



The Diverse Impacts of the Neo-liberal Social Policies on Children's Welfare and Social Work with Young People: The Finnish Perspective

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Abstract

This article discusses the impacts of globalization, neo-liberal social policies and the Finnish economic recession of the 1990s on children's and young people's welfare. It summarises some of the impacts of Finnish social policies on the everyday lives of families with children and highlights some of the features of the recent and current debates surrounding youth delinquency and the societal reactions to young generations. All this contributes to a contradictory and conflicting societal context which challenges experts in the field of child welfare social work experts to operate - as expected - at the right moment, legally and effectively. Instead of being overly-defensive for the 'good old' ways of practicing social work with children, the authors invite social work scholars and practitioners to reconceptualise both the concept of children's citizenship and its position both in child welfare theory and practice in the context of children's global rights.

1 Introduction

In his latest book, *Perspectives on European Social Work*, Professor Walter Lorenz (2006a) presents an exciting, historically informed macro-analysis of the social, material and ideological conditions underlying the current restructuring of the European welfare states. Moreover his analytical focus and interest covers the many contradictory challenges we are facing in today's social work practice. The impact of neo-liberal policies, the individualization of risks, the privatization of social solidarity and the accentuation of economy (Lorenz 2006a, 138) are undoubtedly felt in every European welfare state. Consequently, Lorenz claims that the basic instruments used to produce social order and social solidarity have undergone a re-orientation. If this is true, this represents an important trajectory that is going to have far-reaching consequences for the European social work professions and practices in the near future. This statement raises many questions: How is this re-orientation happening? What are the visible and yet hidden trends? What are the expected outcomes and dilemmas? How can we, as constructors mile, impact the directions it takes?

Social work operates as a function of governance with the specific role of transferring objective legislation and policy to the subjective world of individuals and families through mediating in the 'social space' between these two domains (Donzelot 1980). Traditionally, social work has a strong ethical commitment to the accumulation of social capital and the facilitation of social solidarity between those whose self-management has failed, and the self-managed world of the affiliated. Bauman (2000) among others has expressed his concern while "social work ...is also the ethical gesture of taking responsibility for the fate and well-being of the Other", its daily practice is becoming "ever more distant from its ethical purpose".

As a group of researchers we are particularly interested in the ongoing transformation of child welfare social work both from an historical and a sociological viewpoint¹. We tend to think that the above questions and observations invite detailed, country specific analyses of the impacts of the global economy and national social policies on people's welfare, as well as analyses of the reforms in social order and care as such. We are in need of a thoughtful, empirically grounded understanding, and therefore, our task in the following is to illustrate the ongoing changes in our own country, particularly from the point of view of children's and young people's welfare and in the context of certain new forms of social control targeted at young people's norm-violations in the present conditions in which some of the distinctive features of the Nordic Welfare State model have been questioned. As such, we will discuss the present contradictions and challenges in the field of social work related with young people, keeping in mind that over modernization the regulation of the family and childrearing acquired an important place in the production of social order. One of the results of this has been the creation of a network of control and care (*penal-welfare complex*, Garland 1985 and 2001) that has been gradually built around the theme of childrearing. This network involves an interesting and ongoing dynamic of attempting to strike a balance between *punishment* and *support* (e.g. Skehill 2004). Accordingly, it is the duty of the contemporaries of every particular time in history to discover how these dynamics become established and are functioning. Our primary interest here is in the transforming social context of social work with children and youth, which is one of the tools in the production of social order and solidarity between adults and young generations.

2 Transforming Nordic Welfare Regime and children

Finland is known as part of the social democratic welfare regime in which the state has the prime responsibility for ensuring the welfare and social security of its citizens, including children. The core ethos of the Nordic welfare model consists of universalism, equality and public responsibility. The aim is to avoid unequal societal distribution by a relatively high level of decommodification, taxation and income redistribution. The service supply is universal and extended to all citizens. The primary model of the Nordic welfare state in welfare literature has tended to be Sweden with its core features of full employment, solidarity in wage policy, the promotion of social equality, and the Keynesian counter-cyclical policy of economics. (Harrikari 2004b, 91; Eydal et al 2006).

