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The child's best interests principle in child welfare assessments: how do Finnish social workers approach and apply the principle?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how social workers approach and apply the principle of the child's best interests in their practice when they make assessments in child welfare in Finland. The study rests on two types of data in which social workers describe their assessment practice: a survey of social workers with 373 responses and a vignette-based group discussion data with 120 practitioners in 28 groups. The findings highlight that the principle of the child's best interests is acknowledged as being important and uncontested. However, the overall approach is procedural, focusing mainly on talking with children about their views and opinions. There is a weakness, if not even a lack of a substantive approach to the principle, with limited use of theoretical knowledge. The study suggests two ways forward: more reflective practices to critically explore the principle in its all variations in front-line practice, and a more theory-based approach to applying the principle.

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Introduction

Although the principle of the best interests of the child has a long history and is widely used in child welfare, it is a common sentiment that it is challenging to apply the principle in practice. The principle as such is ambiguous and indeterminate, and it requires child-specific discretion and sensitivity (e.g. Archard and Skivenes 2009; Barth 2009; Sandberg 2018; Sormunen 2021). Nevertheless, in a recent survey, Finnish social workers reported high levels of satisfaction regarding how well assessments are carried out in child welfare from the point of view of the child's best interests (Jaakola and Vornanen 2024). This particular finding called for us to examine in more detail how Finnish social workers approach the principle in their work, as their message contrasted with criticism regarding how fragmentally the principle is applied in child welfare (e.g. Križ et al. 2022; Skivenes 2010). The aim of this article is thus to study *how* social workers approach and apply the principle when making child welfare assessments. In asking the question 'how', we highlight the practice-based application of the principle as described by practitioners but refrain from taking an explicit position regarding whether assessments are made in the child's best interests. Empirically, the study is built on two types of data: a survey of social workers and vignette-based group discussions with practitioners in Finland. The data for this article are drawn from a larger study 'Child welfare in the best interest of a child? Assessments at the juncture of social services and child welfare'¹ of which specific topics pertaining to assessment practices have been reported elsewhere

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(e.g. Aaltio et al. 2023; Heino, Veistilä, and Lamponen 2024; Jaakola and Vornanen 2024; Jaakola et al. 2024; Lamponen and Aarnio 2024; Pösö et al. 2024).

While focusing on social workers' approaches to the principle of the child's best interests, we hope first to contribute to the knowledge base on how to build a bridge between children's rights in their quite abstract form and social work practice. The findings of our study highlight the fragile nature of that bridge at the moment. Second, we will suggest that while there is a growing tendency in Finland and elsewhere to introduce more standards, structures and procedures to assessments carried out by social workers (e.g. Ponnert and Johansson 2018; Vis and Lauritzen 2020), there is also an evident need to ground the principle in practice on theoretical knowledge about children's well-being, their developmental needs and the social and cultural norms surrounding childhood.

This article is structured so that we will first give a short overview of the principle and the context of making assessments in child welfare in Finland, after which we will present the research design and empirical findings.

The principle of the child's best interests in child welfare

Although the notion of the child's best interests has a long history and has both legal and psychosocial meanings and is used in everyday language, the most pivotal definition of the child's best interests is presented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), where it is viewed as a right (Parviainen 2024). According to Article 3 of the CRC, children have the right to have their best interests taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern them, both in the public and private spheres. The principle is further defined by General Comment No. 14 by the United Nations (2013) stating that the full application of the concept of the child's best interests requires the development of a rights-based approach, engaging all actors, to secure the holistic physical, psychological, moral and spiritual integrity of the child and promote his or her human dignity. While its nature as a dynamic and evolving principle is emphasized in the General comments, the concept is also defined to be, first, a substantive right; second, a fundamental, interpretative legal principle; and third, a rule of procedure. It is also stated there that the child's best interest is a complex concept that cannot be precisely defined; this provides flexibility in its interpretation and application. It is therefore necessary to assess and interpret child's best interests individually in each case at hand (e.g. Sandberg 2018).

