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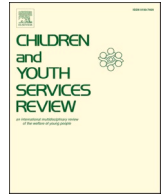
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Contact person intervention in Nordic countries: A comparative integrative review

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, the contact person intervention (CPI) is declared for children and youth in national legislation. The CPI is based on a relationship between the child and a volunteer adult who provides support to the child in need in different life situations. In this review, we summarise how the CPI within child welfare services has been studied and defined in four Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). The aim is to present an overview of research-based knowledge on the intervention in the Nordic countries. A thorough integrative literature review for the period January 2010 to September 2022 produced 16 scientific publications. There were no academic publications available for Denmark during this period. The review focused on research carried out in Sweden (10 publications), Finland (5), and Norway (1). All studies on the CPI are descriptive and explorative and mainly focus on tracing the historical background of the intervention. The practice of working with contact persons would benefit from research looking at the content and effectiveness of the service. More systematic national and cross-national research is needed to strengthen the knowledge base of the intervention.

1. Introduction

The contact person intervention (CPI) and contact family intervention¹ serve as Nordic examples of utilizing volunteers within the legal framework of social work (e.g., Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022; Goldschmidt Henriksen et al., 2011; Larsen, 2008; 2009; SOU 2020:47). In the Nordic countries, child welfare services have traditionally used outreach interventions to promote the wellbeing of children and their families (e.g., Pösö et al., 2014; Sjöblom & Wiklund, 2019), particularly those delivered as lay support by volunteers (Moilanen et al., 2023).

In Sweden (Social Services Act 2001:453), Finland (Child Welfare Act 2007:417; Social Welfare Act 2014:1301), Norway (Child Welfare Act 2021:1039), and Denmark (Act on Social Services 2022:170) the CPI is explicitly outlined in national legislation as an intervention provided for children and youth. In practice, the legislation provides an

opportunity for children and families to receive social support from volunteers, paid and supervised by social services (Andersson, 2003). The core objective of the CPI across all Nordic countries is to support children's development and growth through a relationship between the child and a volunteer contact person (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022; Goldschmidt et al., 2011; Larsen, 2008; 2009; SOU 2020:47).

CPI is looked upon as an attractive and flexible intervention both from the social worker's and family's point of view and it has been trusted to be effective based on social service professionals' experienced know-how. Despite this the intervention has not aroused interest much interest in the research even though some research on the CPI has been conducted in each country. In Sweden, several reports on the CPI were published at the beginning of the new millennium (e.g., Andersson & Bangura Arvidsson, 2001; Nilsson, 2005; Vinnerljung & Franzén, 2005; Ekblom & Landberg, 2007). In Finland, the first doctoral dissertation on

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¹ In Swedish, these interventions are called 'kontaktperson' and 'kontaktfamilj', respectively. In Finnish, the verbatim translations are 'support person' and 'support family'. In Norway, a contact person is called 'støttekontakt', and in Denmark, 'kontaktperson'. Here, we use the terms 'contact person' and 'contact family' to refer to similar practices across all Nordic countries.

the CPI was completed in 2015 (Moilanen, 2015). Some studies were also conducted in Norway 15 years ago on contact person and contact family intervention (Larsen, 2009; 2008). In Denmark, a comprehensive practical handbook (Goldschmidt Henriksen et al., 2011) has been published, as well as a study by Bo (2004). Knowledge about the CPI remains fragmented, and there is a lack of basic statistics and facts (e.g., effectiveness and outcomes) as well as comprehensive literature reviews. This also raises the question of why so much trust is laid in providing the CPI for children and youth. To address this gap, our article aims to provide a synthesis of current research on the CPI in the Nordic countries.

In this article we present an overview of research knowledge on the CPI in the four Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark) to support the evaluation, understanding of the intervention logics and the development of the intervention. By assessing the state of knowledge, we also aim to identify the gaps in the research field. The two research questions are: 1) How has the CPI within child welfare services been studied and what kinds of methodological choices are made in these studies? And 2) How does the use of the CPI differ between the Nordic countries? The second research question includes three sub-questions: how is the CPI itself framed, what are its goals, and how is the intervention implemented? To accomplish these aims, we used an integrative literature review with the aim of understanding and building knowledge (see Broome, 2000) about the CPI.

1.1. The formal framework of the contact person intervention in the Nordic countries

To better understand the CPI, we first draw out the formal legal framework and statistics available from each Nordic country.

In Sweden, the CPI is a means-tested intervention delivered by volunteers. Social services can help an individual and their closest relatives with their personal affairs, if the person applies for or agrees to it, by appointing a volunteer contact person, or contact family (SOU 2020:47). These volunteers are recruited and appointed directly by municipal social services, who also have responsibility for developing the content of the support and assessing its delivery and outcomes (Social Services Act 2001:624, 3§6b). National guidelines mainly reiterate the legal framework, emphasizing the need to create a plan in consultation with the client and the volunteer to guide the intervention's implementation (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2014). Each year, approximately 10,000–15,000 children in Sweden receive support from a contact person or contact family. Notably, the percentage of children and young people under 20 with a contact person or family decreased from 1 % in 2003 (n = 22,536) to 0.5 % in 2021 (n = 12,709) (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2022; Statistics Sweden and SCB, 2023). There are no statistics available that divide the interventions.

In Finland, the CPI is also a means-tested intervention and provided for children and young people by national legislation. The support provided by the contact person can vary according to the needs of the recipient. The contact person can also provide support for the whole family or an adult in the family (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022). In the beginning of 2023, a new national structure for organizing social and health care services in Finland was introduced and wellbeing service counties received the responsibility for organizing contact person services; this distinguishes Finland from other Nordic countries, where the municipalities are responsible. In contrast to the Swedish model, in Finland the CPI can also be organized for example by NGOs (e.g., Save the Children Finland and the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare), meaning the NGO recruits and trains the volunteers. In 2015, the CPI was defined as a general family service, the receipt of which does not require child welfare outpatient care, (Social Welfare Act 2014; Child Welfare Act, 2007). In Finland there is a lack of national statistics about the numbers of children who have a contact person. But study made in 2021 gives indicative information that around 1870 children in Finland would have a contact person as a support measure (Kannasojä

et al., 2022a).

