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Research article

Interprofessional collaboration in family support in low-threshold open meeting places for families in Finland: professionals' narratives

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Abstract

This study focuses on interprofessional collaboration in low-threshold family services. Understanding the reasons for problems in developing joint activities in the field of family support requires investigation of professionals' perceptions and experiences of interprofessional collaboration. The data comprised five focus group interviews with professionals working in the low-threshold open meeting places for families. These professionals form part of the coordinated services provided by family centres. A narrative framework enabled in-depth analysis of the relational actions constructing interprofessional collaboration. Three story types about interprofessional collaboration in the family support were identified: (1) the Bridge Builder story unifying service silos; (2) the

Everyday Encounterer story about developing relationships; and (3) the Equality Seeker story promoting equality in activities across both families and professionals. The results indicate that to increase interprofessional collaboration in family support, a dialogic partnership with administrators, working-group members, families and the community is needed.

Keywords family support; interprofessional collaboration; focus group; narrative analysis; low-threshold family centre

Introduction

In Finland, many different professionals work in child and family services, including those provided by non-governmental organisations and churches, municipal early childhood education and other cultural and community organisations. Others form part of the social and health services provided by the recently established well-being services counties (Bulling, 2017; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023). These different services have been developed over a long period into separate areas of expertise (Bulling and Berg, 2018). The family centre model combines universal social and health services with more targeted welfare services (Busch et al., 2013). In this article, we use the term *interprofessional* to describe the cross-border activities and collaboration of professionals from different units, domains or sectors working together across areas of responsibility (Bulling and Berg, 2018). Using data from group discussions with professionals, we explored interprofessional collaboration in the field of family support in the open meeting places for families that form part of the low-threshold family centre service network (see Martinussen et al., 2017; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023; Virtanen et al., 2020).

According to Cedersund et al. (2021) and Hämäläinen et al. (2020), not all communities provide security and well-being on the individual or community level. Recent changes in family structures and the increasing vulnerability of families have revealed many differences between communities in family cultures, family support and family support networks. There is also an increasing need for a shared, socially sustainable approach to family and child welfare. This situation is an outcome of the global changes, crises and inequalities that influence families' as well as children's rights, and which underpin the need for child- and family-centred actions and policies (see Andreotti, 2021; Hämäläinen et al., 2020).

In this study, we focus on how voluntary interprofessional collaboration in the context of family support could be provided in a more sustainable way from the perspectives of professionals working in low-threshold open meeting places. Such low-threshold services for families include open kindergartens and other meeting places that children, accompanied by an adult caregiver, can attend without a prior appointment or registration (see Kaiser et al., 2022). Currently, low-threshold support for children and parents in Finland is already offered via interprofessional collaboration (see also Äikäs et al., 2022; Anderson, 2013).

We examined professionals' narratives of their experiences rather than giving direct descriptions of events in open meeting places for families (see Phoenix, 2013; Squire, 2013). By adopting a narrative approach (Squire, 2013), we hoped to reveal possible contradictions, inconsistencies and tensions (see Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Ricoeur, 1991) involved in interprofessional work practices. A narrative approach can illuminate different experiences, potential challenges and underlying meanings related to interprofessional collaboration between workers from various sectors and units (Phoenix, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2013). The present narrative framework enabled in-depth analysis of the relational actions constructing interprofessional collaboration.

Interprofessional collaboration in the field of family support

The integration of social and health services refers to various measures and solutions that aim to coordinate and unify the structures and functions of welfare services (Cameron et al., 2014; Kodner, 2009; Lewis et al., 2010, p. 8; Willumsen et al., 2012). One manifestation of integration and the foundation of support is interprofessional collaboration, which has become a common method of working in family

services, education, social work and healthcare (Bricker et al., 2022; D'Amour et al., 2008; Glaser and Suter, 2016).

Interprofessional collaboration in family services broadly describes how the different service providers produce ecological and resource-oriented outcomes by bringing together professionals and community members in an inclusive and encouraging way without fear of stigmatisation (Gillespie, 2009). Interprofessional collaboration also supports the creation of a common agenda and mutually agreed activities in the community at large (Kania and Kramer, 2011; Virtanen et al., 2020).

