III

It could be a lot of reasons which could be linked to austerity, linked to the fact that their poverty or deprivation ... [has] been reinforced by austerity, and then their fear of being judged [is also reinforced]. Or they do not want you to come to their house because there may be some shame around that. – Scottish Practitioner I

In literature, feelings of shame associated with poverty that arise from people's failure to fulfil social expectations is described as socially constructed and imposed by media and government (Walker et al. 2013). Thus, it appears that the public discourse around austerity and poverty (Dorling 2014; Ferguson and Lavalette 2013; Crouch 2011), as well as vilifying accounts of child protection in media (Ferguson and Woodward 2009), all play a role in people's reluctance to engage with social work.

Uniquely, one Finnish practitioner identified service users' unrealistic expectations as a challenge to effective engagement where families are expecting more intense interventions than social workers are able to provide within their legal powers and resource limitations. This appears to reflect the 'paradoxical nature' of the Finnish

comprehensive child protection system, which is perceived simultaneously as a source of support and a feared 'punisher' that may remove the children (Granfelt 1998, p. 134).

Practitioner-related factors

Generally, and in line with literature, participants described effective engagement as requiring the use of a specific set of professional skills that aim to promote service user participation (Gallagher et al. 2011):

We've got the responsibility to be respectful and [practice in an] open and honest way with the families ... If we can do that in the right way then we stand a chance [of] the families working with us. – Scottish Practitioner IV

With regard to challenges, most Scottish and one Finnish participant spoke of the difficulty of establishing trusting relationships if these skills are used ineffectively or in an unsympathetic way:

So the barriers may be that the social worker ... doesn't have the skills to engage effectively with the family. It may well be that they misunderstand the practical or the emotional problems within the family. – Scottish Practitioner I

One Scottish and one Finnish participant highlighted the significance of being able to trust other practitioners' values and skills with regard to appropriate information sharing to ensure proportionate responses to families' needs:

In terms of that initial engagement, it does not necessarily mean that it needs to be social work to—I think it is about working together to ensure that it is the most proportionate response and kept at a level that [can] try to support that engagement of the family. – Scottish Practitioner I

However, participants did not generally perceive any connection between austerity and the skills and values that underpin their direct practice with service users. Although some participants acknowledged spending cuts as an added challenge, most demonstrated confidence in their professional abilities, which can be interpreted as a sign of professional resilience, i.e. their capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances (De las Olas Palma-García and Hombrados-Mandieta 2014):

There are ways [you can work] around [austerity-related challenges] if you are creative as a social worker. – Scottish Practitioner IV

One participant acknowledged, however, that in an age of austerity, practitioners can feel powerless in their attempts to support families:

I think it is interesting to think about how helpless we can feel ... And I think that is absolutely about austerity. Because the helplessness is because at our side there are not enough resources in terms of intervention. – Scottish Practitioner II

4.2 Summary and conclusion

Both Scottish and Finnish participants' confidence in their own skills and abilities to engage effectively with families in an age of austerity emerges from the findings as a sign of professional resilience. However, all participants were able to identify factors that sometimes hinder their ability to engage effectively with children and families. The most significant of these were accumulated limited resources, particularly in terms of increased workload and inadequate staffing, and service users' negative preconceptions and mistrust towards social work involvement. In terms of resource limitations, these findings are in line with previous research (Alhanen 2014;

Kananoja et al. 2013; Pitkälä 2012). Other factors that participants regarded as limiting their ability to engage effectively related to increased proceduralism, time restrictions, the power imbalance between them and service users, and practitioners' ineffective or unsympathetic use of their core engagement skills.

Unsurprisingly, the relationship between spending cuts and the factors that hinder effective engagement was regarded as complex and closely intertwined with wider socio-political developments and public perceptions. Austerity was regarded as contributing to the increase in financial scrutiny and workload, particularly through the well-documented detrimental impact austerity exerts on children and families (Lehtelä et al. 2016; Policy in Practice 2016). Service users' mistrust was mostly attributed to the negative public discourse around poverty and child protection, which some participants perceived to exacerbate families' reluctance to engage with social services. Generally, the power imbalance and time restrictions, apart from those resulting from scarce resources, were not viewed as connected to austerity.

The most significant difference between Scottish and Finnish practitioners was that the latter identified fewer challenges to engagement and regarded austerity as making a less significant contribution to these challenges. The difference may potentially be attributed to less drastic austerity measures implemented in Finland compared to those introduced in the UK (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015) and the language of 'austerity' only being adopted in public usage recently. Compared to the Finns, Scottish participants regarded austerity to be more connected to inadequacies in staffing, and appeared to be more affected by austerity measures that have led to cuts in voluntary sector support services. The Scottish practitioners also spoke more frequently about challenges in relation to proceduralism, and appeared to regard the

imbalance between them and service users as a more significant barrier. These differences appear to reflect participants' respective socio-political contexts, highlighting the way in which the class-dualistic Scottish liberal welfare state relies on a strong civil society for service provision whereas in a more equitable Nordic country, support services are provided primarily by the state (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Esping-Andersen 1990).

Chapter 5

A temporal perspective to engagement opportunities

This chapter examines the findings from a temporal perspective and considers the practitioners' perceptions of their past, current, and future opportunities to establish working relationships with children and families. Although this research did not initially set out to explore this perspective, the extent to which a temporal dimension emerges from the findings indicates that due to welfare reforms the role and reality of frontline child protection practice is in a process of change in which austerity plays a role. Hence, these findings are relevant to the original aims of this research and warrant further analysis.

5.1 Remembering the past: more opportunities and choice

The overall reflection of the practitioners regarding their practice is that they previously had more resources and opportunities to engage with service users. It is beyond the scope of this research to analyse the extent to which this perception is connected to nostalgia and people's tendency to recall positive past events more easily than negative memories (Baldwin et al. 2015). Nonetheless, all Scottish and half of the Finnish participants regarded, in line with literature (Saarinen et al. 2012; Hearn et al. 2004), preventive and supportive services as having been more readily available before austerity:

We might had services locally that we had two years ago that we might be thinking, 'that meets the child's needs or ... that service would be very helpful in terms of ... working with the mother', and that service is not available anymore. And that would be due to cuts and austerity.