Although there are many similarities and common features amongst the Nordic countries - Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Finland - they are not institutionally identical. We suggest distinguishing between the Nordic states instead of viewing them as one uniform package. The differences emerge both on the social policy level - for example in employment policies, ensuring equality, the policies of income distribution, and welfare policies - and on the level of the social work practices related to children and families. Both these differences and the disparity in the quality of life amongst children in the Nordic countries appeared to increase over the course of the 1990s. Finland and Sweden were hardest hit by economic recession at the beginning of the 1990s, whereas Denmark, Island and Norway faired better. (Eydal et al 2006; Harrikari 2004b). We will discuss the social consequences of this period in Finland in greater detail later in this article.

Lorenz (2006b) claims that the way children are treated and the society and the organization of the welfare policies geared toward children in a society are indicative of the welfare policy

¹ see <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/blogs/sociolegal>

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of the state. Until recently the approaches to child welfare and the policies and practices related to protection in various European countries have essentially corresponded to the core principles upon which the social services were founded. According to Lorenz, in the case of the Nordic countries this has meant, for example, that 1) social workers have been given a clear mandate by the society to intervene on its behalf, 2) there has been a coalition between professional judgment and the evidence derived from the social sciences, 3) the appearance of an overall rationality underlying social work processes which has confirmed the value basis upon which the interventions were conducted, and 4) increased emphasis on prevention. Whether the aforementioned features are still the dominating characteristics of child welfare practices in Finland is questionable, since over the last decade Finnish social work and child welfare policy have been subjected to vast global and international influences. Our suspicion derives particularly from the results of some analyses of children's welfare which have identified changes in certain social groups involving a considerable number of our young citizens (e.g. Bardy et al 2001; Alanen et al 2004, 148).

The core concepts of Nordic child welfare policy have always been *the structural prevention of social problems* and *shared social responsibility of children's well-being and equality* (Eydal et al 2006). These ideas have recently been threatened by a number of challenges within the socio-economic and political spheres these ideas have been challenged. After the 'golden era' of the welfare state in the 1980s, socio-economic policies and welfare arrangements have been challenged by various phenomena, such as the impacts of the global economy and markets, demographic shifts, increased individualism, globalization and new types of risks. The strengthening of the neo-liberal ideologies particularly in the economic discourse and the imported neo-liberal order of governing have continued to pose challenges to the Nordic welfare state model. (Alanen et al 2004, 147; Harrikari et al 2006).

3 Economic recession and its influences on families with children in Finland

The beginning of the 1990's was an exceptional period in Finland. The country experienced a deep economic recession, followed by a significant bank crisis, both of which contributed to major changes in the public sector. Under the guidance of the conservative cabinet of 1991, the government favored a monetarist and downstream cyclical economic policies over Keynesian and counter-cyclical policies. Child and family policy, as a part of this general trend in social policy, was forced to change direction (e.g. Bardy et al 2001).

An extensive number of studies surrounding the causes and effects of the recession have been published over the past ten years (e.g. Kiander et al 1998; Pekkarinen et al 1995). What many of them found was that although the period of recession had a significant effect on the Finnish society as a whole, its effects on families with children were especially harsh. Since the birth of the nation state in the 1917, there has been a long bio-political project, in which the Finnish nation has invested itself in increasing birth rates, qualified motherhood, improving the welfare of families with children, and ensuring the health of its children. In the 1930s and 1940s this was done as means of strengthening the nation state during the war, and later it became a means of achieving economic success in the international market (Harrikari 2004a; Satka et al 2004; Satka 1995). This period endured until the 1990s. To put it bluntly, instead of being a national resource, the child population became a public expense which had to be minimised in order to prevent it from threatening the credibility of the state in "the eyes of the global markets" (Harrikari 2004b). A quarter of all family subsidies were cut off and the provision of basic social services, intended for families with children, declined in all sectors - from maternity clinics to youth work (e.g. Bardy et al 2001).

Clearly, the elimination and reduction of family allowances had a significant impact on the income development of households with children, and the income levels of families with children have declined throughout the 1990s and the new millennium compared to the other types of households (Uusitalo 2000, 43-57). Income development in families with children has been fairly good on the average, however, there has been a great deal of disparity amongst them. With regard to families with children, the percentage of those families with incomes in the lowest tenth percentile has increased significantly. This is indicated by the fact that while there were 28 000 poor families with children in 1990, the corresponding number in 2003 was 63 000. Income development has been particularly weak in single-parent households, families with several children and families with children under the age of three. The most powerful factor in explaining the increase in poverty is unemployment, which has been more prevalent among poor families with children than in non-poor families with children. And the increase in the number of poor families has resulted in a corresponding increase in child poverty. The percentage of children living below the poverty line nearly tripled between 1990-2003 (Moisio 2006).