In reforming family services, the sharing of working methods and expertise – that is, interprofessional collaboration – plays a significant role. According to Bulling (2017), Champine et al. (2018) and Sanders et al. (2019), effective and open communication requires the service provider to be reachable and easily approachable, and to actively listen and understand. Professional expertise and services can be brought into open meeting places, enabling families to receive help, advice and support early and without any threshold criteria (see Kaiser et al., 2022; Martinussen et al., 2017). According to Virtanen et al. (2020), collaboration and partnership have traditionally been viewed as mechanisms to create bridges between organisations and institutions from the private, public and non-governmental sectors to enhance funder collaboratives, public–private partnerships and multistakeholder initiatives.

Agreed policies, operating principles and working methods, as well as pair and teamwork, facilitate the work of professionals, save resources and increase the well-being of both professionals working in a family centre and its network of operators (see Martinussen et al., 2017). According to Hämäläinen et al. (2020), sustainable family and child welfare and support require the recognition of values that consciously and unconsciously affect professionals' practices, including that of interdependence.

In this study, the level of integration of family support refers to the coordination of social and health services from the perspectives of professionals (see Bulling and Berg, 2018; Martinussen et al., 2017). Such integration is often overlooked in debate on the reform of social and health services, in which the development of structures is generally seen as the main element (Willumsen et al., 2012). In this study, we understand social sustainability as a goal in reducing inequality in the well-being and participation of families (Dolan et al., 2020).

Family support in open meeting place networks in Finnish family centres

The term *family centre* refers to the entity of integrated services that serve children, parents and families with children in the well-being services counties, which are the outcome of the reform of Finland's healthcare, social welfare and rescue services (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023). The aim of the family centre is to provide needs-based support tailored to individual children and their families. The professionals in the open meeting places, who work closely with those in other services, have more knowledge of what those services and professionals can offer and hence can use this knowledge in their encounters with families (Bulling, 2017; Bulling and Berg, 2018). According to Gillespie (2009), family centres are well-placed to support the special needs of specific groups. They can also provide parents with more informal social support. Recent processes of social and cultural change have also introduced transformations in the support of parenthood in these low-threshold open meeting places for families (see Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2012).

Open meeting places for families promote a sense of community, peer activities and peer support, and provide families with information, expertise, guidance and counselling (Bulling, 2017; Bulling and Berg, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2022). The networking of open meeting places with other services in the area, as well as functional service guidance and the provision of common services in the field, strengthen the accessibility of services for families (see Kaiser et al., 2022). Recent research supports the idea that special attention should be paid to the circumstances of families, children and young people who are at risk of marginalisation or exclusion from services. Measures should aim to promote equality in service accessibility (Dolan et al., 2020; Hämäläinen et al., 2020).

Aim and research question

The aim of this research was to enhance understanding of interprofessional collaboration in supporting families in open meeting places for families. Using a narrative approach, the research question was: What kinds of stories about interprofessional collaboration in family support can be identified in focus group discussions with professionals working in open meeting places for families?

The interpretation of narratives is not a search for factual truth but a mapping of understanding within a specific context (Bold, 2012). Our narrative research aimed to elicit and gain understanding of professionals' perspectives on interprofessional work activities and family support in the context of open meeting places for families (see Bold, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Methods

We applied narrative analysis to interpret the professionals' talk in the focus group interviews (see Squire, 2013). The narrative analysis used in this study was based on a constructive and interpretative paradigm, and thus a story consisted of a plot description of events and experiences (see Calás and Smircich, 1999; Squire, 2013). The order and temporality of the events narrated did not alone make a story; instead, a story required an evaluation of the events and construction of their meanings (Mykkänen et al., 2017). We treated the narratives as raw material from which meaningful and intriguing stories could be constructed (see Polkinghorne, 1995).

Data collection

Our data consisted of five focus group interviews conducted with professionals working in open meeting places for families. Four of them were conducted in the ERASMUS project Increasing Accessibility of integrated ECEC-services to support all families with young children. Three interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and two in person. They lasted, on average, around 90 minutes. The first interview was conducted in November 2019 and the last in August 2021. From three to seven people, including social workers, nurses, early childhood education and care professionals, workers in churches and other organisation, and family centre coordinators, participated in the focus group interviews. All 25 interviewees worked in a different part of Finland, either as an expert, employee or manager.