Different resources and services are limited compared to maybe what there were five years ago. – Scottish Practitioner I

Increasing unemployment and increasingly deficient mental health, drug and alcohol services are apparent in increased child welfare concern reports. – Finnish Practitioner II

One practitioner spoke about a ‘massive reduction’ in community resources that, together with the adverse cumulative impact of austerity, limit the opportunity for families to experience social inclusion even more than before:

The [community] resources [are now] becoming [only] available to people who can pay for them. So, I can continue to go to my local leisure centre because I can afford the membership fee. What about someone [whose] kids cannot go to swimming pool because they can't afford it ... And ironically what we then do is in our assessment ... we talk about how active are children ... and how included they are the community. So—what do we expect people to do? How are some people supposed to access and be active and included in their communities when they cannot afford to do that? – Scottish Practitioner II

This reflects literature in which social inequalities are claimed to distort people's ability to make choices, not because the financially less well-off would lack the capacity make such choices, but because of ‘unequal distribution of the social and cultural resources that enable and empower choice’ (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 107). In an age of austerity, it then becomes social work's role to work around these inequalities:

I think [social workers] are increasingly motivated or impassioned to be more socially just in our response to the austerity ... So my response perhaps, as a result of austerity, is to be more responsive than inactive

in so far as being conscious that people perhaps ... are put in a position, where they have little choice and [I] want to be someone who can help them to establish more choice. – Scottish Practitioner II

All Scottish and one Finnish participant perceived that more funds were available previously, which enabled them to support families and make these choices. Scottish participants, in particular, spoke of discretionary payments that they previously used to make, and Finnish practitioners in the interim, continue to be able to make:

There is more scrutiny now ... because the council has less money ... Previously we as social workers could authorise up to £20 ... if you needed to help the family by buying something ... whether that's gas, electric or bus fares, train fares, whatever it would be. Now we can't authorise even one pence without a manager's signature. – Scottish Practitioner IV

I hear people who have been much longer qualified talking about times when there was cash going about and we used to give people cash in a way to help them in a practical sense, or placements were much more regularly available because there was much more money about. – Scottish Practitioner II

These findings appear to reflect not only austerity but also wider policy developments that have led social work to become managed in a business-like cost-efficiency promoting and managerialist manner (Banks 2011). For example, while one Scottish participant perceives caseloads to have increased in an age of austerity, another pointed out that the change has happened over time and in conjunction with other policy shifts:

Austerity has been going on for a while, isn't it, really? So [our workload has increased] probably in the last two or three years, and [I] maybe

never recognised [it] as [having] been a significant shift. So it is not like austerity came in yesterday, it has been going on for a time. – Scottish Practitioner I

5.2 Here and now: resilient practitioners

As described above, most participants argued that their role and resources had changed over time due to various intertwining policy developments, austerity included. However, some noted that there is a limit to which economic efficiency should be promoted in child protection:

A lot of rhetoric is coming about being solution focused ... [They say] 'it is not about austerity and cuts; it is about being more efficient'. There is a limit to how much that can actually take place and I think we are past that limit actually ... Because the cuts come from so many directions that ... you are then struggling to find out what is [it] that you can do to help, because there is no service there. – Scottish Practitioner III

When they have emphasised, I think, [avoiding taking children in care] a bit too much [for financial reasons] ... it has started to turn against itself. [Families'] situations end up going too far and it leads to expensive long-term placements. But, I somehow feel that when they are cutting costs in one end, then in the other end [there may be more costs]. So, although there are stringent resources, it is very important to understand where a placement could actually be the investment that saves money in the future. – Finnish Practitioner IV

In line with literature, most Scottish and two Finnish participants spoke of the increased pressures they face in an age of austerity due to growing demand and decreasing resources (Jütte et al. 2015; Paasivirta 2012; Walker 2012; Satka et al. 2007). As highlighted in the latter citation below, these pressures may also be

attributed to neoliberal approaches, which undermine the traditional social work value base (Ferguson and Woodward 2009):

My perception is [that austerity] has a fundamental daily impact on people's lives. Not only on my clients' lives. I think, that the impact on my life [is fundamental, as it is on] the people that work for services and the agencies you work with, which actually changes the whole tone of people's engagement. Because ... the people who are doing the work are not in as comfortable perhaps a position [as] they may have been a number of years ago. – Scottish Practitioner II

[Austerity] is an extra challenge for the social worker to navigate ... and [they need] to know [their] skills, core values ... why you do the job basically. So [that you] do not become a robot of a cost cutting local authority as much as you can ... then you can cut through some of those barriers [to engagement]. – Scottish Practitioner IV

The increased pressures are evident in the following accounts that describe the powerlessness as experienced by the practitioners:

I think that there are limited resources at the side of the practitioner as well as the side of the client. And actually, how helpless does everybody feel in that? Because, 'we would want to help you, but actually, do we have what you need? And if what you need is access to community resources, if what you need is access to better housing—actually we do not have any ability to do anything about that'. So there is helplessness on our part, which I think is probably exacerbating the helplessness on theirs. – Scottish Practitioner II

We may be dealing with the aftermath of some of the emotional and mental health stuff, but there certainly still are the financial constraints and how that impacts on families' and children's inclusion—or children

being able to visit their granny even, thinking of ... that relative poverty, and the impact to that. – Scottish Practitioner I

We cannot accommodate children on the basis that they haven't got money, but we've got to keep children safe. So how do you deal with that? – Scottish practitioner III

However, in spite of the pressures and challenges they claim limit their ability to engage effectively with families as outlined in the previous chapter, all participants demonstrated professional resilience, i.e. ability to successfully navigate work adversities and adapt to challenging circumstances (Carson et al. 2011; O'Dougherty Wright and Masten 2005; Masten et al. 1990). They remained confident that their skills and abilities to engage with families were unaffected by austerity:

What I do see ... locally is lots of cuts to services ... Then there are the pressures in caseloads ... [that] could have an impact, but I think it is the human, the service, so ... we do that as humans and we do not need the financial backings in terms of interventions, and our skills and their knowledge of that, that should stay stable ... I don't think austerity has an impact on engagement as of yet. – Scottish Practitioner I

I have not noticed austerity to affect my practice. – Finnish Practitioner I

I think what we do is come to terms with [limited resources] and move on ... I hope it doesn't affect my efforts engaging with people. ... I think if it just becomes normal, so whatever that caseload or whatever that resource cut is that you just make do, you say 'okay, that is our new normal' and you get on [with it]. – Scottish Practitioner II

This finding is in line with research suggesting that practitioner abilities to engage with families are less affected by economic restraints than other aspects of their practice (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015). The manner in which participants were able to

make the most of their sometimes limited opportunities to engage with children and families probably also reflects the notion that, despite increased pressures, social workers continue to hold some degree of control over the way in which they prioritise their time within the organisational and statutory framework (Davis and Wainwright 2006). On the other hand, the finding may reflect the practitioners' particular role, which is conducting initial assessments:

We are probably on the luckier side because we do have that limited time anyway ... We are there to make up a care plan for moving over. I think, [we] do not lose too much on the assessment [because of austerity], but it is then what you do with that assessment afterwards. – Scottish Practitioner III

Interestingly, two Scottish participants regarded austerity as having made a positive contribution to their ability to engage with service users through an enhanced sense of empathy and families' increased interest in approaching social work for support:

I wondered actually if [austerity] has affected positively ... There is a sense of a kind of collaboration, and ... 'Okay, we accept that ... austerity is happening. What do we do to try and minimise and mitigate against that?', rather than 'how do we enforce it?' ... As a practitioner, I think in some ways it helps me to empathise. – Scottish Practitioner II

I think austerity [measures] ... have had a massive impact across the country ... What I see is quite a lot of families looking for financial assessment or assistance, or referrals to food banks ... What my understanding is, that ... when their benefits are cut or they've got sanctions on them ... we are a service that they know, that—they can come to for help and support or we can sign-post them to the right people. – Scottish Practitioner I

The latter citation reflects literature in which the use of food banks is noted to have increased in the UK in an age of austerity (Dorling 2014). It is also acknowledged that the need for care, support, and guidance that brings families into contact with social work services is often related to their insufficient financial or material resources (Davis and Wainwright 2006).

5.3 Going forward: concerns about the future

Most Scottish and half of the Finnish participants spoke about their concerns for the future of social work should austerity persist. Half of both Scottish and Finnish participants believed that resources may become even more limited:

Further down the line, the more cuts [they make] ... in terms of austerity ... two and three ... years down the line [they might] make cuts in terms resources [that affect the] availability of social workers. So, I think that may have an impact on engagement and I mean in that there is not enough workers to actually engage [with families]. – Scottish Practitioner I

Because this is so exhausting [job] for us remaining [in the intake team], even we will not last long. In this sense, it could be sensible economically as well if there would be practitioners to do [the job] here. I think it is a risk in a way as well if you do not have enough practitioners to do the work in time. – Finnish Practitioner IV

So we've got increased need and decreased budgets. It is not going to end well. – Scottish Practitioner IV

One practitioner noted, however, that social workers do have the skills to find ways to support families even if resources are scarce:

When I qualified 11 years ago ... I was always told 'you've done all this training ... If you cannot find the resource, you [need to] be the resource'. .. I think, going forward ... we need to start bringing these skills back to the forward, practice them, and use them. If we are not able to get a service that works for families ... then we need to be using our skills and knowledge and research and providing that info and intervention. – Scottish Practitioner I

Two Scottish participants also spoke about the challenges of applying early intervention and inter-agency collaboration policies in an age of spending cuts:

I think it is good that everyone is working together, but I think it needs to be financed. I do not think it can just be a cheap way of child care. And I think they will just keep doing it till where there isn't any social work left. [Where] we are there just for removing children. There is not any actual helping people or trying to work with families. Where [we are] almost left as an emergency service, I think that is where it gets pushed towards just now. – Scottish Practitioner III

And there is the big pressure on—to work in a more interagency way and be sharing [information] and I think, [going] forward that is a good practice model. That is what we should be doing for families. However, it's forced upon us to some extent, because we cannot do it all ... So you might spend a lot of time looking for a relevant resource. – Scottish Practitioner I

This finding reflects literature in which early intervention is described as a cost-efficient short-term solution for governments (Jütte et al. 2015), but increasingly challenging to deliver in an age of austerity (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015) when child welfare services are becoming increasingly reactive instead of preventive (Saarinen et al. 2012). In other words, it is challenging for social work to view itself as an

‘empowering profession’ when its role is becoming more circumscribed (Welbourne 2011, p. 405).

Half of both Scottish and Finnish participants also mentioned the persisting negative public discourse and the adverse impact that austerity measures will continue to exert on low-income families:

I think it suits people [in power] to have barriers [to engagement that stem from negative public discourse] and then to be able to turn around and say, ‘well they’ve only got themselves to blame because they did not visit, they did not accept this support’. It is kind of victim blaming, again. I think we are going back that way. – Scottish Practitioner III

Austerity has a negative impact, and can only escalate going forward for families. – Scottish Practitioner I

There are multiple factors, which could ... limit engagement. But I think austerity emphasises the things that make it difficult. So, austerity emphasises how you feel about yourself. Austerity emphasises your limited resources. – Scottish Practitioner II

These findings reflect the literature in which it is suggested that negative perceptions of welfare services pave the way for further spending cuts (Dorling 2014) and poverty is described as leading to a sense of powerlessness stemming from material deprivation, limited ability to make life choices, and shame (Walker et al. 2013). Furthermore, service users’ feelings of self-blame and powerlessness have been noted to potentially exacerbate when they come in contact with social workers (Davis and Wainwright 2006).