3.1 Effects on children's welfare

Several studies have discussed the impacts of income changes and increasing poverty on the welfare of children and the young (Bardy et al 2001; Järventie 2000 and 2001; Sauli et al 2001). The results have varied depending on the chosen perspective. Rimpelä et al (2006) have studied youth-related welfare trends by analyzing school health surveys conducted between 1996-2005. The surveys measured 1) family circumstances, 2) experiences at school, 3) drinking, smoking, and exercising habits, and 4) physical and mental health. The researchers found that the welfare of young people has remained relatively stable during the period under examination. Although the changes in the levels of welfare were quite insignificant, a twofold development was identified as having taken place over the past ten years. The years 1996-2000 represented a period of welfare decline, whereas 2000-2005 was a period of stable, even increasing welfare. One of the most important factors behind the increase in welfare was the considerable reduction of unemployment in families. (Rimpelä et al 2006, 57-77)

Furthermore, the general indicators of child welfare and mental health also suggest other worrisome trends such as noteworthy changes in the number of children who use psychiatric services and child welfare. For example, the number of 10-14 year-old children placed in psychiatric institutional care increased 46 percent during 1998-2002 (STAKES 2004). According to the statistics of the National Research and Development Centre for Social Affairs and Health (STAKES), the number of children utilizing non-institutional child welfare services has tripled, and the number of children taken into custody has nearly doubled in the past 15 years. Kitinoja (2005) noticed a significant increase in the number of reported problems in his comparison of two groups of minors (1996 and 2000) who had been placed in Finnish reform schools. Myllärniemi (2005) explored the criteria for taking children into care in the Finnish capital area. She found that the most common reason for children under the age of 12 to be taken into care was that their mothers were alcohol addicted, whereas the most common reasons why older children were taken into care were identified as social maladjustment and delinquent behaviour. In addition, there was an increase in the number of 13-17 year-olds who were taken into custodial care. It is obvious that the problems experienced by families with children, children and the young have increased and become more difficult and complex than in previous decades. We do not currently have enough

information to determine the extent to which the above statistics and numbers are indicative of the transforming interventions of social care and control.

3.2 Contradictions in youth delinquency

Similar trends can also be found in the Finnish 15 year-olds self-reported delinquency surveys (FSDR) which have been conducted by the National Institute of Legal Policy since 1995. According to the latest survey (Kivivuori et al 2005), three major interrelated trends have appeared during the past ten years. Firstly, conformity has become more prevalent as the number of adolescents who do not engage in any kind of criminal behaviour has increased. Secondly, there has been a decrease in the level of criminal behaviour involving theft or the destruction of property. These two general trends are clearly interrelated: conformity has increased because participation in theft or destruction has decreased. Thirdly, the number of property crimes has decreased. Generally speaking, it appears that while there has been a decrease in the number of people carrying out offences, i.e., the number of actual crimes has remained stable or has even increased. The number of violent crimes and drug-related offences was found to be comparatively stable, despite the fact that there was a significant increase in juvenile homicides in 1998-2002 (Lehti 2006, 62-63). In general, the FSRD studies suggest that the Finnish youth has become more law-abiding during the last decade.

Thus, the Finnish studies strongly suggest that there has been a polarization in the trends related to child and youth welfare and delinquency during the past decade. While an increasing number of the Finnish minors are thriving, a small, but increasing number of children are suffering from a lack of economic resources and deprivation, which has resulted in an increase in non-conforming and antisocial behaviour. When considering these trends, however, it is important to keep two things in mind regarding both welfare and the self-reported studies of delinquency. Firstly, because they are carried out in normal classes at public schools, they are representative of those young people are considered to represent the societal norm. It is likely that they exclude those young people with high truancy rates, those who are in special education classes, or, for example those who are in institutional care. Secondly, the influences of the increased social control are also certain to impact the results. For example, the FSRD study findings regarding the decrease in delinquency probably reflects the increasing effectiveness of social control. We must take into consideration that, for example, there are increasing number of guards in public places and more technical surveillance in shops, stores, schools, and other public places. These and types of situational crime prevention, in the “pre-crime area”, are being used to prevent the opportunities to commit traditional juvenile crimes, such as shoplifting and thefts. In addition, young people themselves have become more punitive and less tolerant of juvenile crime - a phenomenon which may reflect recent cultural changes under which norm-breaking behaviour is associated with being a “loser”. (Kivivuori et al 2005).

