

Article

# Responding to Child Maltreatment: Comparison between School Social Work in Finland and Germany

by

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## **Abstract**

Child maltreatment is a major topic of concern in European countries. This article compares how Finnish and German school social workers (SSW) respond to child maltreatment (CM). For the purpose of this study, a case vignette was designed that implied multiple forms of CM, including child sexual abuse, the failure to provide a child with adequate nutrition and hygiene and exposure to violent environments. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight SSW from Finland and Germany to examine their first reactions to the case, their professional approach and country-specific solutions. The transcribed interviews were subjected to content analysis. Concerning suspected child sexual abuse, the findings reveal that the Finnish SSW would inform the child protection services and the police directly after information regarding suspected maltreatment had been verified, whereas the German participants would seek professional advice and carry out a risk assessment. However, despite the fundamental differences between these approaches, both are in line with national legislation. Concerning the inadequate provision of nutrition, the findings reveal that German children are not provided with free school meals nationwide like Finnish children. Nonetheless, as this study shows, providing children with a free school lunch does not ensure that they are adequately provided for during the entire day. It is recommended children in both countries be provided with free school meals nationwide, to implement means-tested benefits for those who need greater support and to strengthen the education of SSW in the early identification of child neglect, in addition to fostering a holistic approach to treating clients.

*Keywords:* child maltreatment, child protection, Finland, Germany, mandatory reporting, school

## **Introduction**

This article presents the results of a comparative study examining the response of Finnish and German school social workers (SSW) to a case vignette that implies multiple forms of child maltreatment (CM). There are several reasons for the role of educators in responding to CM (Crosson-Tower, 2003, pp. 9-12). Accordingly, dealing with CM is a community effort, and educators are qualified to identify CM. Educators also have legal duties to identify and report CM in several countries (in Finland, Section 25, Child Welfare Act (417/2007); in Germany, Section 8a Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII)), are personally committed to promoting the well-being of children and to ensure the child's best interest, and have professional responsibilities and standards in dealing with children, including ethical considerations (Crosson-Tower, 2003, pp. 9-12; see also ethical standards provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)).

Mandatory reporting (MR) exists in many countries and covers several professions in the educational system. This presents a challenge regarding how MR is to be done in schools, since the specific role of SSW may vary between countries and educational settings. A New Zealand qualitative study based on 20 semi-structured interviews with SSW revealed considerable variation in the formal notification of concerns to the statutory agency, and identified the need for better education and policy to guide schools in identifying and dealing with CM (Beddoe & de Haan, 2018). A qualitative study from the US, based on in-depth interviews and one focus group of SSW (n=10), showed that making a CM report also includes, besides ethical and legal procedures, an interpersonal component (Chanmugam, 2009). Accordingly, relationships between SSW and children change, ranging from a deepening of the relationship to relationship damage (Chanmugam, 2009).

This article examines the response of Finnish and German SSW in an example case of CM. Both countries have family service-oriented child welfare systems, but also include supportive and protective services (Hetherington, 2002). The Finnish system is considered social-democratic, in which the state is mainly involved in delivering

services, whereas the German system is considered conservative, in which services are primarily delivered by non-governmental entities (Hetherington, 2002, p. 27; referring to Esping-Andersen, 1990). By using a comparative approach, alternative social work practices can be recognized and lead to improvements in practice (Friesenhahn & Kniephoff-Knebel, 2011). This study was guided by the research questions of how SSW react to a case as presented in the vignette, as well as which professional approach and country-specific solutions they have in order to address a situation like the one described to develop recommendations for both countries and to improve practices. The structure of the article is as follows. First, the duty of SSW to report CM in both countries is outlined. Second, the method used in this study is described and the results presented. Finally, the implications of the results are discussed, and concluding remarks made.