One participant spoke of a fundamental change in the way social assistance distributions are managed in Finland, where a national Social Insurance Institution

(SII) assumes a role previously reserved for social workers (Blomberg et al. 2016). The change implemented in January 2017 aims to promote efficiency (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2016), i.e. bring saving to the Finnish government. While social workers continue to be able to make discretionary payments, it remains to be seen how this change in the social worker's role will affect the ability of child protection practitioners' to support and empower service users, or people relying on these payments:

I do think there are really poor families ... and it is getting more severe all the time ... so there are more referrals [to child protection] ... I think there are so many factors affecting it—maybe not austerity [per se], but the birth rate in Finland is going down, and ill-being increases. So I do think it may be connected to increasingly stringent economic situation, and uncertainty—I do not know how this SII change will affect. It may be expensive [for the government] the uncertainty that—it can be a big thing for people relying on social assistance. These types of uncertainties may affect their wellbeing. – Finnish Practitioner IV

5.4 Summary and conclusion

Examination of the findings from a temporal perspective reveals that both Scottish and Finnish participants perceived their role and resources available to them to have changed over time due to austerity and other policy developments. Overall, participants stated that they previously had more resources and more opportunities to engage with families. Currently, the practitioners face increasing pressures but demonstrated professional resilience and confirmed that although opportunities may be limited compared to those of the past, their ability to engage with families remains unaffected by austerity. This reflects their effective use of professional freedom to prioritise their time and resources, and perhaps the time-limited nature of initial

assessments. Participants were, however, generally concerned that their resources will become increasingly stringent and their ability to engage with families effectively and deliver early interventions might be further limited if austerity persists.

Although the findings are not generalisable beyond this small sample, it appears that professional resilience contributes significantly to the ability of frontline practitioners to continue promoting effective engagement under the increased pressures present in an age of austerity. Closer examination of this resilience is beyond the scope of this research, but it is worth noting, however, that in an age of austerity, social workers' work-related wellbeing, which closely related to resilience (De las Olas Palma-García and Hombrados-Mendieta 2014; Carson et al. 2011), might be at risk (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015). The final chapter below evaluates these findings and draws conclusions about their implications for practice.

Chapter 6

Summary and Conclusion

6.1 Evaluation of the findings

This dissertation set out to explore Scottish and Finnish child protection practitioners' perceptions of the impact of austerity on their ability to engage effectively with service users. It has been acknowledged throughout this dissertation, that austerity is a complex concept, and an attempt to grasp and compare its implications across two socio-political contexts is a challenge. However, it has also been argued that Scottish and Finnish child protection systems are similar enough for credible cross-national comparison in terms of underpinning principles and challenges brought about by contemporary policy developments and European economic climate (Chapter 2). Effective engagement as a shared emphasis in child protection practice in both countries was chosen as the research topic around which the research questions (Chapter 1) were formulated. The findings demonstrate that the participating Scottish and Finnish practitioners shared an understanding about the meaning of both 'austerity' and 'effective engagement', which promotes the validity of the findings.

The manner in which the findings answered the research questions indicates that the research design was fit for its purpose. The answer to the first question, i.e. what are the most significant challenges to effective engagement, were found to be accumulated scarce resources and service users' negative preconceptions and mistrust towards child protection. This finding reflects the well-documented resource limitations (e.g. Jütte et al. 2015; Alhanen 2014) that were discussed in the literature

review. The significance of service users' preconceptions was not as comprehensively explored in the review, which reflects its selective nature and the focus of research on practitioners' perspectives instead of those of service users.

The answer to the second research question exploring the relationship between austerity and the challenges to engagement proved to be as complex as anticipated. Overall, the way in which participants perceived the impact of austerity to intertwine with that of other efficiency-promoting policy developments, including neoliberalism and managerialism, highlights the cumulative adverse impact that spending cuts, economic climate, and welfare reforms have on social welfare (Mooney and Scott 2012b). The participants viewed their resources as having become more limited and financial scrutiny as having increased in an age of austerity. They also attributed increased workloads to growing income inequalities and austerity-exacerbated poverty and related health and social issues (McKendrick et al. 2015; Kurttila 2015; Walker et al. 2012). Families' negative preconceptions and reluctance to engage with social work were regarded as being connected to a negative public discourse around child protection and austerity, which reflects notions about unsympathetic media (Ferguson and Woodward 2009) and political rhetoric regarding unsustainable social welfare (Dorling 2014; Ferguson and Lavalette 2013).

The final research question examining the way in which the perceptions of Scottish and Finnish practitioners differ was answered through systematic cross-national comparisons. The similarities across the contexts appear more striking than the differences do, which highlights the shared reality of child protection practice in Western welfare states in an age of austerity. However, the specific socio-political contexts are apparent in that the Scottish participants seemed to be more affected

by the cuts in voluntary sector support services than their Finnish colleagues were in a Nordic country, where the state continues to deliver most of the welfare services (Esping-Andersen 1990). Compared to the Scottish, the Finnish practitioners more often attributed the challenges to factors other than austerity, which may reflect the less drastic spending cuts implemented in Finland (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015), and less prominent neoliberal approaches to welfare services.

Overall, the findings complement previous research and suggest that both child protection practitioners and families are facing increasing pressures in an age of austerity (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015; McKendrick et al. 2015). However, in spite of these pressures, both Scottish and Finnish participants demonstrated professional resilience and stated that, in the interim, their ability to engage with families remains predominantly unaffected by austerity. The question as to what factors affect this resilience not explored in this research. Nonetheless, participants were generally concerned that their ability to engage effectively with families might become increasingly circumscribed in the future if austerity persists and their resources become scarcer.

This research set out to explore perceptions that are by nature ever-changing and context-bound. In other words, these findings do not describe austerity's *de facto* impact on public budgets or services, but participants' perceptions of the extent to which spending cuts affect their practice. It must be also noted that the participants volunteered to take a part in this research because of their particular interest in the topic. Thus, it could be argued that the sample was not necessarily representative, even within their respective local authorities (Carey 2013). However, as noted in Chapter 3, as the intention was not to make generalisations but to explore

practitioners' perceptions within their context, the data was sufficiently representative and comparable. Both linguistic and context-related factors were also carefully considered throughout the process to my best understanding and knowledge to provide a truthful interpretation of participants' perceptions (Hantrais 2009).