The lack of a precise definition of the child's best interests has been a common topic in the child-welfare literature. It is said to be one of the most debated and criticized concepts of the CRC (Sormunen 2016). At the same time, it would be hard to argue that a legal decision should be made so that it is not in the best interests of the child (Hansen and Ainsworth 2011). Already in the 1970s, when Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1980, 1986) wrote about the concept in the United States, they argued that the concept was imprecise in terms of legal and theoretical content. However, in their view, the concept was needed to guide professionals' decision-making normatively so that decisions are made with an emphasis on the child's needs instead of parents' wishes or their needs. The contested nature of the concept is often highlighted (e.g. Hansen and Ainsworth 2009; Piper 2000). Some argue that the child's best-interest principle remains as a moral but rhetorical tool to approach childhood and child-centrism (Hennum 2014; Meyer 2007). Alternatively, it has been proposed that the principle should be replaced by other conceptual constructions to guide child welfare (e.g. good-enough parenting, as suggested by Ainsworth 2021). Nonetheless, it is a legislative norm for child welfare in Finland.

A procedural approach to the child's best interests has been suggested to give an opportunity to diminish the vagueness of the principle. According to the legal scholar Sormunen (2020), the procedural approach (or procedural review) builds on considering procedural elements in assessing the child's best interests. In this view, the procedure which is carried out to assess the child's best interests is more essential than the substantial content or the outcome of the assessment (Sormunen 2021). While the procedural approach to a child's best interests has

proven effective in safeguarding fundamental and human rights, a substantive approach would also be needed as well (Sormunen 2020). In Sormunen's view, one option is a 'semi-procedural' approach combining elements of procedural and substantive approaches, in which case content also matters.

From the point of view of child welfare practice, national legislation may include some guidelines to capture this complex principle. In a comparative reading of national child welfare legislation and their definitions of the child's best interests in 14 jurisdictions, there are indeed some more specific formulations of the principle but still requiring professional reasoning in each case (Skivenes and Sørsdal 2018). In practice, social workers and other professionals must navigate between a variety of sources and types of norms and information and weigh their importance and relevance for the case at hand. While doing that, they must respect the child's right to express their views freely and give due weight to children's views in all matters affecting the child (CRC Article 12; General Comment No. 14). Article 12 emphasizes the importance of respecting the views of children. In General Comment No. 12 (2009), the Committee on the Rights of the Child specifies this by saying:

Since the child enjoys the right that her or his views are given due weight, the decision maker has to inform the child of the outcome of the process and explain how her or his views were considered. The feedback is a guarantee that the views of the child are not only heard as a formality but are taken seriously. The information may prompt the child to insist, agree or make another proposal or, in the case of a judicial or administrative procedure, file an appeal or a complaint. (point 45)

When applying the principle of the child's best interests, the duty of the professionals is thus not only to hear the child but to take the views seriously and explain how the child's views were taken into account – and to make decisions in the best interests of the child (Sandberg 2018).

The child's best interest principle in assessments in Finnish child welfare

Making assessments is an integral part of any human service organization and, indeed, of professional practice of social work within those organizations. Making assessments is a complex social, institutional, interactional, legal and cognitive process (e.g. Jaakola 2020). Children's and families' needs and rights for services are assessed at the point of entry to services as well as during the provision of those services. In Finnish child welfare, it is mainly the task of social workers to assess the requests or applications for social services and child-welfare referrals, and as a result, a child or family may be referred to receive the child and family services provided for under the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) or child-welfare services, as per the Child Welfare Act (417/2007). If services are provided, there should be constant assessment of the relevance of services, which may result in the continuation of, changes to, or termination of those services. At present, there are no obligatory assessment tools or structured methods for practitioners to use in their assessments (Aaltio et al. 2023). Assessments are described as 'craftwork practice' that is tailored to each case (Lamponen and Aarnio 2024), sometimes carried out by multiprofessional teams to assess the situations of children and their families (Lamponen, Aarnio, and Veistilä 2024).

The principle of the child's best interests should guide assessments as any other measures in Finnish child welfare. The Child Welfare Act (417/2007, Section 4) specifies seven issues which must be evaluated in terms of child's best interests: (1) the child's balanced development and well-being as well as close and continuous human relationships; (2) the child's opportunity to receive understanding and affection, as well as supervision and care, according to age and developmental level; (3) education that corresponds to tendencies and wishes; (4) a safe growth environment and physical and mental integrity; (5) independence and responsibility for growth; (6) the opportunity to participate in and influence one's own affairs; and (7) consideration of linguistic, cultural, and religious background. These dimensions, which are quite similar to those in the General Comment by the United Nations (2013) mentioned before, inevitably invite professional discretion, as the Act does not specify how to apply the dimensions when making assessments.