3.3 Changes in the social reactions of the media and communities on children and youth

One interesting paradox is that as young people have become increasingly law-abiding, the society has become increasingly concerned with juvenile delinquency. This is a phenomenon which deserves closer attention, and it appears as though there may be several factors behind its development. The most important could be the intense media attention on children and youth. During 1980-1997 the intensity of the front-page reporting of violence increased considerably in the “yellow press”. The reporting of juvenile delinquencies was virtually a daily event between 1998-2002, when there was a significant increase in the number of

juvenile homicides (Harrikari 2004b, 95-96). Tabloid reports of violence and the fear of crime increased significantly independently of the actual number of cases of violent crime. The main headlines dealing with homicides increased while the risk of actually becoming the victim of homicide remained the same (1980-2000). In addition, the age of the offenders and victims of the most reported crimes were distinctly younger than the offenders and victims of the majority of actual and typical homicides. (Kivivuori et al 2002). Thus, there was a clear divergence in the trends of reporting violent crimes and the actual number of violence.

Supporting debates also began to emerge in other influential newspapers. These writings indicated a change in the level of public tolerance of children, the young and families with children. Riitta Jallinoja (2006) analyzed the leading Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, from 1999 to 2003. She suggests a strong familial movement, a turn or “trance-like state”, which took place at the beginning of the new millennium. She refers to the themes of risk rationality, concern, fear and panic, she discusses this as “the escalation of evil”. The most extreme cases – including crimes like homicides - were highlighted and extended in the media debate in a manner which made it seem as if they concerned the entire population of children and young people. Juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and school attendance problems were seen as derivative of familial problems, such as problems related to the successful combination of work and family life, the “sickness of families”, and “lost parenthood”. The defendants of family called for the return of the joint community values and practices that were common in the 1950s, as they believed they had the potential to solve these problems. The primary principles promoted by these socially active middle-class mothers include e.g., a new emphasis on the quality of motherhood and parenting as well as the idea that it is better for small children to be cared for at home than to be placed in institutional daycare.

One of the principles suggested by “the defendants of family” was the “it takes the whole village to raise a child” ideology. These community-based models - which aim at strengthening parenthood, bringing back “basic values” respecting parents and adults as well as correcting and even punishing bad behaviour - spread quite extensively throughout the country at the beginning of the new millennium. One rather curious feature of these imagined villages, however, is that children tend not to be part of their everyday operations and appear exclusively as the objects of adult activities. (Alanen et al 2004, 164). Furthermore, “adult-lead villages” are linked to the local crime prevention programs which have been implemented in the Finnish municipalities since 1998. Together these policies have been carried out in a way which tends to highlight the absence of children’s and young people as the implementation of youth curfews has perhaps been the most popular debate among their proponents.

The implementation of these community-based and adult-led projects can be seen as part of a larger-scale change in the generational relations and transformation related to the governing of younger generations (see Harrikari et al 2006). Finland seems to have moved from the principles and topics of welfare policy - social prevention, the avoidance of assigning labels to people, raising income transfers and family allowances as well as improving the social services aimed at families with children - towards a different social order and generational solidarity that is characterized by increased adult control. Early intervention, risk-assessment and multi-professional cooperation have spread and permeated service sectors such as maternity and neonatal clinics, daycare facilities, schools, and the fields of child welfare, youth work and social work in accordance with international, particularly Anglo-American models (see e.g. Lister 2006; Such et al 2006; Schutter 2006). These changes are also reflected in the interests of Finnish child welfare research. The majority of the current

child welfare studies are related, in one way or another, to how to perceive risk factors, conduct early interventions and improve multi-professional cooperation under the given conditions.