Also in Norway, the CPI is a means-tested intervention provided by the municipality, for both children and adults. The formal target group includes individuals with physical or mental illness, injury, disorder, drug problems, social challenges, or disabilities. Contact persons are assigned directly and individually or in collaboration with NGOs (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Families, 2023). The Child Welfare Services (*Barnevernet*) governed by the Child Welfare Act, handle contact person cases. A contact person may be assigned according to the Child Welfare Act (Norwegian Government, 2021) when it is deemed necessary to ensure that the child is being properly cared for, or on other (unspecified) grounds (§ 3–4). A contact person can be assigned to families who have weak networks and children who are considered in need of adult role models (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Families, 2023). Norwegian national statistics provide precise data about all the used measures for child welfare services and 2060 children had a contact person as support measure in 2022 (Statistics Norway, 2023).

In Denmark, contact persons are covered by the Act on Social Service §46, emphasizing early and comprehensive support for children and young persons with special needs (Danish Government, 2022). Since 1997, a specific regulation, *Kontaktpersonsordningen*, has governed contact persons. Here, it is clarified that contact persons can be assigned to children aged between 8–18 years with intellectual disabilities, ADHD, and/or autism spectrum disorders. This kind of detailed and specific regulation regarding contact person services is specific to Denmark and does not exist in other Nordic countries. It also reveals that the intervention in Denmark covers a narrower group of children than in the other Nordic countries.

However, the Danish Act on Social Services (Danish Government, 2022) stipulates that municipalities must also provide the option to assign contact persons to other specific groups. These groups include adults at risk of radicalization and extremism (§12b), children under 18 who have served sentences for crimes (§57d), individuals who are deafblind (§98), and people with mental disorders, drug or alcohol addiction, or special social challenges who cannot remain in their own homes (§99). Available data indicates that in Denmark, the number of cases involving children and young people receiving contact persons has increased from 12,112 in 2020 to 13,097 in 2022 (Danish Statistics & Danmarks Statistik, 2022).

The above overview of the legal regulations of the intervention shows that the CPI is a flexible measure applicable in diverse situations. It is a measure that can be adapted to each specific situation and recipient (e.g., Moilanen et al., 2023; SOU, 2020:47).

1.2. Similar practices to the CPI

Interventions like the Contact Person Intervention (CPI) exist, particularly in North America and the United Kingdom. These interventions, often run by NGOs, are commonly referred to as 'youth mentoring' programs. Youth mentoring programs are one of the most widely used forms of support for children and youth from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Herrera et al., 2023). Interestingly, they have received more international research attention than the CPI (e.g., Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Preston et al., 2019). There is also Nordic research available on youth mentoring (e.g., Damm et al., 2022; Larsson et al., 2016; Radlick et al., 2020; Vitus & Perregaard, 2021).

While no previous literature reviews specifically focus on the CPI, reviews on interventions with similar functions can be found. Recent scoping reviews have focused on interventions delivered by social services that provide support for youth transitioning from the child welfare system into adulthood. Okland and Oterholm (2022) found that most social services either rely on mentoring programs or search the youth's personal network and biological family to improve the youth's social network. Gunawardena and Stich (2021) identified independent living

readiness programs as the most common interventions, while mentoring programs are frequently used to address social and emotional needs. Several earlier reviews have concluded that continuity and a child perspective are lacking in child welfare interventions for teenagers, in part because age-specific factors are neglected (e.g., Havlicek, 2011; Simmel, 2012). While risk factors for out-of-home placement and the risks of the same practice are continuously researched, early interventions have received less systematic study (Goemans et al., 2016; van der Put et al., 2022).

In the following section, we present the methodological principles and conceptual foundations of our integrative literature review. We then describe the applied search terms and the search and screening strategy used in our study. Finally, we summarize the results and provide a discussion and conclusion.

2. Method: Integrative literature review

To explore existing research on the CPI in the Nordic countries, we conducted an integrative literature review using Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) framework. As the broadest type of research review, the integrative review methodology allows us to summarize and synthesize research from various sources, including quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as empirical and theoretical research. By doing so, the integrative review provides a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, thereby avoiding the limitations of the more traditional forms of systematic review (Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Whittemore et al., 2014). According to Whittemore and Knafl (2005, p. 546), integrative reviews may "present the state of the science, contribute to theory development, and have direct applicability to practice and policy".

However, criticism has also been directed at the integrative review methodology. First, integrating diverse data sources and various methodologies is likely to complicate data analysis and synthesis (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Additionally, Torracco (2016) notes that some integrative reviews provide only cursory critical analysis of the literature, offering lists of deficiencies and weaknesses without in-depth analysis or adequate data synthesis. Moreover, if any low-standard studies are selected for review, this may lead to bias in synthesis, and thereby undermine the overall quality of the review (Evans, 2008).

One of the characteristic features of the integrative literature review is the completeness and diversity of the search strategy (Broome, 2000). Aimed at informing evidence-based practice and to develop or test theories, the integrative review is based on a systematic literature search. The review strives to generate a holistic synthesis of what is known regarding a topic. Distinct from systematic review, the integrative review intends inclusion of literature from diverse sources (e.g., published and grey literature) and methodologies (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) (Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022; da Silva et al., 2020; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). An integrative review can be used to form a synthesis not only on results of empirical research, but also on methodological and theoretical perspectives (Toronto & Remington, 2020, p. 4; Whittemore et al., 2014).

2.1. Search strategy and study selection

In this study, the integrative literature review was used as a method for summarizing the recent research literature and allowing the inclusion of diverse research methodologies. Searches were made between September and November 2022 in 12 electronic databases. Six of them were Nordic national scientific databases: DiVA Portal and SwePub (Sweden), Danmarks Forskningsportal (Denmark), Cristin (Norway), as well as Arto and Electra (Finland). Further, the search in English was made in six international databases: ProQuest Social Services Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Social Care Online, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Social Science Citation Index (WoS). All these national and international databases, which

are widely used and relevant to Nordic social work research, were searched to identify primary sources. The searches in the different databases were carried out by a research assistant.