Various topics related to work and its development in an open meeting place were discussed in the interviews, enabling us to elicit the professionals' experiences and perceptions about family meeting place work. The interviewees discussed, among other things, the coordination and availability of services for children and families, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the everyday life of meeting places and, for example, how families participated in the development of activities and what kinds of cooperation were enabled. At the start of the interviews, the participants were encouraged to talk openly with each other. The interviewers paid special attention to the interaction between research participants (Kitzinger, 1994). The interview data were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and amounted to a total of 118 pages with 1.5 line spacing. During the transcription process, all identifying information such as participants' names, jobs and locations were removed. The material was fully anonymised, including who was speaking and in which focus group.

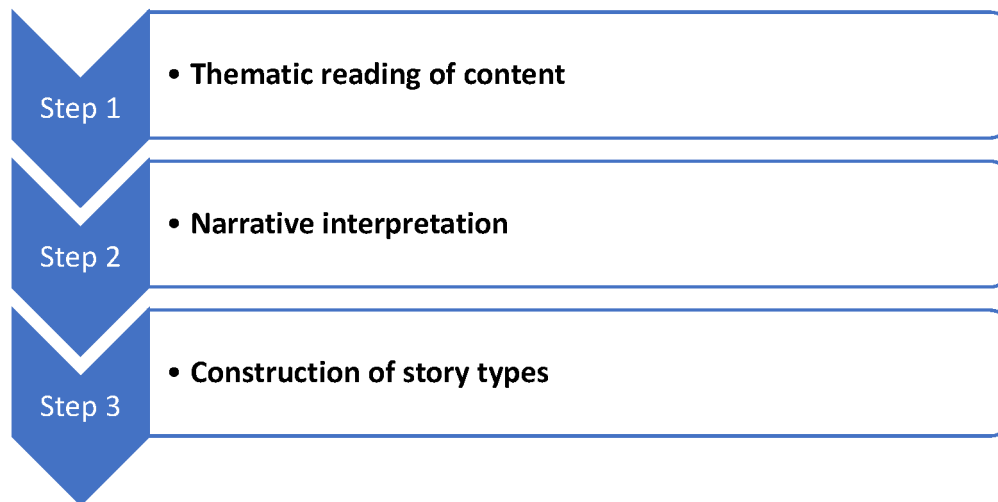
Analysis

We began the analysis by a thematic reading of the content, which we then analysed by applying the models of Labov and Waletzky ([1967] 1997) and Polkinghorne (1995). We focused our analysis on the content of the narratives and not on their narrative style (Lieblich et al., 1998). We created narrative interpretations from our data, although the data did not comprise traditional narratives of the beginning-middle-end type but instead were constructed during our analysis process (see Polkinghorne, 1995). Our narrative research did not aim to produce one objective truth as such, but it sought to foreground the process of understanding and interpretation (see Riessman, 2008).

We followed the method described by Polkinghorne (1995) by first analysing the content of the constructed narratives and then producing stories with a new plot, as shown in Figure 1.

Step 1: thematic reading of content

In this step, we extracted key contents from our transcribed interview data and formulated preliminary themes on family support and interprofessional collaboration based on both the data and the literature on interprofessional and multidisciplinary cooperation. Our main principle was to let the dataset speak for itself as much as possible (see Mykkänen et al., 2017; Vähäsantanen and Arvaja, 2022).

Figure 1. Flow of analysis

We examined the transcribed data obtained from the five focus groups several times. We noted all the parts where the interviewees highlighted their work-related experiences and perceptions of parenting and family support and interprofessional collaboration. We then identified themes and selected excerpts that exemplified them (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vähäsantanen and Arvaja, 2022).

Step 2: narrative interpretation

After the thematic reading of content, we moved to the second step of narrative interpretation. The purpose was to form story types that described the different kinds of interprofessional collaboration in family support found in the data, using the preliminary themes identified in Step 1.

By applying our narrative research structure and interpretation framework, we built plot narratives by focusing on the following issues (Labov and Waletzky, [1967] 1997): (1) open meeting places for families as the context for supporting families for all the professionals in the focus groups (the character of open meeting places); (2) the role of professionals as parenting support workers (how the professionals positioned themselves); (3) professional methods of work and *modus operandi* (what the professionals emphasised) in interprofessional collaboration in family support; and (4) goals and changes in the development of interprofessional collaboration (perceived need to change the situation).