#### *Reporting of child maltreatment in Finland and Germany*

All professionals who are in continuous contact with children, such as professionals working in schools, have a leading role in recognizing and responding to CM (Gilbert et al., 2009). MR laws are defined as ‘a specific kind of legislative enactment which imposes a duty on a specified group or groups of persons outside the family to report suspected cases of designated types of child maltreatment to child welfare agencies’ (McTavish et al., 2017, p. 1; referring to Mathews, 2016), and exist in many countries. In Finland, several professionals, including SSW, have the ‘duty to notify the municipal body responsible for social services without delay and notwithstanding confidentiality provisions’ upon discovering that the welfare of a child must be investigated (Section 25 subsection 1 Child Welfare Act (417/2007)). Additionally, they must inform the police if they suspect an act punishable under the Chapter 20 Criminal Code (39/1889; 766/2015) has taken place, which includes, among others, the sexual abuse of a child (Section 25 subsection 3 Child Welfare Act (417/2007)). A strong focus is placed on the early detection of signs indicating CM, especially in basic services such as schools (Väänänen, Vornanen, Pölkki, & Hämäläinen, 2013, p. 27). In Germany, all professionals, including SSW, who work in conjunction with the SGB VIII, are obligated to perform a risk assessment if they have credible information that the well-being of a

child is at risk. SSW employed by unattached or private providers are required to evaluate the risk, together with the child themselves, a specialist and the parents, if the protection of the child is not called into question. If the parents are not willing to accept the necessary support, or if these aids are not available, the professionals are obligated to inform the youth welfare department (Section 8a subsection 4 SGB VIII). While Section 8a subsection 4 SGB VIII speaks of a reporting duty (Verpflichtung), the Section 4 Act on Cooperation and Information in Child Protection (KKG) speaks of a reporting authority (Befugnis). However, concerning the relationship between these, the duty to notify the responsible youth welfare department in accordance with Section 8a subsection 4 SGB VIII is given priority before the authority to notify, in accordance with Section 4 KKG (Möller, 2017, p. 97).

Table 1 shows the number of notifications made to the authorities in both countries between 2014 and 2016. Accordingly, there was a continuous increase in both countries (Destatis, 2017, p. 45; THL National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017, p. 33) that can be traced back to several causes: in Germany, to a rise of risk situations, increased sensitivity, changes in practice and improved cooperation structures (Rauschenbach, 2017, p. 2) and, in Finland, primarily to a lowering of the threshold to notify in accordance with Section 25 of the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) (Heinonen, Väisänen, & Hipp, 2017).

**Table 1:** Number of Notifications in Germany and Finland

	2014	2015	2016	Change (%) compared to 2014
Germany	124,213	129,485	136,925	+10.23
Finland	107,301	114,789	121,372	+13.11

Data based on Destatis (2017, p. 45); THL (2017)

Additionally, the Finnish statistics show an increase in the number of children affected by a notification between 2014 and 2016, from 63,707 to 69,203 children, an increase of 8.63% (THL National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017). Such statistics are lacking

in Germany. Furthermore, there is a lack of statistics in both countries on the number of referrals made by SSW, or the percentage of total referrals that they constitute.

## **Method**

### *Vignette study*

A vignette provides 'a shared point of departure' when researching social work practice in different countries (Eskelinen & Caswell, 2006, p. 494), and reveals the similarities and differences between multiple issues, for example, how social workers make decisions and assess cases, as well as the measures they suggest (Meeuwisse, 2009). Moreover, 'access to sensitive topics or sensitive areas of inquiry' can be gained and an 'in-depth understanding of the subject studied' attained (Eskelinen & Caswell, 2006, p. 494; referring to Barter & Renold, 1999; Hughes, 2001). This study compares the response of German and Finnish SSW to CM, in particular, their first reactions to the case, their professional approach and country-specific measures. Therefore, the following case vignette was designed and presented to the participants:

Florian is nine years old and has lived with his mother since his parents divorced. Both parents live in a deprived area where crime rates are high. At the weekends, he stays in his father's one-bedroom flat which is in a poor and unsanitary condition. Florian attends school unwashed, without having eaten breakfast and without bringing a packed lunch with him. After the last weekend, Florian told his classmate Daniel that his father showed him pornographic films and that they both shared a bed, and that he felt very uncomfortable about that. Daniel is worried about his friend and contacts the school social worker.