To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria, based on the review questions: a focus on the CPI; child and family social work as the research context; peer-reviewed or, e.g., a book chapter or report published in a university series; and published in English, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, or Finnish between January 2010 and September 2022.

The search terms that were used as part of the first-round screening process were formed collaboratively by two of the authors. Several internet searches were also made to ensure that the terms used were correct. As we were aware that limitations associated with inconsistent search terminology and indexing problems may yield only about 50 % of eligible studies (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), we decided to use a large number of search terms and various term combinations to find as wide a range of thematically relevant studies as possible (see Fig. 1).

Search terms were focused on the title, abstract, and keywords of the articles, when the database allowed. For example, in the Swedish DiVA database, it was not possible to search for abstracts, so the search was focused only on the title and keywords. Performing the search in different languages made the search strings long and compelled us to identify the correct terms used in different countries to create the search terms. To find pertinent studies four screening rounds were made. The screening rounds and search terms as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Fig. 1.

The first-round screening concerning abstracts and subject or keywords indicated 646 abstracts published in a variety of research fields. In the second round of screening, all duplicates were excluded, resulting in a total of 475 abstracts.

In the second round, articles were screened according to their titles and the availability of the abstracts and viewed in relation to the inclusion criteria. The authors then assessed a total of 27 full-text articles in the third round. During this phase, the first four authors participated in reviewing the texts. While the first author read all the articles, each article was also reviewed by two or three of the other authors. This approach was necessary because not all authors were fluent in all the languages in which the articles were published. The Finnish authors (1 and 3) focused on the Finnish and Swedish texts, while the Swedish authors (2 and 4) were responsible for reading the Norwegian and Danish texts. Throughout the process, the authors held several meetings to discuss search results, the screening process, and the eligibility of the articles. One study was not accessible in full text through the available databases and was therefore excluded.

After the third round, following the above-mentioned exclusions, only six full-text articles met the inclusion criteria. Most of these articles related to Nordic mentoring programs linked to education in fields such as social work, teacher and medical training, and career development. Due to the small number of articles, we decided to conduct an additional manual search. In the fourth round, we manually searched reference lists and used Google Scholar to find additional articles, reports, books, and book chapters. At this point, we excluded academic dissertations, as there was only one published during the search period (Moilanen, 2015), and through the screening process we found three other articles that used the same or partially the same data as this dissertation. The search was broadened to include not only peer-reviewed texts but also other kinds of academic texts (see also van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Kennan et al., 2018). This criterion was chosen to avoid low-standard studies being selected for review, thereby undermining the overall quality of the review (Evans, 2008). This phase was crucial as it led us to identify ten more publications. At the end of the four-step screening process, a total of 16 publications were included.

The literature review has its limitations. Our review does not necessarily contain all the relevant studies, despite having followed good ethical practice and methodological guidelines. Conducting multiple rounds of searches aimed to ensure comprehensive coverage,