Other than the study by Jaakola and Vornanen (2024), mentioned in the introduction, very little research has been undertaken on how the principle is taken into account when making assessments in frontline child welfare in Finland. The studies highlighting the principle are in the context of court decisions or with a child’s participation as their particular interest (e.g. De Godzinsky 2014; Pölkki et al. 2012; Sormunen 2021).

Research design

In this article, we explore how the principle of the child’s best interests’ is approached and applied in practice of child welfare assessments as seen by practitioners. We build our analysis on the survey data of social workers (*N* = 373) and vignette-based group discussions by practitioners. Two types of data help us cast light on this understudied topic. While the survey gives us the opportunity to analyse the determination of the best interests of the child in assessments in a general and broad manner, the vignette-based group discussions provide insights into their case-based practices as imagined and elaborated on together with colleagues. Both data sets will be presented next separately, first the survey and then the vignette-based group discussions. The presentation of the findings will follow the same pattern.

The survey

The purpose of the survey was to reach a wide range of social workers in order to gain an understanding of the assessment practices carried out in Finnish child welfare services. The survey included several structured questions on the content and practices of assessment, as well as a few open-ended questions. Permission to collect the survey was obtained from 210 municipalities across Finland.² The survey was sent electronically to approximately 1000 social workers employed in child and family services or child welfare services in municipalities. The municipal contact persons provided relevant email addresses and forwarded the survey link to the social workers. Data collection began in November 2021 and ended in January 2022. Four reminder rounds were carried out. A total of 373 social workers from different parts of Finland responded to the survey.³ Descriptive data of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

The analysis of the survey data focuses exclusively on the variables that measured the extent to which the social workers perceive their expertise and its theoretical base when considering the child’s best interests. Some variables indirectly describe the prerequisites for an assessment in the best interests of the child, such as the child’s participation, workplace practices to promote

Table 1. Descriptive data of the survey respondents.

Variable	% (n)
<i>Do you work primarily in child welfare or child and family services?</i>	
Child welfare services	22 (82)
Child and family services	52 (189)
In both	26 (94)
<i>Do you have legal qualifications as a social worker?</i>	
Yes	76 (279)
I am a substitute social work student	24 (87)
<i>Age of respondents</i>	
Under 30 years old	10 (35)
30–44 years old	51 (183)
45–54 years old	25 (91)
Over 54 years old	14 (50)
<i>Work experience in child welfare</i>	
Under 5 years	43 (158)
5–10 years	32 (118)
11–20 years	21 (76)
Over 20 years	4 (13)

assessments in the best interests of the child and time available for making assessments. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally agree, 5 = totally disagree) was used to measure social workers’ responses to the structured questions. The theoretical knowledge behind the assessment was asked as an open-ended question. Statistical analysis was done in SPSS version 29. In the analysis we use descriptive percentage distributions of the responses to the structured questions and we quantify and categorize the contents of open-ended responses pertaining to the theoretical knowledge used.

The vignette-based group interviews

The other data set consists of 28 group interviews with 120 practitioners whose task was to ‘assess the need of the children and their families for services’, a task defined by the Social Welfare Act. The groups were provided with a vignette that was designed and pretested with several social workers to be as realistic and as ‘ordinary’ as possible, one of the strengths of vignette-based studies in social work (e.g. Eskelinen and Caswell 2006; Kia 2024). The vignette provides a case description of siblings, a girl aged 14 who spends nights away from home and contacts the school health nurse because of her unwellness and a boy aged 9 who has difficulties with school work and the school environment. The parents have some mental health issues and do not manage to support their children. The family counselling psychologist together with the parents contact social services in order to have the family’s and children’s needs for services assessed. The groups were asked to elaborate how they would work with the case to assess it. The semi-structured interviews included a question section about how the practitioners would consider the children’s best interests while making the assessment, how they would affirm that the assessment serves the children’s best interests and what they would do if there was disagreement about the principle. The related discussions in this section have been separated from the transcriptions to make the data for the analysis of this article.

Most of the groups were teams that made such assessments in real-life situations, while some groups were formed for the purpose of the study. In both cases, the researchers contacted the contact persons assigned in the research permit granted to the study. The invitation to join the study was sent to practitioners by the contact persons and interested practitioners contacted the researchers. After that, the practicalities (e.g. time, space) were negotiated between the researchers and practitioners. The group composition is presented in Table 2.