6.2 Implications for practice

This research offers valuable insights to social work practitioners, academics, and policy makers regarding the current situation in frontline child protection practice and the complex impact austerity might have on practitioners' resources and their ability to work effectively with children and families at the initial stages of engagement. It is important to note that the practitioners in both a liberal Scottish welfare state and those in a social-democratic Nordic Welfare state face primarily similar challenges. Although the practitioners appear to remain resilient, it must be acknowledged that even they are concerned about the implications of persisting austerity. Both austerity and the renegotiation of the social contract between the state and the citizens will almost certainly continue throughout the Western welfare states (McKendrick et al. 2016; Hirvonen 2014; Pierson 2001). Hence, in future research it would be beneficial to examine factors that underpin professionals' resilience to continue promoting effective engagement in an age of scarce resources, and to examine ways to promote practitioners' work-related wellbeing that might be at risk in an age of austerity (Mänttari-van der Kuip 2015).

6.3 Conclusion

This dissertation process offered me, as a researcher and future social work practitioner, invaluable insights into the frontline practice where both practitioners and families are facing increased pressures due to spending cuts. The attempt to

conduct a credible small-scale cross-national study was an enjoyable challenge that allowed me to critically reflect on the way different historical, economic, and socio-political factors have shaped child protection practice in two different countries. It was interesting to discover that not only do Scottish and Finnish child welfare systems share a similar value base and practice principles, but the practitioners also face shared challenges when attempting to promote better outcomes for children and their families in an age of scarce resources.

As reassuring as the practitioners' confidence is in their ability to continue promoting effective engagement, their concerns about the future of the practice highlight the need to determine ways to maintain and promote social workers' work-related wellbeing. After all, even in an age of austerity, social work continues to be a 'human' service, as one of the practitioners underlined. The effectiveness of engagement is not easily measured against economic targets, which should be considered when decisions regarding resource allocation are made.

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Appendix 1A – Information and consent sheet (English)

I am Jenni Lohvansuu, a postgraduate social work student from Stirling University. As a requirement for the degree of MSc in Social Work Studies, I am to complete a dissertation research. This letter is an invitation to participate in my research study that has been granted an ethical approval from University of Stirling.

Project name: Comparing practitioners' perceptions of the impact of austerity on child protection in Scotland and Finland.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to learn more about how the current economic climate is reflected in the frontline child protection practice. The aim is to understand the perspectives of professionals who conduct initial child protection assessments. Comparing perceptions of practitioners in Scotland and Finland can generate insights to frontline social work practice in two different countries that share common challenges of promoting safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children in the age of austerity. Findings can be used to raise awareness and develop practice responses to limited resources.

Research description: I will gather information about practitioners' perceptions of their abilities to engage effectively with children and families in the age of austerity by interviewing at least 4 frontline child protection practitioners with expertise and experience in conducting initial assessments in Scotland, and 4 practitioners with similar experiences in Finland.

- Participating in the research involves one hour-long semi-structured interview with me. In the interview, you will be asked a series of questions regarding your perceptions in regards to effective engagement and the impact of limited resources. Even if you have not encountered limited resources or believe that austerity measures do not affect your direct practice with service users, your opinion is highly valued. You will be given the questions to read in advance.
- The interview will be conducted via Skype during January – February 2017. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed in a way that all identifiable information will be removed to ensure your anonymity. In case the interview fails due to technical issues, I will ask you complete the interview in writing.
- If you decide at any stage that you do not want to continue as a participant you can stop the interview. You can also withdraw from the research after the interview. We will then discuss whether I can use the information you have provided thus far. No information will be used without your consent.

Confidentiality: Information gathered in this research will be kept in a strictly confidential way and stored securely. The data will contribute to research findings, which will be presented in my dissertation. Participant names and identifying details will be changed to protect the identity of individuals. The data collected will be accessed by only me and my supervisor. I will not talk to anyone else about what participants have said, unless I am concerned about the risk of someone being harmed. The dissertation will be marked by University staff and be available in the library for public viewing. I will also provide information regarding my research findings to council. All data gathered during the interviews will be destroyed after three months from the date the dissertation has been graded.

Your participation: If you sign this form you are stating that you have agreed to me interviewing you and recording what you have said on an audio recorder. You are agreeing to me using your comments in my dissertation, with the agreement that I will change your name and any identifying details to protect your identity. Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the above description of the research.

Acknowledgement: I agree to participate in this research and I know how to contact the researcher if I have questions about the research in the future.

Participant signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Jenni Lohvansuu, MSc Student, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling,
FK9 4LA, Scotland.

Appendix 1B – Information and consent sheet (Finnish)

Olen sosiaalityön opiskelija Jenni Lohvansuu. Suoritan opintojani Stirlingin yliopistossa Skotlannissa. Opintoihini kuuluu pro gradu –tutkielmaa vastaava lopputyö. Tämä saatekirje on kutsu osallistua tutkimukseeni, jolla on yliopistoni eettisen lautakunnan hyväksyntä.

Tutkimuksen nimi: Vertaileva tutkimus ammattilaisten käsityksistä julkisen talouskurin vaikutuksesta lastensuojeluun Skotlannissa ja Suomessa (*Comparing practitioners' perceptions of the impact of austerity on child protection in Scotland and Finland*).

Tarkoitus: Tutkimuksen tavoitteena selvittää, kuinka julkisten menojen leikkaukset ilmenevät lastensuojelun asiakastyössä. Tarkoituksena on vertailla suomalaisten ja skotlantilaisten alkuarviointeja laativien lastensuojelun ammattilaisten käsityksiä aiheesta. Vertailemalla näkemyksiä voidaan lisätä tietoisuutta työn arjesta ja ammatti-laisten käsityksistä kahdessa erilaisessa maassa, joissa molemmissa haasteena on lasten hyvinvoinnin edistäminen tiukan talouden oloissa. Tutkimustuloksia voidaan käyttää kun tarkastellaan lastensuojelun käytäntöjä resurssiniukkuuden aikana sekä Suomessa että Skotlannissa.