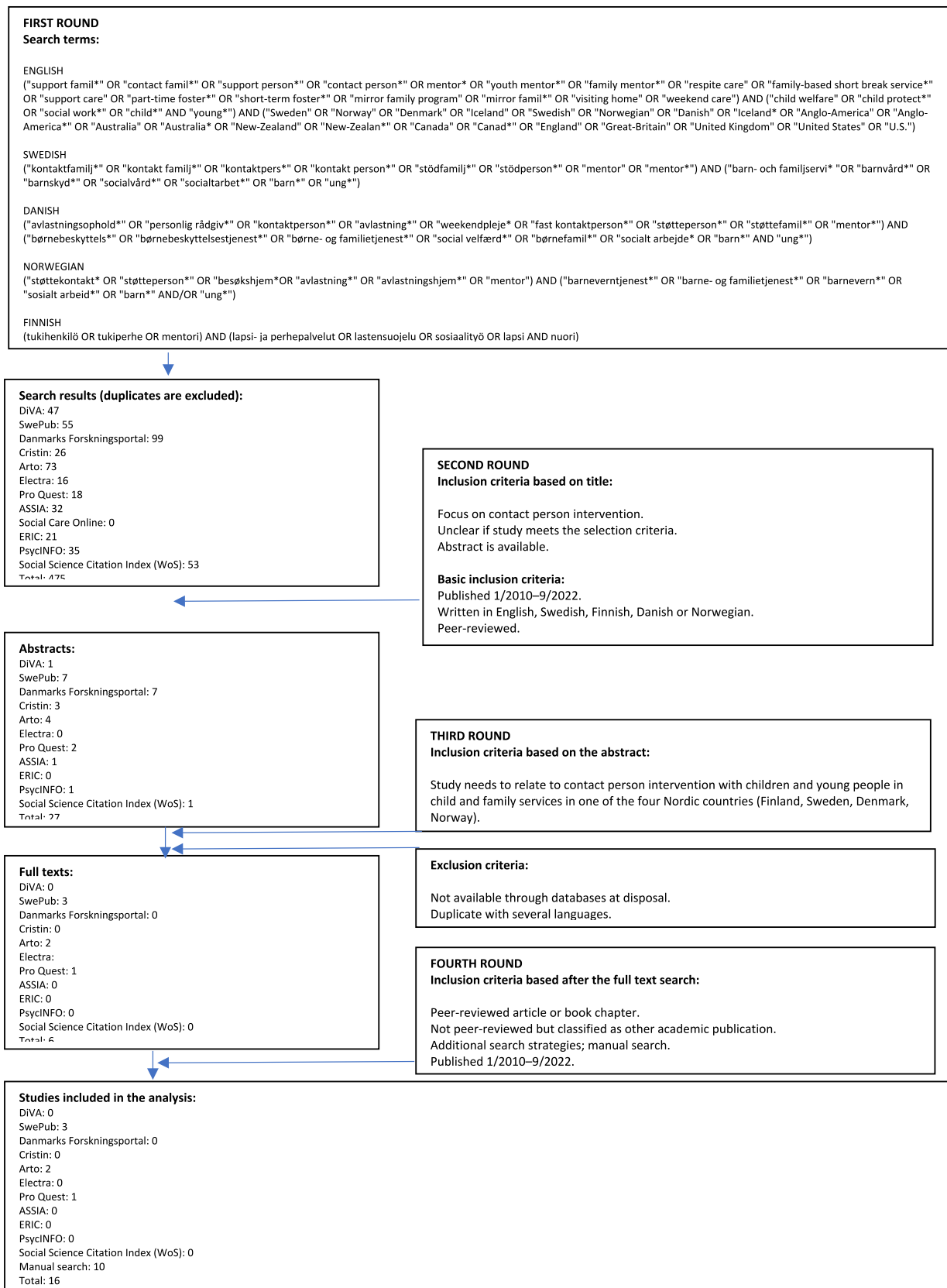


Fig. 1. The search and screening process.

although the total number of publications remains relatively small. We intentionally used a wide range of search terms, as strict criteria would have resulted in a less complete picture of the available studies. Additionally, we acknowledge that there has been a considerable amount of research published after our literature search in Norway (Herland et al., 2023) and in Finland (Kannasojä et al., 2022a; Moilanen et al., 2023; Kannasojä et al., 2022b).

2.2. Characteristics and analysis of the reviewed texts

The search yielded 16 academic publications and studies that met the inclusion criteria. Most of the reviewed publications were conducted either in Sweden (10) or in Finland (5). Only one study was done in a Norwegian context and there were no academic publications from Denmark during the selected period. Thus, our focus is on drawing comparisons between Sweden, Finland, and Norway.

Of the 16 texts, eight were peer-reviewed studies and eight were other types of academic text. These included, for example, research reports published by universities and book chapters written by academics.

The reviewed publications are listed in the table below (Table 1.). As part of the analysis, the publications were also classified by their characteristics based on country and area, phenomena of interest, participant characteristics, and methodology, as well as the database and quality of academic text (peer-reviewed or other academic text), as they relate to the research questions and the inclusion criteria (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). Publications are sorted by country (Sweden, Finland, and Norway) and chronologically by publication year.

As integrative reviews have been methodologically criticised, especially in terms of the risk of conducting the analysis in too cursory a way (Torraco, 2016), we focused our analysis strictly on our research questions. We were interested in the knowledge of the CPI provided in the publications and the features that they chose to focus on. By comparing the existing texts and studies on the CPI in the Nordic countries, we were able to place 'local intervention' in a broader context, serving as a kind of rough check on proposed explanations (Azarian, 2011; Enell et al., 2022).

The analysis was primarily conducted by the first two authors, although all authors participated in the initial round of analysis. During this phase, we classified the publications into a table based on their data, methods, study focus, and main results. This process provided us with an overall understanding of the research field related to the CPI. Given that integrative reviews have faced methodological criticism, particularly regarding the risk of conducting superficial analyses (Torraco, 2016), we remained focused on our research questions. We were interested in the knowledge of the CPI provided in the publications and the features that they chose to focus on. By comparing the existing texts and results of the studies on the CPI in the Nordic countries, we were able to place 'local intervention' in a broader context, serving as a kind of rough check on proposed explanations (Azarian, 2011; Enell et al., 2022). This also offered us a way to synthesize the findings across the different countries.

3. Results

We report the results by referring to our research questions. First, we answer the first question: how has the CPI within child welfare services been studied and what kinds of methodological choices are made in these studies? In the second subsection, we answer the question: how does the use of the CPI differ between the Nordic countries?, and the sub-questions: how is the intervention itself framed, what are its goals, and how is the intervention implemented? References to publications are marked with sequential numbering in line with Table 1.

3.1. Study characteristics

The studies can be categorized into three groups according to their focus and aims. The first group of studies provides a historical overview

of how the CPI has developed, aiming to understand its function and place in the welfare system and the associated ideals (3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15). Secondly, several studies focus on how different aspects of the intervention are performed and experienced by the parties involved (1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14). Thirdly, a handful of studies focus on the possible long-term effects of the CPI on children's development (4, 5, 2), including one study (7) that examines longitudinal links between accumulated childhood adversities and adverse outcomes in adult age in children that have had CPI. We included this study because it provides descriptive statistics on children and youth who have received the intervention.

The most striking result is the scarcity of research on the CPI despite its long history (see also Andersson & Bangura Arvidsson 2001). As research on the subject is scarce, all the studies necessarily start by describing the nature of the intervention and outlining previous studies, as there has been no literature review available. The 16 publications are primarily expressive and explorative, i.e., describing the intervention, its content, different forms of descriptive statistics, etc. One possible explanation for this is that the intervention occupies a unique space 'no man's land' - a blend of public child welfare services, volunteer work, and civil society activities (11, 8).

Many of the articles (2, 4, 5, 7, 14, 16) study contact person and contact family interventions together, as they are traditionally seen as similar kinds of interventions. However, recent research indicates that the two interventions are based on different kinds of logic, e.g., the CPI is intended for older, school-aged children and teenagers while the contact family intervention is intended for younger children (Kannasojä et al., 2022b).

When comparing the data and methods used across all included texts, four are from the same research group and based on the same Swedish national register (2, 4, 5, 7). Most other studies incorporate several forms of data. Five include documents such as guidelines and case files (8, 11, 12, 13, 15) and the remaining eight publications are based on documents and/or different forms of interview material, often in combination. This includes interviews with parents and youth/children who received the intervention in four publications (3, 6, 9, 16), of which three are based on the same data (3, 6, 9); and adults who received the intervention as youth in one publication (1). Three data sets contributing to six publications involved interviews with volunteers (1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 13) and four data sets contributing to seven publications involved interviews with social workers/case managers (1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13). This also shows that the number of researchers in this area is very small, but those involved are active in publishing.