4 Current challenges in social work with children and youth

The support for the new liberal trend of minimising public expenses has weakened the status of families with children and children's welfare: there has been a clear increase in both child poverty in general and poverty among families in the weakest socio-economic position. And generally speaking, much less public attention is paid to the root causes of this disturbing trend, such as poverty, than to its symptomatic behaviours (e.g. criminal activity, non-conformation, and antisocial tendencies). Due to a large-scale policy changes, including, for example, the tactics of economic effectiveness, risk calculation and early intervention, generational solidarity and tolerance towards children, the young and families with children may be decreasing and response sensitivity increasing. Furthermore, these conditions seem to invite local policy strategies and professional practices with a clear control-focused orientation compared with the support-focused interest which has prevailed in the past decades.

The shift from the era of universal income support and services to the times of discretionary subsidies and 'hot-spot' interventions has had and continues to have a significant impact on social work with children: as state support and subsidies for families with children decreases, the current demands for child welfare are increasing and becoming more and more challenging. The recent increase in the demand for more social support has not resulted in the allocation of extra resources to children's social services. Instead, social workers are required to work with more young people who present with increasingly complex social difficulties without sufficient material resources, i.e. the foundation of the 1980s welfare state. Child protection - once regarded as the last resort in the field of the social services - is now being asked to intervene in and deal with problems caused by the lack of social support from the previously functional universal welfare system without any significant staff increases. At the same time, there has been increasingly vocal public criticism towards social workers as the protectors of children. At least three types of criticism can be detected in the current Finnish debate:

- The timing of intervention: social workers are intervening either too early - violating families' right to privacy - or too late - endangering children's well-being.
- Morally or legally questionable practice: social workers are either too strict - encroaching on citizens' civil rights - or too lenient - pampering misfits and encouraging maladjustment.
- Non-effective professional skills: social workers are over-educated - academic training is too theoretical and thus a waste of resources - or unskilled -degenerating social problems and multi-professional co-operation requires better theoretical skills.

The current situation is causing a kind of legitimacy-crisis particularly in the area of child protection social work. The aforementioned contradictions are forcing the profession into a proverbial corner, which, in the worst case scenario, could lead to a withdrawal of social workers from the group of those who are authorised to speak on children's and young people's behalf. Therefore, more constructive ideas regarding how to move forward are of great importance. What site both social work theory and the professional practice should take?

It is crucial to the future of social work with children and young people that all reflective voices be heard loud and clear. It has been argued that the trajectory of child welfare develops between the coercive and welfare elements of child care intervention (e.g. Dozelot 1980; Garland 1985). In today's circumstances, in which there has been a distinct coercive and individualistic shift away from universalism in welfare policies aimed at children, it is crucial that neither social work theory nor its practices forget about the rights of the children whom they aim to help.

For example, the new discourse of risk works against the widely shared Finnish consensus of children's welfare as a common political concern. Its presence also threatens children's right to participation tending to view them as potentially irresponsible individuals who are in need of 'early adult intervention' than as young citizens in need of individual autonomy. As such, there needs to be a critical analysis of how the available resources are allocated to children and children's welfare institutions. Social workers and other professionals in the field of children's services face the challenge of having to reconsider their responsiveness to children's knowledge and opinions. At the same time, they must also address the issues: who is to speak for children in matters related to the allocation of resources, and how can we achieve inter-generational distributive justice? Who is going to take responsibility for working with children as social persons and young citizens, i.e., to empower children as social citizens and the consumers of services?

The first step towards meeting these challenges is to move away from the narrow conceptions of citizenship that exclude non citizens and citizens under a certain age. The task could be to imply a difference-centered alternative to the common conceptions of children's and young people's citizenship (see Moosa-Mitha 2005), i.e., to view adult-centered 'normal' practices critically, to work with children as subjects with their own rights, and to develop ways of working that facilitate the potential for children to contribute to all welfare practices involving them. The second step is based on the fact that social workers have more than 100 years of practice experience working with various silent groups in society. They have developed methods ranging from radical community work to advocacy and supported many people on the periphery in their aim of becoming more empowered. The fact that past generations of social workers have obviously had the means to construct innovative tools and appropriate theoretical knowledge to enable such development is a good indication that the current and future generations might well be able to carry on this tradition. In fact, their close contact with children as clients means that social workers have a unique opportunity and indeed ethical obligation to work towards the realization of children's rights in practice. By applying innovative and holistic perspectives to issues of childhood, social workers can contribute to the development of the knowledge of how the welfare systems can meet the challenges of ensuring children's rights, globalization, and the new ideologically loaded concepts which have been raised related to children's welfare.

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