In our analysis the end of the story redirected the perspective away from the present towards the development targets and challenges of interprofessional cooperation. We formulated plot narratives from the interview data for each of the five focus groups (see Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). We then moved to the construction of story types.

Step 3: construction of story types

At the end of the analysis, we identified three stories that differed from each other both in the roles of the professionals and in their activities in the open meeting places. The stories were formed using a modified plot structure interpretation framework model (Table 1).

The study aimed to describe interprofessional collaboration in the family support system that takes into account (1) the role of professionals in supporting families in the open meeting places for families; (2) the working methods of professionals; and (3) the development goals and changes in interprofessional collaboration in family support. These three perspectives guided the identification and construction of the story types emerged. We sought to preserve as many word choices and expressions from the data as possible. Expressions used by the focus groups were cited in several story types, and hence the story types were not based on the stories of individuals or a single focus group. The three issues, which are based on professionals' activities when working between service silos, building relationships and strengthening equality in the activities of families, professionals and communities, are displayed in

the results. The results are presented in the form of stories, an approach that helps to illustrate and trace the relationships between the three perspectives (see Riessman, 2008; Vähäsantanen and Arvaja, 2022).

Table 1. Formation of the interprofessional family support stories

Story types	Professionals' role in the field of family support at the open meeting places for families	Professionals' working methods	Development goals and changes in interprofessional collaboration in family support
Bridge Builder	Arranges activity at the administrative level through practical work. Notices that the pressure for coordinating action also comes from national and local decision-makers and current discussions on supporting mental health.	Strives to implement participatory activities together with families in a diverse and purposeful way. Works in a way that suits the goals of individual families.	Works by using the latest research findings. Makes different family services visible to the workers and actors. Understands family support as a right of the child.
Everyday Encounterer	Encounters families as an expert in everyday situations in the meeting places.	Breaks up hierarchical relationships between people and tries to strengthen autonomous and free relationships. Creates new relationships and strengthens families' emotional and interaction skills in their everyday activities.	Hopes for a common space and shared goals that would facilitate a quick meeting with another expert in the field. Strives to strengthen parenting and support families flexibly and without delay.
Equality Seeker	Coordinates family services and works together with other professionals according to shared goals.	Improves the availability of low-threshold services through joint coordinated work. Dares to be an example of how professionals from different organisations integrate in a systematic way to improve family welfare support services.	Ensures interprofessional collaboration and an equal way of working together across administrative silos. Strengthens equality in supporting families and parenting.

Limitations of the study

The narrative analysis method used in this study enabled in-depth and plot-wise analysis of the data. Certain limitations of the study should be noted. First, the data were qualitative and extracted from a small number of interviews.

Second, while the dataset can be considered quantitatively small, the narrative method of analysis, which was partly theory-driven, enabled it to be analysed both in depth and plot-wise. As such, while the results cannot be directly transferred to other contexts, they can be utilised in family-centre development work where, for example, network activities and a self-directed working culture are emphasised.

Third, because we interpreted the data from our own subjective position, it is possible that our presentation of the stories may seem somewhat detached from the participants themselves. It is also possible that our interpretation of the interviewees' speech diverged from the interviewees'

intended meaning. A central feature of narrative research is that the researcher is always in a non-objective position.

Fourth, the different regional locations of the family centres have their own historical and political realities and hence may also vary in their professional work and workplace culture. Moreover, the results, which pertain to a specific country, Finland, are not necessarily directly applicable to other countries.

Results

In this section, we focus on three story types that we identified as describing interprofessional collaboration in family support open meeting places for families. The significance of the stories of interprofessional collaboration in the family support system was thus directly related to the open meeting places for families, where events and experiences are lived and experienced (see Elliot, 2005). We identified three story types: (1) the story of the Bridge Builder, who works between service silos; (2) the story of the Everyday Encounterer, who builds relationships in everyday life; and (3) the story of the Equality Seeker, who strengthens equality in the activities of families, professionals and communities.

The story types were composites created by extracting elements from the stories of several different participants in the five groups. These story types do not therefore represent the experience of a single person, but instead offer shared meanings for meeting place work. Each story type therefore represents a certain kind of interprofessional collaboration in family support. Next, we present each of the story types in detail and in the light of previous research.