Tutkimuksen kuvaus: Olen kiinnostunut lastensuojelun ammattilaisten käsityksistä siitä, millaisina he kokevat mahdollisuutensa käyttää vaikuttavaa vuorovaikutusta asiakkaiden kanssa aikana, jolloin julkisia menoja jatkuvasti leikataan. Tavoitteenani on haastatella 4 lastensuojelun ammattilaista jolla on kokemusta alkuarvioinneista Suomessa, ja 4 ammattilaista jolla on samanlaista kokemusta Skotlannissa.

- Osallistuminen tarkoittaa yhtä tunnin mittaista haastattelua. Haastattelussa kysyn kysymyksiä käsityksistäsi käytännön asiakastyöstä erityisesti vaikutta-vaan vuorovaikutukseen ja resurssiniukkuuteen liittyen. Vaikka et olisi työssäsi kohdannut resurssivajetta, tai ajattelisit, ettei tiukka julkinen talouskuri vaikuta asiakastyöhösi, arvostan näkemystäsi. Saat kysymykset nähtäväksi ennen haastattelua.
- Koska asun Skotlannissa, haastattelut suoritetaan Skypen kautta tammi-helmikuussa 2017. Luvallasi ääninauhoitan haastattelun ja translitteroin sen siten, ettei sinua voida tunnistaa vastauksistasi. Siinä tapauksessa ettei haastattelu onnistu internetin kautta teknisten ongelmien vuoksi, pyydän sinua vastaamaan haastattelukysymyksiin kirjallisesti.
- Sinulla on oikeus kieltäytyä jatkamasta tutkimuksessa missä tahansa vaihees-sa. Voit myös perua suostumuksesi osallistua tutkimukseen haastattelun jälkeen. Siinä tapauksessa sovin kanssasi siitä, voinko käyttää sinulta siihen asti keräämääni tietoa tutkimuksessa. En käytä mitään sinulta keräämääni tietoa ilman suostumustasi.

Luottamuksellisuus: Tutkimusaineisto säilytetään luottamuksellisesti. Kerättyjä tietoja käytetään tutkimustuloksissa, jotka esitellään lopputyössäni. Osallistujien nimet ja muut mahdolliset tunnistetiedot muutetaan yksilönsuojan varmistamiseksi. Tutkimusainei-stoa pääsee käsittelemään minun lisäksi vain ohjaajani. En keskustele antamistasi vastauksista kenenkään kanssa, paitsi jos pelkään henkilön turvallisuuden olevan uhattuna. Tutkielmani arvioi yliopistoni henkilökunta, minkä jälkeen lopputyöni säilyte-tään yliopiston kirjastossa julkisesti lainattavana. Tutkimustulokseni tulevat myös Eksoten ja skotlantilaisen osallistujakunnan saataville. Kaikki keräämäni tutkimusainei-sto tuhoetaan kolmen kuukauden kuluessa siitä, kun yliopisto on arvioinut tutkielmani.

Osallistuminen: Allekirjoittamalla tämän kirjeen suostut haastatteluun ja haastattelun ääninauhottamiseen. Vastauksiasi voidaan käyttää tutkielmassa edellyttäen että vastauksesi pysyvät anonyymeinä. Allekirjoituksellasi osoitat että olet lukenut ja ymmärtänyt yllä olevan kuvauksen tutkimuksesta.

Suostumus: Suostun osallistumaan yllä kuvattuun tutkimukseen ja tiedän kuinka ottaa yhteyttä tutkimuksen tekijään, mikäli minulla on kysymyksiä tutkimuksesta.

Osallistujan allekirjoitus:

Päiväys:

Tutkijan allekirjoitus:

Päiväys:

Jenni Lohvansuu, MSc Student, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling,
FK9 4LA, Scotland, United Kingdom.

Appendix 2A – Interview schedule (English)

Introduction

My name is Jenni, and I am a postgraduate social work student from Stirling University conducting a dissertation research. I have completed my first degree in Finland and this is one of the reasons why I am interested in comparing Scottish and Finnish child protection practice. I want to find out how the current economic climate affects frontline child protection practice and that is why I am interested in your opinion as a practitioner. I have sent you an information and consent sheet that I hope you have had time to read and sign. To summarise it, I will audio record this interview. Your responses will be anonymised, and the data will remain confidential. If at any point you feel like you do not want to continue the interview, please let me know. Even after the interview, you can contact me and let me know if there is anything in your responses that you do not want me to use in my dissertation.

Background

1. How long have you been working in child protection as a qualified social worker?

Definition of initial assessment: *an enquiry on a child's circumstances in response to a Child Welfare Concern Report to determine whether child is in need of welfare services, at risk of harm, or whether a more comprehensive assessment is required.*

2. Would you say that conducting initial assessments is a part of your job description?

Exploring barriers to effective engagement

Definition of effective engagement: *a meaningful contact a practitioner establishes with services user in order to develop a cooperative working relationship that is based on trust, respect, empathy and effective communication and interaction.*

3. What is your perception of effective engagement at the point of an initial assessment?
4. Have you experienced any barriers or challenges to effective engagement when conducting initial assessments? If so, can you give me an example?
5. What do you find to be the most significant barrier or challenge to effective engagement in your practice?

Exploring the impact of austerity

Definition of austerity: *large-scale cuts to public spending aimed to reduce government budget deficits, which include cuts in benefits and public services.*

6. What does austerity mean to you as a child protection practitioner?
7. Have you noticed austerity measures to affect your practice with children and families at the point of initial assessments? If so, in which way?
8. To what extent do you find the barriers to effective engagement to be linked to austerity measures?

Closing

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the way austerity affects your practice or about effective engagement?

Thank you for participating and giving your time. Once the dissertation has been graded, a copy of it will be available for the local authority and for you to read.