The groups came from different parts of Finland and consisted mainly of social workers (*n* = 82), with an MA degree in social work as required in Finland, and social instructors (*n* = 29) with a BA on social services or equivalent studies. There were also nine other professionals, as such assessments can be undertaken by multiprofessional teams. Table 2 highlights the variation of the names of real-life teams making assessments. Other groups consisted of practitioners which had the statutory duty to assess children’s and families’ needs for services without such team structures.

Table 2. The groups for the vignette study.

The nature of the groups (<i>n</i> = 28)	<i>n</i>
<i>Groups which in real-life make assessments as teams (<i>n</i> = 13)</i>	
‘Assessment teams for the needs for services’	8
Multiprofessional teams	2
‘Assessment teams’	2
‘Child welfare assessment team’	1
<i>Groups which collected practitioners making assessments without such a team-structure (<i>n</i> = 15)</i>	
Practitioners in child welfare	8
Practitioners in family and child services	5
Practitioners in child welfare as well as family and child services	2
<i>Occupation of the participants (<i>n</i> = 120)</i>	
Social workers and leading social workers	82
Social instructors	29
Other (psychologist, teacher, doctor, police, nurse, youth worker, family therapist, family worker)	9

The groups discussed the case in quite similar ways regardless of their backgrounds. It is noteworthy that it is only social workers – and, in some cases, social instructors – who are mandated to make service decisions based on assessments. The practitioners were quite experienced in their practice, as the majority had worked in child welfare for 3 to 5 years. The smallest group had two practitioners and the largest 11, but most had 4–5 practitioners. Each group had two interviewers, which included the authors of this article. The interviews were carried out either face-to-face or via internet (according to the groups' preferences) and lasted 40–120 min. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

For the analysis of the group discussion data, we employed inductive thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2021a). We first identified the thematic patterns addressing the principle of the child's best interests, voiced either by one or several speakers and coded them by providing a short summary of their content. We used semantic coding, which made us focus on the explicitly expressed meanings of the principle and stay close to the language of the group discussants (Braun and Clarke 2021a, 55). However, as some thematic patterns were short – the speakers addressed the principle only by saying, for example, that 'we make assessments according to the child's best interests' or 'the Child Welfare Act' without any further elaboration by the group members – we decided to exclude such patterns from the main analysis. Although they were excluded, it is important to acknowledge that their shortness highlights the challenges which exist in putting the abstract principle into words, or the taken-for-granted nature of the principle. In the next round of analysis, we worked with the thematic patterns which were richer in content. Although richer, the patterns shared the language of gathering information (e.g. talking with children; hearing their views; getting or finding more information) and a variety of sources of information which practitioners intended to contact and work with in order to acquire the required information. Instead of technically counting the codes, a more reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke 2021b) was implemented to define and name the main thematic categories in which working for information in contacts is shared but the contacts differ. The categories to address the principle of the child's best interests are (1) working with the child, (2) working with the parents, and (3) working with other practitioners. Working with children is the most common category.

Results

Social workers' views of the child's best interests principle in their assessments, as reported in the survey

The survey results indicated that the social workers have a strong conviction that the principle of the best interests of the child is given adequate consideration in assessments (see Table 3), with 87% of the social workers expressing agreement with the statement 'The assessment takes sufficient account of the child's best interests'. This viewpoint is further reinforced by the social workers' own expertise in making assessments in the best interests of the child, as 93% of the social workers note their agreement with the statement 'I have sufficient expertise to make an assessment in the best interests of the child'.

Table 3. The proportion of responses to the child's best interests assessment and views of expertise to make a best interests assessment, % (n).

	Completely or somewhat agree % (n)	Neither agree nor disagree or disagree % (n)	Total % (n)
The assessment takes sufficient account of the child's best interests	87 (314)	13 (48)	100 (362)
I have sufficient expertise to make an assessment in the best interests of the child	93 (338)	7 (27)	100 (365)

Table 4. Social workers' views on their confidence in the process of considering children's best interests, % (n).