The Bridge Builder story

The Bridge Builder sees the main task as organising and developing the management of interprofessional actions in the Bridge Builder's own field of administration. Furthermore, the Bridge Builder acts as a mediator between the top management and rank-and-file employees. The Bridge Builder's position in the organisation is challenging because the coordination of leadership in the organisation has not been further defined. Coordinated action already exists, but its structure has not yet found its final shape. The Bridge Builder's activity is in line with the administration. The Bridge Builder is a professional with a lot of ideas about family support networks and methods and has tried to use them. To succeed, the Bridge Builder needs access to the latest research findings.

While coordinating activities, the Bridge Builder notices the importance of early support in the prevention of larger concerns for families. Children's rights are at the heart of the coordination process. By coordinating the functions of the various family support networks, the Bridge Builder can prevent different providers from creating overlapping services.

The Bridge Builder tries to organise activities and events in different areas with different actors. The Bridge Builder helps people become aware of their problems and needs and seeks to establish a communicative relationship with others with the aim of solving their problems together. The Bridge Builder also notices the importance of inclusion. The Bridge Builder tries to develop compatible practical actions that serve early support and enhance well-being.

The Bridge Builder initiates many projects, such as joint training sessions and meetings between different service providers. The Bridge Builder strives to build the basic services needed to enable cooperation across different administrative domains. The Bridge Builder arranges discussion on resource planning and overlap in different providers' services. The Bridge Builder hopes to plan more guidance on services and help families move forward in a timely manner.

In the Bridge Builder's opinion, family support and coordinated activities are best guided and encouraged by well-functioning development work done by a coordinated leadership in collaboration with meeting place work groups. The Bridge Builder must consider the use of both remote services and shared physical spaces in coordinating and facilitating development work. The Bridge Builder is aware of the top management's desire to see low-threshold

parenting support services jointly developed by different administrative sectors. However, a clear operating model for developing joint action across administrative boundaries is not yet in place.

In this story, the Bridge Builder works between service silos. Thus, the Bridge Builder occupies a middle management role of coordinating parental support services between the senior management and frontline employees (see Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). In the Bridge Builder's story, the family is seen as an important societal institution in child protection (Dolan et al., 2020), and hence supporting the general well-being of the family is a fundamental right of the child (Virtanen et al., 2020). The Bridge Builder helps stakeholders to understand the importance of interprofessional collaboration in preventing the fragmentation of the so-called *silos* in parenting support (Hämäläinen et al., 2020).

The Everyday Encounterer story

The narrator of the Everyday Encounterer is an expert and professional in the day-to-day operations of the organisation. For the Everyday Encounterer, the task is to organise and develop practical matters with peers in their respective meeting places. The aim is to support the well-being of families and their doing things together in everyday life. Information and joint training sessions are planned together with parents to meet their specific needs.

The Everyday Encounterer works closely with families, encountering both children and adults. The Everyday Encounterer has noticed that parenting support is already available on an everyday basis in different organisations.

The Everyday Encounterer sees personal encounters as important in meetings and in doing things in everyday life. The Everyday Encounterer wants to move away from traditional methods of operation towards more flexible activities that better meet the needs of families. The Everyday Encounterer works with other professionals together in a shared physical space. Together, they try to find the most appropriate services for the family. The Everyday Encounterer coordinates and arranges joint development work with the frontline employees in their organisation's various projects, as well as basic services and traditional services.

The Everyday Encounterer believes that it is a good idea to develop the coordination of activities to earlier identify the challenges faced by families. The Everyday Encounterer guides customers in selecting the most suitable forms of support. The Everyday Encounterer tries to strengthen client participation. The Covid-19 pandemic emergency forced change in the traditional methods of operation towards more flexible activities that nevertheless corresponded to the needs of families. Everyday Encounterers see their task as enabling and promoting client participation in the development of parenting support services.