It's evident that documents and registers dominate the datasets, while the voices of participants in the intervention remain excluded. In some studies, this is explained in relation to the challenges in recruiting interviewees (10, 16), especially considering the ethical aspects of studying underaged children as service users (16). At the same time, the CPI has been criticized for being an adult-led intervention (15), with only one study being based purely on children's experiences of the intervention (16). There is also one study where the data were collected from adults who had received the intervention as youth (1).

It has been noted that the CPI and its organization are not clearly and precisely formulated or nationally guided and regulated (8, 10). One Swedish publication emphasized the need to specify the intervention's underlying logic, including the risk factors it aims to influence and how (5).

3.2. Comparing the CPI in Sweden, Finland, and Norway

The voluntary work of contact persons can be regarded as a form of civic activity based on a 'contract' between the volunteer contact person and the child with their parents (11). The work of laypersons has traditionally been important in Nordic social work and child welfare services, which have their roots in civic activities and interventions by NGOs (8, 16, 12).

Table 1
List of publications included in the review.

Full reference	Country, area	Aim of the study (research questions)	Participants and methodology	Database & PW
1. Teng, S. (2010). <i>Kontaktpersoner för ungdomar genom socialtjänsten – en studie om hur dessa insatser avslutas (Contact persons for youth through social services – a study of how these interventions are terminated)</i> . FoU-Södertörns skriftserie no. 89/10.	Sweden, a larger municipality in the Stockholm area.	To generate knowledge about the CPI with focus on how it is terminated.	Case files from cases of CPI 2003–2005 (n = 75). Interviews with young adults who received the intervention as youth (n = 5) and case managers (n = 5).	Manual search, other academic text.
2. Vinnerljung, B., Brännström, L., & Hjern, A. (2011). <i>Kontaktfamilj/-person för barn: Uppföljning och utvärdering med registerdata (Contact family/person for children: follow up and evaluation with register data)</i> . Report in social work, no. 138. Stockholm: Stockholm University.	Sweden, national.	Does CP/CF seem to reduce the risk of: 1. future out-of-home placement? 2. adverse long-term development? 3. future out-of-home placement or adverse long-term development for children whose parents have indications for substance abuse? 4. Does the length of the intervention any positive effect? 5. What background factors seem to predict a worse or better long-term development?	National register study on children born 1980–1990 who received CF/CP at 2–5 or 10–13 years (n = 11 000) and a matched control group. Regression analysis. Adverse long-term development was operationalised as 16 factors related to mental health problems, drug use, public welfare receipt, criminality, and education. These factors were used to match the subjects who received CF/CP with those who did not.	SwePub, other academic text.
3. Franséhn, M. (2012). Den hedervärde medborgaren – exemplet kontaktperson inom socialtjänsten (The honourable citizen – the example contact person in social services). In H. Johansson & M. Bäck-Wiklund (Eds.), <i>Att fostra familjen: – en grundbok om styrning, föräldraskap och socialtjänsten</i> (pp. 126–146). Stockholm: Liber.	Sweden, three municipalities in the same region in western Sweden.	To generate knowledge of what content is included in the CPI for youth 13–20 years and how the intervention can be understood in relation to society's function as teen parent.	Files on CPIs with youth 13–20 years lasting a year or more (n = 36). Three focus groups with social workers, volunteers, and school representatives, one from each municipality (n = 27). Nine case studies on youth aged 13–20 who had CP intervention for at least a year; interviews with youth, parents, CPs, and social workers (n = 35). Inductive analysis with focus on specific key elements in the intervention.	Manual search, other academic text.
4. Brännström, L., & Vinnerljung, B. (2015). <i>Kontaktfamilj/person för yngre och äldre barn: Har insatsens varaktighet och ansamlingar av ogynnsamma omständigheter under barnens uppväxt någon betydelse för utfall på lång sikt? (Contact family/person for younger and older children: Does the length of the intervention and the accumulation of adverse childhood factors have any significance for long-term effects?)</i> Working paper 2015:2, School of Social Work, Stockholm: University of Stockholm.	Sweden, national.	To shed light on the following research questions: 1. Does the length of the CP/CF intervention have any significance for the outcome? 2. Does an accumulation of adverse childhood factors have any significance for the long-term outcome?	Same data and same operationalisation of adverse long-term outcome as Vinnerljung & Brännström (2011) but no control group. Logistic regression analysis.	SwePub, other academic text.
5. Brännström, L., Vinnerljung, B., & Hjern, A. (2015). Effectiveness of Sweden's contact family/person program for older children. <i>Research on Social Work Practice, 25</i> (2), 190–200.	Sweden, national	To estimate the impacts of Sweden's Contact Family/Person Program for older children on participants' long-term outcomes related to mental health problems, illicit drug use, public welfare receipt, placement in out-of-home care, educational achievement, and offending.	Partly same data as Vinnerljung & Brännström (2011) and same operationalisation of adverse long-term outcome. Children who received CP/CF at 10–13 years (n = 6386) and control group that were estimated to have the same probability of getting CF/CP but didn't. Matching via propensity score matching. Logistic regression analysis of outcome measures.	Manual search, peer reviewed.
6. Franséhn, M. (2016). Laypersons or professionals? Ambivalence about voluntary contact persons in social services in Sweden. <i>Nordic Social Work Research, 6</i> (2), 102–113.	Sweden, three municipalities in the same region in western Sweden.	To explore and illustrate how the CPI works today in relation to the original intentions in law. Main objectives: To define important key elements in the design and content of the intervention and to explore which types of persons are appointed for CP contracts, focusing on competencies.	Same data as Franséhn (2011).	ProQuest, peer reviewed.
7. Fridell Lif, E., Brännström, L., Vinnerljung, B., & Hjern, A. (2017). Childhood Adversities and Later Economic Hardship among Swedish Child Welfare Clients: Cumulative Disadvantage or Disadvantage Saturation? <i>British Journal of Social Work, 47</i> (7), 2137–2156.	Sweden, national	To examine longitudinal links between accumulated childhood adversities and an adverse outcome in adult age within child welfare population.	Same data as Vinnerljung & Brännström (2011) but no control group. Logistic regression analysis with financial difficulties as outcome measure.	Manual search, peer reviewed.
8. Svensson, K. (2017). Frivilligt socialt arbete i det offentliga gränsland. Gode män, övervakare, kontakt- och stödperson (Voluntary social work in the borderland of the public. Trustees, probation officers,	Sweden, national	Voluntary workers who do social work/voluntary community workers in Sweden. Borderland between public organisations and civil society and the	Group interview with Swedish Association of Voluntary Community Workers (RFS). Documents – legislation and examples of guidelines for case managers.	Manual search, other academic text.