	Always or almost always % (n)	Occasionally or only rarely % (n)	Total % (n)
I ensure a decision by discussing it with the child	74 (273)	26 (94)	100 (367)
The assessment involves a one-on-one meeting with the young person (13–18 years old)	91 (330)	9 (32)	100 (362)
The assessment involves a one-on-one meeting with the child (6–12 years old)	81 (298)	19 (68)	100 (366)
The assessment involves a one-on-one meeting with the child (2–5 years old)	49 (179)	51 (186)	100 (365)
My workplace promotes the implementation of the assessment in accordance with the best interests of the child	61 (225)	39 (142)	100 (367)
I have enough time to make the assessment	24 (86)	76 (278)	100 (364)
I analyse information using theoretical knowledge	41 (150)	59 (217)	100 (367)

We looked at the variables that measure the crucial elements of any assessment of a child's best interests, such as child participation (Table 4). The majority of the social workers engage the children in discussions regarding the assessment outcomes. However, there are notable variations in the extent of children's involvement based on their age. Specifically, adolescents aged 13–18 years are more likely to be engaged in face-to-face meetings than younger children. For children under school age, only around 50% of children have a face-to-face meeting with a social worker. Furthermore, although the majority of the social workers perceive their workplaces to promote assessments in the best interests of the child, 39% of the social workers report that this does not always occur. In addition, 76% indicate that they regularly do not have sufficient time to make the assessments.

The application of theoretical knowledge as the foundation for the child's best interests principle is not a prevalent practice among the social workers, with the majority (59%) employing it only occasionally or rarely in their assessments (Table 4). When social workers were asked to write freely about the theoretical knowledge they apply in practice, a total of 276 free text responses were received from 98 social workers. A content analysis of these responses resulted in the formation of five categories (Table 5): working methods and orientations, legislation and children's rights, set of disciplines, phenomenon-based approaches and a specific theory. The categories are arranged in order of frequency of mention, with the most frequently mentioned category appearing first and the least frequently mentioned category appearing last.

'Theoretical knowledge' has a wide meaning in the social workers' responses. It only rarely refers to a specific theory, and if it does, it is only attachment theory which is mentioned. Instead, theoretical knowledge is seen most often to be informed by orientations to practice as well as by legislation. Child orientation, systemic approaches, or trauma-informed care, among others, orientate practitioners to act in certain ways. They are more or less informed

Table 5. Categories of theoretical knowledge used in assessments.

Category of theoretical knowledge	Examples of the descriptions
1. Work methods and orientations	Child orientation, trauma sensitivity, systemic approach, solution orientation, family therapeutic way, relationship-based work
2. Legislation and human rights	Child Welfare Act, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, human rights, legislative requirements, child's best interests, child's participation
3. Set of disciplines	Developmental psychology, special pedagogy, social sciences
4. Phenomenon-based approaches	ACE risk factors, supportive factors for safety in childhood
5. Specific theory	Attachment theory

by theory, but the terms used in the survey's free-text comments refer more to practice orientation than to the background theories. Legislation and legal norms, in particular the Child Welfare Act and the CRC, are often regarded as sources of theoretical knowledge. Some social workers mention scientific disciplines, such as developmental psychology, and phenomenon-based approaches, such as adverse childhood experiences, which inform their assessments.

How the child's best interests principle is applied in practice – vignette-based group discussions

Group discussion data is often shaped by consensus (Morgan 2002) and consensus is typical for our data as well. In general, there is a solid agreement across all groups that the assessment of the case presented in the vignette would be made to serve the children's best interests and that it is the social worker who eventually affirms that the assessment is done in the best interests of the child. The group participants express neither doubts nor hesitations about the inclusion of the principle. There were no differences in this regard between the groups.

In the practitioners' group discussions, working with children, parents and other practitioners is the key way to approach the principle. Working with them is done primarily to gather more information from their respective perspectives as highlighted by the following extract.

Meeting children and talking with children, I would emphasise that. And also the messages from school and other authorities, and of course from the parents. All this together, including the counselling centre [mentioned in the vignette], it is a combination of all this information that determines the child's best interests.

The most frequently presented way to approach and apply the principle of the child's best interests is *working with children and listening to children's views and opinions*. The group participants explain in great detail how important it is and how it is in the child's best interests to talk with them and to listen to their views and opinions.

As the consideration of the child's best interests is embedded in talking to and hearing the child, a variety of skills and methods are mentioned to be important: for example, practitioners need to take the child's characteristics, personality and age into account. With regard to the vignette, the younger child (9 years) is said to require special skills and tools, whereas the issues related to the older child (14 years) are said to necessitate private and confidential encounters between her and the practitioners. The practitioners state the need to meet the children in person. Despite the practitioners' intentions to provide a good platform for talking, concerns are expressed that children may have difficulties talking with strangers and practitioners' lack of time to build good relationships with the children. The extract below conveys the doubts frequently noted in these data, in particular, the limited time available to meet with the children in the proper way.