The narrator of the Everyday Encounterer story focuses on building relationships between service providers and clients in everyday life. The Everyday Encounterer has family-friendly discussions with client families (see Nivala et al., 2022). The Everyday Encounterer looks for and creates suitable communication networks and opportunities for negotiation and other types of social interaction (Dolan et al., 2020). Low threshold services establish trust between families and professionals, so that parents' wishes are listened to and support is provided flexibly across the administration's service silos (see Kaiser et al., 2022). The Everyday Encounterer sees that having a shared space facilitates quick encounters with experts in other domains, thereby giving families greater flexibility and possibly faster support in their parenting. Kodner and Spreeuwenberg (2002) also see the open physical location of services as having positive effects on the organisation of integrative care. Understanding that family and child welfare practices take place in a specific time and place and reciprocally affect other practices and the environment is foregrounded in the Everyday Encounterer's story (see Hämäläinen et al., 2020).

The Equality Seeker story

The Equality Seeker works in the organisation not only as a professional and expert but also as a forerunner. The Equality Seeker thinks about change and challenges, about what needs

to be done differently. The Equality Seeker sees it important to get the voice of families heard in the coordination of activities concerning them and that the involvement of whole families should be increased. However, this does not mean that the individual focus is forgotten.

The Equality Seeker is worried about the fragmentation of services. There is a need to mediate, coordinate and develop services collaboratively, to build better networks. If the location of the meeting place is problematic, then technology designed to facilitate fast communication irrespective of distances should be adopted. The Equality Seeker talks about the digital leap. The Equality Seeker also emphasises that distances and travel to access services affect organisations' levels of service production.

The parenting support services offered by other providers may not be fully known, and hence services must be developed in collaboration with all kinds of different networks. Secrecy and legislation in different administrative sectors make it difficult to help families.

In the future, the Equality Seeker would like to see a clearer orientation from the top management regarding the development of new kinds of leadership and functioning that can improve parenting support. The Equality Seeker also sees permission from supervisors for cooperation in developing activities for the benefit of families as an important factor. The Equality Seeker hopes that if the attitudes of actors could be influenced, this would reduce resistance to new types of collaboration.

The Equality Seeker considers that family support must be developed on an equal footing, irrespective of linguistic and cultural differences. The Equality Seeker also believes in flexibility and taking contextual changes into account.

The Equality Seeker shows how integration at the service production level requires that frontline professionals' social and health services can cooperate across administrative economic sectors and commit to shared goals. The Equality Seeker sees that meeting place work in the future must take into account the importance of the well-being of the whole family and support migrant families, especially by noting the importance of linguistic challenges to the experience of inclusion.

The Equality Seeker story is more of a counter-narrative than the other story types. The Equality Seeker proposes how professionals from different organisations can integrate in a systematic way as partners to improve family welfare support services. The Equality Seeker would strengthen equality across diverse families, professionals and communities. Equality Seeker points to the importance in the context of low-threshold services of being aware of language barriers in seeking to support families with a migrant background (Kaiser et al., 2022). The Equality Seeker describes how open meeting places can enable families to access parenting support equally across the various domains of government (see Virtanen et al., 2020). The Equality Seeker wants to see equality across families in how they are treated by the various parenting support services. The Equality Seeker wants families with children in the entire region to be able to access services that promote health and well-being (see Goodwin, 2016; Kaiser et al., 2022; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023). The Equality Seeker story type suggests that the coordination of family services in a low threshold environment would improve access to these services in everyday life. Well-organised coordination ensures the continuity of support in changing situations (see Fogarty et al., 2022). The Equality Seeker approaches the question of collaboration from a perspective centred on the creation of a common agenda based on trust and collaborative equality across administrative silos (Virtanen et al., 2020).

Discussion and conclusions

Our narrative analysis produced three story types on the experiences of interprofessional collaboration in family support services of professionals working in open meeting places for families. The Bridge Builder, Everyday Encounterer and Equality Seeker story types revealed professionals' voices and dreams about the need for awareness, actions and partnerships. The identified narratives yielded a picture of the current level of coordination of family support practices in the context of open meeting places

for families. The story types, and the Everyday Encounterer type in particular, aimed to see improved relationships and reciprocity in these open meeting places (Dolan et al., 2020). The strength of the narrative approach lay in its ability to capture various standpoints and challenges in the interface of customer needs, professional boundaries and leadership tasks.

For the Bridge Builder, the family is a core institution (see Hämäläinen et al., 2020). Additionally, interprofessional family support was seen as a child's right, a standpoint that helps in developing and implementing collaboration, measures and services that affect the lives of whole families (Virtanen et al., 2020). The participants seemed to work in a social pedagogical child- and family-oriented way with the shared goal of strengthening the family's participation. This cooperation with parents could be described as family-friendly discussion (see Nivala et al., 2022).