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Full reference	Country, area	Aim of the study (research questions)	Participants and methodology	Database & PW
contact- and support person). In S. Linde & R. Scaramuzzino (Eds.), <i>Socialt arbete i civilsamhället: aktörer, former och funktioner</i> (pp. 275–299). Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.		function of voluntary work today.		
9. Franséhn, M., Johansson, H., & Wissö, T. (2018). Höga förväntningar på kontaktpersoner? En studie av föräldrapraktiker och insatsen kontaktperson för ungdomar inom socialtjänsten (High expectations of contact persons? A study of parental practices and the contact person intervention for young people in social services). <i>Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift</i> , 25(3–4), 327–347.	Sweden, three municipalities in western Sweden.	To get a deepened picture of the youth who receive the CPI and to analyse which dimensions of parenting the social services try to compensate when using the intervention.	Same data as Franséhn (2011). Analysis based on Bronfenbrenner and dimensions of family practices.	Manual search, peer reviewed.
10. Svensson, K., & Jägervi, L. (2020). <i>Betydelsen av ett uppdrag: Kontaktpersoner för ungdomar i socialtjänsten (The significance of an assignment: Contact persons for youth in social services)</i> . Working paper 2020:1, School of Social work, Lund: University of Lund.	Sweden, one municipality	To contribute to the knowledge about the CPI. Focus is on the assignment as CP for children and youth, and how it is defined by social services.	Individual interviews with social workers in social services working with CP/CF under Social Service Act (n = 7). Thematic analysis.	SwePub, other academic text.
11. Moilanen, J., Kiili, J., & Alanen, L. (2014). The practice of using support persons in the Finnish child welfare field. Towards a relational analysis. In T. Harrikari, P.-L. Rauhala, & E. Virokannas (Eds.), <i>Social Change and Social Work</i> (pp. 165–187). London: Palgrave Macmillan.	Finland, Jyväskylä and national	Placing the practice of using contact persons in Finnish child welfare in its wider social, political and cultural context. How the relationship between voluntary CPs and the children they provide support for emerges and develops, what the volunteers invest in the relationship, and what the 'support' comprises.	Documents: web-published introductions to the CP practice produced by authorities and reports and guidebooks published by two NGOs. Thematic interviews with 10 CPs and one coordinator. Analysis based on Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus.	Manual search, peer reviewed book chapter.
12. Moilanen, J. (2015). Vapaaehtoistyö lastensuojelussa eilen ja tänään – tukihenkilötoiminta peilauspintana (Voluntary work in child welfare yesterday and today – contact person activity as a mirroring surface). <i>Lectio praecursoria. Janus, Sosiaalipolitiikan ja sosiaalityön tutkimuksen aikakauslehti</i> , 23(4), 416–422.	Finland, Jyväskylä and national	CP history in Finland and its current state. How the CPI has changed over the years. To understand the CPI, we need to understand its history.	Combines the data of Moilanen, Kiili & Alanen (2014) and of Moilanen, J., Kiili, J., & Alanen, L. (2015). Document analysis based on Bourdieu's relational approach.	Arto, other academic text.
13. Moilanen, J., Kiili, J., & Alanen, L. (2015). Struggling to Support: Genesis of the Practice of Using Support Persons in the Finnish Child Welfare Field. In L. Alanen, L. Brooker, & B. Mayall (Eds.), <i>Childhood with Bourdieu</i> (pp. 165–187). London: Palgrave Macmillan.	Finland, Jyväskylä and national	How the CP practice came into being – its genesis. To generate a better understanding of the current state of operation of the support person practice and the tensions that have emerged over time as an effect of changes to the autonomy of the child welfare field.	Documents from national and local level, case files, and group interview with retired social workers. CP as Bourdieu's field: the analysis conceptualises child welfare work as a social field and as a subfield of the broader state-organised social work field.	Manual search, peer reviewed book chapter.
14. Moilanen, J., & Svenlin, A-R. (2016). Aika tukihenkilö- ja tukiperheoiminnan jäsentäjänä ja resurssina (Time as structuring and resourcing support person and support family activities). In S. Kannasoja, M. Kuronen, & T. Poikolainen (Eds.), <i>Sosiaalityön aika</i> (pp. 77–80). Tutkiva sosiaalityö.	Finland	1. What kind of dimensions does time as a perspective open to contact family and contact person activities? 2. In what different ways does time determine the provision of support? 3. What kind of meanings are given to time in contact person and contact family activities?	Same data as Moilanen, Kiili & Alanen (2014) on the CPI and data from contact family intervention; interviews with professionals, contact families, children, and parents (Svenlin, 2020).	Manual search, other academic text.
15. Moilanen, J., & Kiili, J. (2020). Suojeluvonnasta tukihenkilötoimintaan: lasten ja aikuisten muuttuvat suhteet lastensuojelussa (From protective supervision to contact person intervention: the changing relationships between children and adults in child welfare). In J. Moilanen, J. Annola, & M. Satka (Eds.), <i>Sosiaalityön käänneet</i> (pp. 221–254). University of Jyväskylä, SoPhi, 144.	Finland, Jyväskylä and national	How were the relationships between children and adults (generational relationships) structured in protective supervision and then followed by CP activities in the 1960 s and 70 s?	Documents from national and local level, case files, and group interview with retired social workers. Overlaps empirically with publication number 13. Document analysis based on relational (childhood) sociology inspired by Bourdieu.	Arto, peer reviewed book chapter.
16. Larsen, E. (2011). Help or formality? Children's experiences of participation in home-based child welfare cases: A Norwegian example. <i>Nordic Social Work Research</i> , 1(1), 43–60.	Norway, Oslo and 10 neighbouring municipalities.	To explore children's experiences of participation in cases of home-based child welfare intervention. To provide background information useful for improving the CP and CF interventions.	Interviews with children aged 6–11 years assigned a contact person or contact family by child welfare services (n = 32). Pre-interview conversations with children's parents also form part of the empirical material.	Manual search, peer reviewed.