The challenge is especially our limited resources. We have time to meet the child once during the assessment. If the child is quite shy, it is not certain that the child tells us all about their life, I doubt that quite few tell us that. Then it is also about time available to us to prepare the meetings and choose relevant equipment, it is not much. If you think of Elias, who is 9, we should think if we had any suitable and relevant tools to help him tell.

The extract also demonstrates the emphasis on the importance of the information received from the children, as the speaker expresses concerns about the children telling 'all' about their lives. Information from children is given the first priority. The extract below describes a situation in which the children and parents' views differ. The speaker, supported by other members in that group, describes the child's information as being most decisive.

If parents and children differ in their views, I think, as the child's social worker, that we always think of the child's best interest. Of course, we try to listen to the child very carefully to hear what they say. I would think that we would mostly listen to the child.

However, the descriptions of what the practitioners would do with the information they received from the children are less prominent, if not even absent. The extract above, for example, uses the term of ‘thinking’ without any further elaborations about what ‘thinking’ means.

The practitioners also talk about *working with parents in the context of approaching and applying the child’s best interests*. The objective is very clearly stated across the groups, namely, that it is in the child’s best interests that parents cooperate with practitioners. A good relationship between parents and practitioners supports the child’s best interests and that is why practitioners should work with parents. As a result, parents may change their behaviours, and problems may be resolved, which serves the children best.

Even though I don’t work directly with children as I work with adults, I think that what I do affects children.

The fact that I support adults, I propose financial benefits, I discuss what I see or what I hear here, contact psychotherapy. I talk with parents how their present situation is reflected in the child.

The extract above highlights the speaker’s view about the importance of supporting parents as they support children. In contrast to working with children, the role of information is less emphasized; instead, the nature of relationship with parents (cooperation) is given more emphasis as an element in the consideration of child’s best interests.

The role of information in making assessments is again emphasized in the practitioners’ discussions about *working with other authorities and professionals*. When considering a child’s best interests, the practitioners talked about information that should be extensive, and therefore, the practitioners would contact a variety of agencies working with the family (e.g. school, mental health care) to learn about their views of the case. If other practitioners have different viewpoints about the problems the children and the families face, it is the social worker in charge of the assessment who would choose the relevant information, and their view of the children’s best interests would guide the assessment.

In sum, these three thematic categories to approach and apply the principle of the child’s best interests focus on working with children, parents and other practitioners, mainly to become more informed about the case and the parties’ views or to facilitate cooperation. It also is noteworthy to reflect on what is not talked about. Most interestingly, the frames for interpreting the gathered information – or working otherwise with information – are not presented in detail in this data. The Child Welfare Act is mentioned as a reference point, but the dimensions of the principle of the child’s best interests of the Child Welfare Act (Section 4) are not elaborated on (e.g. how they would consider the child’s balanced development and well-being or a safe growth environment and physical and mental integrity). Furthermore, the group participants do not make references to theories or theoretical concepts to frame and interpret the information gathered.

Discussion

As reported by the practitioners in both data sets in our study, the principle of the child’s best interests is widely acknowledged and taken for granted as an overall element in assessments carried out in child welfare. In the survey, the majority of social workers express satisfaction of their assessments and trust in their own expertise to make the assessments in the best interests of the child. In the group discussions, the practitioners in a similar manner underline that the principle would be embedded in their (imagined) assessments.

The key element to approach and apply the principle is working with children and gathering information with and about them. While emphasizing the priority of talking and listening to children as the fundamental element for their consideration of the principle, the practitioners also report a variety of challenges. A shortage of time and other resources as well as the sophisticated skills required are pointed out in the group data. Obstacles to meeting, talking to and listening to the child are reported also in the survey: roughly two-thirds of the social workers raise the issue of a lack of time for making the assessments. Several of them also mention other organizational practices as obstacles.

Both data remark the impact of the age of children in question: young children are more challenging for social workers. Similar finding is reported in previous research as well: social workers are likelier to meet with older than younger children (Berrick et al. 2015; Vis et al. 2022).