This vignette indicates multiple forms of CM, including sexual abuse, the failure to provide a child with adequate hygiene and nutrition and exposure to violent environments. These categories are derived from a pre-existing classification of CM developed by Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon and Arias (2008). Hence, CM is defined as 'any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child' (Leeb et al., 2008, p. 11). Acts of commission include physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Acts of omission involve the failure to provide a child with physical, emotional, medical/dental and/or educational needs, inadequate supervision of a child and exposure to violent environments (Leeb et al., 2008).

## **Data collection**

The data collection took place between September 2017 and May 2018. In Finland, participants from two municipalities and, in Germany, participants from three towns in Bavaria were interviewed, respectively. Participants, all SSW, were contacted and invited to participate by telephone (Germans) or e-mail (Finns). While all four German participants, identified through a regional network of SSW and employed by an unattached provider, responded to the invitation, only two Finnish participants, identified through online searches and employed by municipalities, responded to the invitation and, as a second step, a further two Finnish participants were secured by snowball sampling (Hussy, Schreier, & Echterhoff, 2010). The data was collected by means of four individual semi-structured interviews with the German SSW and two semi-structured group interviews with four Finnish SSW, a total of eight participants. The Finnish SSW were interviewed in groups, as they felt more comfortable being interviewed in groups due to using a foreign language. To prevent the different interview forms from having too much influence on the findings, the conversations between the participants were predominately limited to the mutual translation of unfamiliar words. Semi-structured interviews were used as they provide an interview guide on the one hand, and flexibility concerning the order and formulation of questions on the other (Hussy et al., 2010).

The vignette was personally distributed to the respondents. During the interview, three types of questions were asked: introductory questions (e.g. How long have you been working as a school social worker?), questions of the interview guide (e.g. What would be your first reaction if Daniel appeared in your office?) and ad-hoc-questions (e.g. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?) (Hussy et al., 2010). In addition to participating in the interviews, all SSW completed a brief background questionnaire. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the participants:

**Table 2:** Characteristics of the participants

	Germany		Finland	
	N	%	N	%
Total	4	100	4	100
Sex				
Female	3	75	4	100
Male	1	25	0	0
Highest education				
Bachelor	4	100	0	0
Master	0	0	2	50
Licentiate	0	0	2	50
Work experience in SSW				
< 5 years	4	100	1	25
6-10 years	0	0	1	25
> 11 years	0	0	2	50

Informed consent was obtained for the research. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the research type (case vignette), that participation in the study was voluntary, that they had the right to not answer questions and that their anonymity was secured, and they verbally agreed to participate. Special care has been taken in reporting the results so that recognizable details of the participants are not mentioned when quoting the interviews. Also, the statements of the participants are provided with numbers instead of names, so that none of the participants can be directly identified when reporting the results. One Finnish group, consisting of two SSW, did not wish to be recorded; in this case, the most important content was written down during the interview. The participants participated as professionals and reflected their professional practice as SSW. Lastly, no direct information about children/pupils was collected in this study.



## **Data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and investigated using Kuckartz's (2016) seven-step qualitative content analysis and the software MAXQDA to identify and systematize the main themes. Firstly, the interviews were transcribed, important text passages marked and memos written; secondly, thematic categories were established based on the interview guide, which is a common procedure in theory-oriented categorization (Kuckartz, 2016). Accordingly, the main categories were derived from the research questions and guided the data collection. For example, participants were asked to name the main areas that they would focus on in their work. Thus, the category 'main areas' was logically one of the topics of data analysis. Thirdly, an initial coding process was carried out, in which each line of the transcript was added to the relevant category. Fourthly, the text passages added to each category were compiled. Fifthly, subcategories were built for each category, which were derived directly from the material. Sixthly, a second coding process was carried out, taking the differentiated categories into account. Seventhly, the structured content was analysed using different analysis methods. The category-based analysis provides the results for the main categories of the study. Here, the key questions were what was said on each topic during the interviews and which topics, if any, were only rarely mentioned (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 188). Additionally, an analysis and visualization of the connections between certain codes were carried out.