For all the compared countries – Sweden, Finland, and Norway – the rationale for using contact persons is to provide support for children and their families. This implies the formation of an interpersonal relationship between the child and the contact person as a key element of the intervention. The broad aim is to strengthen the social inclusion of children and families by reinforcing their social networks and enabling opportunities for children to participate in leisure time activities. (10, 11, 16.).

3.3. Sweden

In Sweden, professionals and volunteers working side by side became a central part of the growing welfare system during the late 1800 s and early 1900 s. Professionals handled legal and administrative tasks, such as investigations, assessments, and follow-ups, while volunteers focused on personal aspects, maintaining close relationships with individuals and families (6, 8).

The 1924 Child Protection Act (1924:361) explicitly combined the work of volunteers and professionals, designating volunteers as ‘supervisors’. In the following decades, social reforms became an essential part of the general development of society. While social work and public authorities professionalized, volunteers remained in the ‘borderland of the public’ (8). In the Social Services Act (*Socialtjänstlag* 1980:620), the term ‘contact person’ was used for the first time, and contact families were introduced as a new practice (Prop. 1979/80:1). However, there were no clear guidelines for how professionals should recruit, support, and collaborate with volunteers (1, 6, 8). Today, although outreach measures for children in general have increased, the use of contact persons and contact families has declined (10).

In studies (3, 6, 9) involving 36 contact persons, Franséhn showed that only two could be defined as ‘pure laypersons’. Most had professional experience in social work or pedagogy. Several studies show that matching the youth with the right contact person is considered important, not just in terms of formal competence but also personal qualities and compatibility regarding, for example, interests and temperament. In addition, the personal relationship between the contact person and the youth is considered an important element of the intervention (3, 6, 9, 10). The CPI has been associated with strong normative elements, providing an opportunity for youth to interact with ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’ fellow citizens (3, 8). In Sweden, social workers have been described as ambivalent towards the value of professionalization of the CPI meaning that on the one hand, they emphasize the value and importance of using a layperson but on the other hand, they want the CPs to be capable of handling tasks that are more suitable for a qualified worker (6). In studies focusing on the development of the intervention over time, authors discuss whether the Swedish layperson ideal is disappearing or weakening in favor of professionalism (3, 8).

In the Swedish context, the intervention has been described as very flexible in both its goals and its content, which makes it useful but also demanding for the case manager (1, 6, 8, 10). It has been described as an ‘all-inclusive’ intervention (6). Little is known about how the work is performed and if volunteers do what is expected of them (8). Recruitment of contact persons, matching, and relationship between the child and the contact person are considered central components (6, 10). The motive for assigning a contact person can relate to the isolation of children or families, youth being at risk of antisociality and crime (10), or parents’ inability to guide and support their teenage children (9). A recurring goal is to compensate for the disabilities or absence of parents and other adults in the youth’s family (6, 9, 10).

It is possible that while the intervention is often not a sufficiently strong measure for youth with complex problems, it can have a positive impact in combination with other interventions (5, 9). None of the studies focusing on long-term effects of the intervention found any positive effects (4, 5, 2) and one found negative tendencies (2). Still, these studies did not have access to information about the motives and goals of the interventions, and no comparison was made with children in

similar situations who did not work with a contact person. Thus, there are no studies that really show whether the CPI achieves its goals. However, in qualitative studies, participants cited mostly positive experiences of the intervention (1, 3, 6, 9).

3.4. Finland

In Finland, studies on the CPI have primarily focused on its historical development (11, 12, 13, 15). To understand the CPI today, it is necessary to start from its inception (12). The intervention has its origin in the radical social welfare reforms of the 1960 s and 1970 s. The formation of a contact person service took place as part of the municipal child protection measures introduced at the beginning of the 1970 s, replacing ‘protective supervision’. Thus, a key aim of the reforms was to revise the ideology of social welfare: existing practices were to be changed to help implement the principles of client-centeredness, voluntariness, family normality, and prevention (12, 13, 15).

The general objective of the CPI in Finland is to promote the well-being of children and families, to support families in raising their children, and to prevent children from getting into ‘risky situations’ and being ‘excluded’ from social life (11, 12). The ideology of the ‘normal’ nuclear family is particularly strong in this context, emphasizing the creation and strengthening of intergenerational relationships in a child’s life (12).

In a study by Moilanen, Kiili and Alanen (11), children and youth needing a contact person were represented as ‘hungry for an adult’. This ‘hunger’ for adult company is believed to be caused by the ‘fragile social networks’ provided by the child’s own family, or by family problems deriving from parental exhaustion, economic distress, or mental or drug problems. Parents were perceived as unable to give their children adequate attention and to be satisfactorily ‘present in their children’s lives’. The research indicates that the primary reason for needing a contact person is the child’s perceived lack of time with their parent (11). The time provided by a contact person – i.e., the presence and attention of an adult – is a form of direct support for the child (14).

The contact persons are supervised by municipal social workers or other professionals. The social worker’s main duty is to monitor the practice and secure the rights of children and parents. In the Finnish context, contact persons are expected to report regularly to the organization on progress made in their relationship with the child and are required to be present at the intervention assessment meetings along with the child, the parent(s), and the social worker. The child, the parent (s), the volunteer, the social worker, and sometimes a separate contact person coordinator sign an official agreement to start the relationship. The agreement is usually valid for one year, as the municipality provides funding for contact person services for one year at a time (11). Finnish contact persons define themselves as ‘ordinary people’ without any specific educational or professional qualifications relevant to the role. Many, however, have a professional background in education, social care, or health care (11).