Appendix 2B – Interview schedule (Finnish)

Esittely

Minun nimeni on Jenni ja olen sosiaalityön opiskelija Stirlingin yliopistosta Skotlannista. Olen suorittanut aiemman tutkintoni Suomessa, ja tämä on yksi syy siihen miksi olen kiinnostunut vertailemaan lastensuojelua Skotlannissa ja Suomessa lopputyönäni. Haluan tutkia kuinka julkisten menojen leikkaukset vaikuttavat lastensuojelutyön arkeen ja tämän vuoksi olen kiinnostunut sinun näkemyksestäsi. Olen lähettänyt sinulle suostumuslomakkeen, jonka olet toivottavasti ehtinyt lukea ja allekirjoittaa. Tiivistäen, nauhoitan tämän haastattelun. Vastauksesi käsitellään siten, ettei sinua voida tunnistaa. Halutessasi voimme lopettaa haastattelun kesken. Myös haastattelun jälkeen voit ottaa minuun yhteyttä, jos sinusta tuntuu ettet halua minun käyttävän vastauksiasi tutkimuksessani.

Taustakysymykset

1. Kuinka kauan olet toiminut sosiaalityöntekijänä lastensuojelussa?

Alkuarvion määritelmä: *sosiaalityöntekijän tekemä alustava selvitys lapsen tilanteesta, jonka tarkoituksena on selvittää onko lapsen turvallisuus, terveys tai kehitys uhattuna, onko lapsi tai perhe palveluiden tarpeessa, tai onko tarvetta laatia kattavampi palvelutarpeenarvio.*

2. Sanoisitko, että kuvatuslainen alkuarvio kuuluu osaksi työtehtäviäsi?

Vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen esteiden tarkastelu

Vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen määritelmä: *ammattilaisen asiakkaan kanssa muodostama tarkoituksenmukainen yhteys, jonka tavoitteena on luoda yhteistyön mahdollistavaa suhde, joka perustuu luottamukseen, arvostukseen, empatiaan ja vaikuttavaan kommunikaatioon.*

3. Mikä on sinun käsityksesi vaikuttavasta vuorovaikutuksesta alkuarviointivaiheessa?
4. Oletko kohdannut haasteita tai esteitä vaikuttavalle vuorovaikutukselle laatiessasi alkuarviota? Jos olet, voisitko antaa esimerkin?
5. Mikä sinun mielestäsi on kaikkein merkittävin tekijä mikä hankaloittaa tai estää vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen omassa työssäsi?

Julkisten menojen leikkausten vaikuttavuuden arviointi

Julkisten menojen leikkausten määritelmä: *suuren luokan leikkaukset julkisiin menoihin, joilla tavoitellaan valtion budjettivajeen pienentämistä, ja joihin sisältyy sosiaaliturvan ja – palveluiden leikkaukset. Myös talouskuri.*

6. Mitä julkisten menojen leikkaukset merkitsevät sinulle lastensuojelun työntekijänä?
7. Oletko huomannut että julkisten menojen leikkaukset vaikuttaisivat työhösi lasten ja perheiden parissa yleisesti, ja erityisesti alkuarviointivaiheessa? Jos, niin millä tavoin?
8. Missä määrin ajattelet, että mainitsemasi vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen haasteet tai esteet liittyvät julkisten menojen leikkauksiin?

Lopetus

9. Haluaisitko kertoa vielä jotain muuta julkisten leikkausten vaikutuksesta työhösi tai vaikuttavasta vuorovaikutuksesta?

Kiitos osallistumisesta ja ajastasi. Kun lopputyöni on valmis, lähetän sen sosiaali- ja terveystieteille ja pääset halutessasi lukemaan tuloksia.

Appendix 3 – Yhteenveto (Finnish summary)

Tämä lopputyö käsittelee talouskurin vaikutusta lastensuojelutyön arkeen alkuarvioita laativien skotlantilaisten ja suomalaisten sosiaalityöntekijöiden näkökulmasta.

Julkisia menoja on leikattu viime vuosikymmenen aikana kautta Euroopan, minkä seurauksena länsimaisten hyvinvointivaltioiden haasteena on tasapainoilla talouskurin ja kansalaisten sosiaaliturvan ja hyvinvoinnin ylläpitämisen välillä. Tutkimuksen päätavoitteena on vertailla kahden pienen EU-maan sosiaalityön ammattilaisten näkemyksiä siitä, missä määrin leikkaukset vaikuttavat heidän mahdollisuuksiinsa käyttää vaikuttavaa vuorovaikutusta työssään lasten ja perheiden parissa.

Skotlanti on osa Iso-Britannian liberaalia hyvinvointivaltiota, missä yksilön vastuuta omasta hyvinvoinnistaan korostetaan, ja valtion sijaan yksityinen ja kolmas sektori tuottavat merkittävä osan hyvinvointipalveluista. Suomi puolestaan on pohjoismainen hyvinvointivaltio, jossa sosiaaliturva on kattava ja valtio suurilta osin vastaa hyvinvointipalveluiden järjestämisestä. Länsimaisten hyvinvointivaltioiden sosiaalipalvelut ovat kokeneet mittavia muutoksia toisen maailmansodan jälkeen. Nykyinen talouskuri voidaankin ymmärtää osana laajempaa poliittista, taloudellista ja ideologista viitekehystä, jossa sen rooli kietoutuu neoliberalistisiin ja julkisten toimintojen taloudellista tehokkuutta ajaviin reformeihin.

Skotlannin ja Suomen hallitukset ovat viime vuosina pyrkineet pienentämään budjetti-vajetta leikkaamalla sosiaalietuuksia ja -palveluita. Vaikka talouskuri Iso-Britanniassa on ollut tiukempaa kuin Suomessa, molemmissa maassa on alettu kiinnittää enenevässä määrin huomiota siihen, kuinka leikkaukset vaikuttavat kansalaisten hyvinvointiin, kasvaviin tuloeroihin ja eriarvoistumiseen. Erityisesti lasten ja lapsiperheiden lisääntyvä vähävaraisuus ja köyhyyden mahdollisesti mukanaan tuomat sosiaaliset riskit herättävät huolta.