Our results indicate that the implementation of the family centre model does not in itself guarantee a customer focus. The story types revealed the importance attributed to customer-oriented interprofessional guidance in ensuring the continuity of care or services (see Kaiser et al., 2022; Martinussen et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2020). One shortcoming identified in this study was the lack of information the professionals reported receiving about other services provided by their family centres. Getting to know other employees and their competencies was considered to facilitate the implementation of coordinated care (see Cameron et al., 2014; Kaiser et al., 2022). The challenges presented by family centres are usually related to the absence of clear cooperative structures and standardised information management models (see Busch et al., 2013; Virtanen et al., 2020).

We also found some points of convergence on the provision of socially sustainable family and child welfare support (see Hämäläinen et al., 2020). In the Equality Seeker story, interprofessional collaboration in family support at the low-threshold open meeting places for families was seen as socially sustainable, as it was linked to the promotion of participation, cultural identity and social cohesion (Hämäläinen et al., 2020; Ungar, 2021). Working in open meeting places for families enabled the real-life problems faced by children, families and their communities to be addressed. Our results provided insights on the more inconspicuous side of the current work done in Finnish open meeting places for families and highlighted the presence in them of the voices of interprofessional workers.

The results also suggest tools for approaching cooperation between services, not only as an administrative structure but also as a set of cooperative relationships built in the process of work and engagement in other activities, and guided by the ideals of encounter, equality and coordination. The results may also be useful in the planning, development and provision of low-threshold family services. With the help of open meeting places, the health and well-being of families with children could be further promoted by networking with other services in the vicinity.

Our study indicates that challenges in the welfare sector require new knowledge and ways of thinking, as well as shared understanding (see Cedersund et al., 2021). With the help of the Bridge Builder, who works between service silos, the Everyday Encounterer, who creates relationships in everyday life, and the Equality Seeker, who seeks to strengthen equality in activities across families, professionals and communities, it is possible to further understanding of interprofessional collaboration in family support services.

Our findings offer ideas on how to provide more effective support on the universal level for different families, including vulnerable families and children at risk. Working collaboratively on the universal level may mean that costly negative outcomes are less likely in the future (see Dolan et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2020). According to Auschra (2018), an atmosphere of mistrust can lead to regional behaviours and suspicions that prevent cooperation. This earlier finding may imply that more work is needed to expand cooperation and partnerships to support families (see Bulling and Berg, 2018; Ungar, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2020). Better coordination and the co-location of services for families generate economies and ensure the provision of the variety of supportive services that families need (see Dolan et al., 2020).

Our study suggests that to strengthen the change in attitudes and relationships between people requires a dialogic relationship between administrators, working group members, families and the wider community (see Ungar, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2020). Since cooperative skills develop through engagement in various roles and activities in working life, they cannot be limited to the skills needed in, for example, a professional's own open meeting place for families. According to Virtanen et al. (2020), partnership is a crucial mechanism in the creation of safe and comprehensive well-being for children and families. Our study shows that partnership also needs to be approached from the viewpoint of children and through the lens of collective impact (Virtanen et al., 2020).

We noticed that the Bridge Builder, Everyday Encounterer and Equality Seeker story types and their motivational activities seemed to have some links with the singular of sociocultural animation (see Marrengula, 2010). It would be interesting to investigate sociocultural animation in expert practices in relation to parenting support. This study yielded insights into the possibility of applying sociocultural animation research as a practical approach to family support work, where research and practice come together in a reflexive perspective (see Marrengula, 2010). We could also present our study in a sociocultural way by showing how the focus group participants functioned as animators whose activities were targeted at supporting the parenting of families. The background organisation enabling this activity was the family centre's low-threshold meeting place for families (Marrengula, 2010).

Furthermore, we have to take these changes in the ecological impact on the life of families into consideration, as they are likely to be significant (Andreotti, 2021). As Michael Ungar (2021) states, there is far less need for research on why things break down; far more is needed on how improve the functioning of systems and the principles that predict success and trust in collaboration. Our narrative study showed that the provision of time- and place-independent child support services had increased in recent years. It would also be important to examine how family support services view the physical non-meeting of people, especially now when many families around the world are being affected by wars and civil strife.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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