3.5. Norway

The Child Welfare Agency in Norway has a long tradition of using the CPI for children in need of social and emotional support (16). In general, Norwegian families who receive interventions from the child welfare services cope with severe social problems that limit their everyday life and leisure time, such as disabilities, low or irregular incomes, or poor housing conditions. Immigrant families with a non-Western background and single mothers are overrepresented (16). However, in the collated research, it is unclear whether this is also the case for the families of children and youth assigned a contact person.

While the Norwegian Directorate of Health (2023) describes the CPI in relation to the characteristics of the person receiving the intervention, the Norwegian researcher Elisabeth Larsen (16) argues that parenting to a standard below the expected level is the main incentive for assigning a

contact person or family for a child. More specifically, the most common reason is argued to be that the child/youth lack the opportunity to participate in leisure activities, often because of the parents' psychological or physical health. Like in other Nordic countries, the CPI is described as flexible in both purpose and form.

Larsen (16) describes the CPI as a home-based child welfare service and concludes that as such, the intervention carries a certain stigma. In her study the parents were reluctant to tell their children about child welfare services and did not receive encouragement from social workers to tell children about child welfare services. Most children had no background information about the intervention they took part in. However, most reported participating in decision-making about shared activities, and almost all children talked about the relationships with contact persons as positive. Larsen concludes that the children who benefitted most had their own goals for participating and had a clear understanding of their role during the activity or time spent with their contact persons.

To conclude this comparison of the CPI in Sweden, Finland, and Norway, there are certain key themes covered in the research that form the current knowledge base. These themes are historical development; legislation status; background of the children, youth, and volunteers; and aims of the intervention. All studies included in the review are moreover descriptive and present the long historical development. Across all three countries, the CPI is grounded on an ideology which is connected to the development of the welfare state. The intervention itself seems to have several broad goals, but the main idea is that support provided by volunteers as civic actors can strengthen the wellbeing of children and families in need. The review makes visible that more research is needed of the current CPI practice. The historical context and the development of the CPI are well documented and provide understanding of the ideology behind it. But the justification and research evidence for the use of the intervention are still weak.

4. Discussion

The aim of the review was to create an overview and synthesis of research-based knowledge on the CPI in the Nordic countries. We explored how the intervention itself is framed, its goals, and how it is implemented. The limited number of articles made it difficult to comprehensively describe how the CPI is implemented in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. As there were no Danish studies from the selected period, we were only able to compare the interventions between three Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, and Norway).

Based on the results, we can conclude that existing studies on the CPI are highly superficial, mainly describing and analyzing its historical development and the current status of the intervention. Studies are also mainly focused on the local level, although there are a few wider studies where national register data have been used. Many of the publications reviewed can be characterized as explorative and narrow. In Sweden, research on the CPI has been conducted by various researchers at different times whereas in Finland and Norway, there is a single main scholar or research group has been responsible for most of the CPI research during the review period. Especially when the research is mainly carried out by one small group or one researcher, it makes the research vulnerable and can challenge its validity.

Although the intervention has been in use for over 40 years, the research field remains in an early stage of development, and more studies are needed to deepen the understanding of how the intervention goals are set up in practice, how should they be followed up, why this intervention should be used, how it works, and in which cases. The literature review allows us to recognize the differences in the historical development of the intervention in each of the Nordic countries, as well as the ground rules for how the intervention is organized and implemented. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about, for example, who receives the intervention and for what purpose. Based on the narrow focus of existing research, it is also difficult to determine if and how

the intervention has developed and responded to social changes over time. CPI has gained a status over the decades that it is widely used, maybe because of its' low costs, but today welfare state structures also require justifications on their services and more in-depth research is needed, for example of the outcomes, to reason the use of the CPI.

There is also an obvious need for studies that focus on the intervention logic and theoretical underpinning of the CPI. The theoretical base of the intervention could be developed with the help of a programme theory framework, as has been done in Finland around contact family intervention (Svenlin & Lehto-Lundén, 2023). The Swedish researcher Mona Franséhn (2016) described the CPI as 'an all-inclusive intervention and concept' and it still illustrates the nature of the intervention. At the same time, it also highlights that the CPI is difficult to grasp and analyze. In social work practice, the intervention is considered useful (Moilanen et al., 2023; Kannasoja et al., 2022b), but it is challenging to study its effects as it involves a mix of voluntary and professional social work.

The review underscores the diverse goals of the CPI across the three Nordic countries. Despite variations, the common rationale for using contact persons to support children and families is to strengthen social inclusion by reinforcing social networks and providing opportunities for children to engage in leisure activities. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should focus on children's experiences and participation opportunities. The ideal of enabling an additional adult relationship in the child's life cannot be approached only from the adult perspective.

5. Conclusion

All publications included in the review highlight the need for more research on CPI. A lack of theoretical elaborations of the intervention in the research is also striking. This is also a reason why it is challenging to provide a coherent picture of the CPI research in the Nordic countries. It is also evident and striking that there are no national-level structures for the development and evaluation of the intervention. Research cooperation between the Nordic countries could be crucial for enhancing our understanding of evaluating the CPI (Moilanen et al., 2023). However, this complexity makes it challenging for social service professionals to justify decisions regarding to whom and on what basis this intervention is offered.

Further, there is a need for research on the effectiveness of the CPI. To design an effectiveness study, we need more information about who receives the intervention and for what purpose (e.g., Kannasoja et al., 2022a; Kannasoja et al., 2022b). Without that, we might face a situation in the future where the whole intervention is missing its focus. As the CPI is part of national welfare legislation in the Nordic countries, there is a demand for evidence-based interventions in child and family social work. Therefore, it is not a sufficient justification that the intervention is valued useful by users and professionals at the practice level.

In future, well-grounded, analytical research on the CPI needs to lean on previous research and aggregated basic data (such as descriptive statistics and descriptions of content) which is now not available at the Nordic or national level. This leads us to argue that systematic national research as well as cross-national comparisons are needed to strengthen the knowledge base and the development of the CPI in the future.

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6. Data availability statement

No data were used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Research is a literature review where the data is articles search from databases.

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