Sosiaalipoliittisista eroista huolimatta suomalaisella ja skotlantilaisella lastensuojelulla on yhteinen arvopohja, mikä näkyy lasten oikeuksien, varhaisen puuttumisen, perheiden osallisuuden ja vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen korostamisena. Kummassakin maassa lastensuojelun asiakasmäärät ovat kasvaneet 2000-luvulla, mikä osaltaan liittyy lapsiperheiden lisääntyneeseen pahoinvointiin, ja toisaalta kertoo varhaisen puuttumisen lisääntymisestä. Resurssiniukkuuden on todettu heikentävän lasten-suojelun ammattilaisten mahdollisuuksia päästä asiakkaiden kanssa vaikuttavaan vuorovaikutussuhteeseen, mutta aihetta on tutkittu talouskurin näkökulmasta vain vähän.

Eksploratiivista metodologiaa hyödyntäen tämä tutkimus selvitti, mitkä ovat skotlantilaisten ja suomalaisten lastensuojelun ammattilaisten mielestä vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen merkittävimmät haasteet tai esteet, ja missä määrin he käsittävät näiden haasteiden liittyvän julkisten menojen leikkauksiin. Lisäksi vertailtiin, missä määrin skotlantilaisten ja suomalaisten ammattilaisten näkemykset eroavat toisistaan. Aineisto kerättiin lastensuojelun sosiaalityöntekijöiltä Skotlannissa (n=4) ja Suomessa (n=4) käyttäen puolistrukturoitua haastattelupohjaa, johon osallistujat saivat valintansa mukaan vastata suullisesti tai kirjallisesti. Aineisto analysoitiin laadullisen aineistolähtöisen sisällönanalyysin menetelmällä ja vertailemalla systemaattisesti skotlantilaisten ja suomalaisten ammattilaisten vastauksia toisiinsa.

Tulokset osoittavat, että sekä skotlantilaiset että suomalaiset sosiaalityöntekijät pitivät resurssivajetta ja asiakkaiden negatiivisia ennakko-oletuksia ja epäluottamusta lasten-suojelua kohtaan vaikuttavan vuorovaikutuksen merkittävimminä haasteina. Myös liiallista

proseduralismia, aikarajoitteita, epätasapainoista valtasuhdetta asiakkaan ja ammattilaisen välillä, sekä ammattilaisen puutteellista kykyä käyttää omia vuorovaikutustaitojaan pidettiin haasteina. Nämä tulokset ovat linjassa aiempien tutkimusten kanssa, joissa samanlaisia tekijöitä on nostettu esille.

Talousskurin ja vuorovaikutusta hankaloittavien tekijöiden välinen suhde näyttäytyi tuloksissa moniulotteisena. Julkisten menojen leikkausten ei koettu välttämättä suoraan vaikuttavan työn arkeen, mutta sen ajateltiin olevan yhteydessä muihin sosiaalipoliittisiin taloudellista tehokkuutta korostaviin kehityssuuntauksiin ja negatiiviseen julkiseen keskusteluun lastensuojelusta ja pienituloisuudesta. Osallistujat molemmista maista käsittivät talousskurin johtaneen resurssivajeeseen ja lisääntyneeseen tarpeeseen hillitä lastensuojelun kuluja. Vastaajat näkivät talousskurin myös lisäävän pienituloisten perheiden pahoinvointia ja täten välillisesti vaikuttavan lisääntyneisiin lastensuojeluilmoituksiin.

Merkittävin ero vastaajaryhmien välillä oli se, että skotlantilaiset kokivat talousskurin vaikuttavan työnsä arkeen ja vuorovaikutuksen laatuun enemmän, kuin heidän suomalaiset kollegansa. Tämä saattaa kertoa Iso-Britanniassa toteutetuista mittavimmista leikkauksista, tai siitä että julkinen keskustelu talousskurin vaikutuksesta kansalaisten hyvinvointiin on alkanut Suomessa vasta hiljattain. Skotlantilaiset sosiaalityöntekijät puhuivat myös suomalaisia enemmän kolmannen sektorin palveluiden leikkauksista, joiden vuoksi heidän on aiempaa vaikeampi löytää perheille sopivia tukipalveluita. Tämä todennäköisesti kuvastaa eroa liberaalin ja pohjoismaisen hyvinvointivaltion välillä, eli eroa siinä kuinka yhteiskunnan hyvinvointipalvelut on järjestetty. Skotlannissa kansalaisyhteiskunnan rooli palveluntuotannossa on merkittävä, jolloin myös leikkaukset näissä palveluissa heijastuvat lastensuojelutyön arkeen enemmän kuin Suomessa.

Useimmat vastaajista tiedostivat että lastensuojelussa oli ennen enemmän resursseja. Silti sekä skotlantilaiset että suomalaiset osallistujat kokivat, ettei talousskuri näy heidän työnsä arjessa siinä määrin, että se vaikuttaisi vuorovaikutukseen asiakkaiden kanssa. Tämä tutkimustulos korostaa ammattilaisten muutoskykyä ja sitkeyttä käyttää rajoitetut resurssit tehokkaasti asiakastyössä talousskurin aikana. Sekä skotlantilaiset että suomalaiset sosiaalityöntekijät ovat kuitenkin jossain määrin huolissaan siitä, että talousskurin jatkuessa heidän resurssinsa vähenevät entisestään, jolloin sillä voisi olla myös vaikutusta heidän mahdollisuuksiinsa käyttää vaikuttavaa vuorovaikutusta asiakastyössä.

Tämä tutkimus osoittaa, että huolimatta maiden eriävistä sosiaalipoliittisista rakenteista, talousskurin aikana skotlantilaiset ja suomalaiset lastensuojelun ammattilaiset kohtaavat samanlaisia haasteita. Todennäköisesti sekä talousskuri että taloudellista tehokkuutta painottavat palvelujärjestelmän reformit jatkuvat tulevaisuudessa. Jotta ammattilaisilla olisi jatkossakin sitkeyttä kohdentaa rajatut resurssinsa tehokkaasti lasten ja perheiden parhaaksi, olisi hyödyllistä tarkastella tekijöitä jotka ylläpitävät ja parantavat ammattilaisten työhyvinvointia. Resurssien kohdentamista suunniteltaessa on myös tärkeää huomioida sosiaalityön erityinen luonne ihmissuhdeammattina, minkä vaikuttavuutta on hankala mitata taloudellisilla mittareilla.

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