The way in which the principle is connected with gathering more information and working with children and other parties demonstrates a procedural approach to the principle: the process of information gathering and talking with children and other parties becomes evident while the substantial elaborations of the principle are weak or non-existent. Although this emphasis reflects the norms of the CRC to include children with regard to their best interests, the procedural approach seems to exclude professional reasoning and elaboration of the information gathered. In our data, very little information, if any at all, is given about working with the views of children or how and on what grounds the practitioners interpret and weigh children's views, feelings, or wishes and other information they gather in the assessment process. The group discussions, in particular, could give floor to such elaborations.

The procedural approach reflected in the emphasis on talking with children is only one, albeit essential, element in the implementation of the principle of the child's best interests in practice (Krutzinna 2022). While it is vital that children have the right to express their views, there is a risk if the complex principle is approached in such a narrow way. It is, after all, the responsibility of practitioners to take children's views into account and make decisions when the principle is considered (Sandberg 2018, 34). Similar concerns are reported in a study about the child's best interest in emergency placements in Norway (Gresdahl, Fauske, and Storhaug 2025). The researchers argue that there is a risk for children's safety if the complexity of the child's best interest is reduced to children's participation. In their view, in addition to involving children and hearing their views and wishes, a holistic professional judgement of children's needs, risks, and protective factors and a deliberative approach are needed.

As studies have documented poor inclusion of children in child welfare for years, the prominence of practitioners' ambitions to include children's perspectives creates great potential for implementing the principle of the child's best interests more widely in practice (Krutzinna 2022; Piper 2000). Nevertheless, the weakness of substantive elements in considering the principle and the tendency not to use theoretical knowledge create a risk that the procedures (e.g. to talking with children) dominate assessments. Our analysis above highlights that only a fraction of social workers (approximately two in five) of the survey respondents say that they use theoretical knowledge to make sense of the information gathered. When they say that they use theoretical knowledge, they refer very rarely to substantial theories but instead refer to legislation and practice orientations as their theoretical frames. Although most of the participants in our data have an MA in social work, suggesting that they would be familiar with theoretical knowledge, this finding echoes the general concerns about the problematic role of theoretical knowledge in social work (e.g. Drury-Hudson 1999; Howe 1996). There may be a variety of obstacles to employing theoretical knowledge in practice: organizational obstacles such as a lack of time, as mentioned in the data, and the abstract and contested nature of theories and the complexity of children's and family's lived experiences escaping any set theory models (e.g. Gambrill 2011; McCafferty and Taylor 2022; Munro and Hardie 2019). Theoretical frameworks would, however, be needed to make sense of information gathered for assessment.

Furthermore, the child's best interests are also a moral issue, a normative standpoint prioritizing children's interests over those of parents (Archard and Skivenes 2009; Skivenes 2010). In our data, practitioners express it to be a strong and shared normative standpoint in their practices of making an assessment. However, if the principle is reduced to a procedure, also the normative standpoint remains rather shallow.

Limitations

Both types of our data are gathered in different parts of Finland, representing a variety of local and organizational settings. Nevertheless, the data are limited in the sense that we only get access to the reported views of social workers of their consideration of the child's best interests (survey) and to their assessment practice by hearing about their imagined practice with a hypothetical case (group data). We do not have any material to highlight whether they, and how they, talk with children, for example. Regarding group discussions as a research method, there is a tendency towards consensus and views that represent socially acceptable professional practice (e.g. Morgan 2002). Consensus is typical for our data as well. Vignette-based group discussions do not provide access to the practice 'in real-life' but instead highlight elements which are typically seen as being part of 'good professional practice' (Eskelinen and Caswell 2006; Wilks 2004). Following from that, it is hardly surprising that the overall sentiment is that assessments are made from the point of view of the child's best interests. Criticism about the general role of the principle was not expressed, neither the parents' interests, suggesting that such critical views are not part of present 'good professional practice'.

Conclusion

We have explored how social workers approach and apply the principle of the child's best interests in their practice when they make assessments in child welfare by using survey and vignette-based group discussion data. The principle is acknowledged as being important, but the overall approach is procedural, quite narrow as such and less substantial or semi-substantial. We suggest two ways forward: more reflective practices to critically explore the principle in its all variations in front-line practice, and more theory-based elaboration of the substantive elements of the principle. This is an invitation to social workers and researchers alike.

Notes

1. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Tampere University (application no. 36/2021), and research permissions were granted by the municipalities and (later) by wellbeing services counties to invite social workers and other practitioners to join the study.
2. In the year 2021 and 2022, there were a total of 309 municipalities in Finland.
3. As there is no data available about the number of social workers in child welfare in Finland, we cannot generalize the results.

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