## *Limitations*

Before turning to the results, the limitations of this study will be mentioned. Some authors (e.g. Eskelinen & Caswell, 2006; Hughes, 2001; Meeuwisse, 2009) criticize the vignette method for using fictitious cases, and for eliciting idealized rather than real responses from its participants. However, to obtain as authentic as possible responses, the vignette was personally introduced, so there was no opportunity to prepare for it. Moreover, all participants stated that such a case might occur in their own practice, with some of them already working with similar cases. In the Finnish Child Welfare Act (417/2007), the terms 'child maltreatment' and 'child abuse' are not mentioned, and there could not be found 'any specific problem formulations' apart from 'illegal acts'

(Pösö, 2011, p. 115). Instead, 'child maltreatment' and 'child abuse' are included in 'wider formulations', which are different with respect to open-care measures and taking a child into care (Pösö, 2011, p. 115; see also Sections 34 and 40 of the Finnish Child Welfare Act (417/2007)). In Germany, CM is understood as an 'endangerment of the well-being of a child', and thus a 'much vaguer notion' of child endangerment, rather than a clear formulation of CM, is implied (Wolff, Biesel, & Heinitz, 2011, p. 189). This study uses the pre-existing classification of CM developed by Leeb et al. (2008). Yet, despite the previously described lack of clear problem formulation in both countries, this classification system has proven to be a good framework for the purpose of this study. For example, Florian being shown pornography by his father was considered sexual abuse by all participants.

Conducting cross-national research projects also poses several language-related challenges; accordingly, the project, access, interview and post-interview language must be selected (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). The project's- and post-interview language is English. German participants were accessed and interviewed in their mother tongue and Finnish participants in English, because it was the only language shared between the interviewer (German) and the interviewees (Finnish). Hence, both were non-native speakers, which introduces a limitation. Nevertheless, inaccuracies when translating transcripts in another language could be avoided. To feel more comfortable using a foreign language, the Finnish participants preferred being interviewed in groups where two different methods were used to obtain knowledge. Involving an interpreter, which might have contributed to an increased feeling of distance and a reduced rapport (Welch & Piekkari, 2006), was avoided. Furthermore, this study used a small sample, and therefore does not represent the situation in both countries as a whole. Even so, despite the fact that school social work in both countries varies regionally, fundamental regulations concerning child protection are prescribed in national legislation (e.g. in Finland, Child Welfare Act (417/2007); in Germany, SGB VIII). As a result, it is not believed that the situation would differ substantially in other parts of these countries.

## Results

### *First reactions*

Firstly, all Finnish and German SSW would verify any information that they received regarding sexual abuse. The Code-Relations-Browser (MAXQDA) visualizes intersections of codes in the transcripts of interviews to help identify connections between the codes. Here, the size and colour of the squares indicates the number of coded segments. Figure 1 shows connections between first reactions and sexual abuse, as well as first reactions and Daniel:



Figure 1

Examining these connections in the transcribed interviews reveals that all Finnish and German SSW would, firstly, check the reliability of Daniel's information by contacting Florian. Even so, both groups would act differently. The Finnish participants would directly arrange a meeting with Florian. For example, one participant said that she 'wouldn't report it (the case) to child protection services without contacting Florian' (F3). In contrast, the German participants spent a long time considering how best to contact Florian and suggested doing so via Daniel. One participant expressed it as follows:

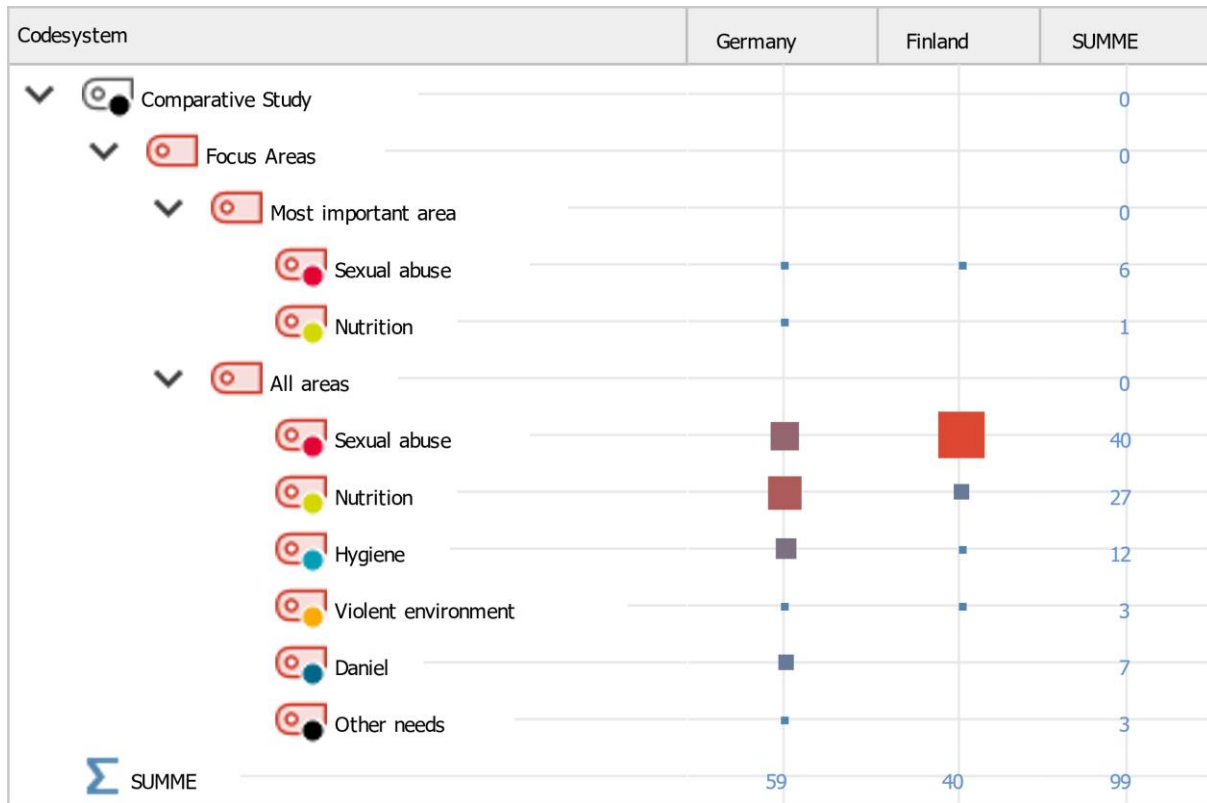
Well, first of all, I would try to ask Daniel what he thinks about it. For example, if he would come, together with Florian, to me. Or if I should ask Florian directly, which I would see as a second step. So, I would really try to let it be done through Daniel, because I noticed that he is a person of trust for Florian. And if Daniel says: Well, look, you can really have good conversations with her (the SSW). So that he (Florian) then comes along with him (Daniel) (G2).

If Florian visits her in her office, she would first try to build trust and confidence by 'spending an hour together, where only pleasant things take place. So, gradually, more like playing games before, starting slowly with questions' in a second meeting.

In addition to verifying the information by contacting Daniel and Florian, several participants from both countries suggested getting more information about Florian's current situation from his teachers. Provided that the information is verified, all participants would handle the case in line with legal requirements in their respective countries.

### *Focus areas*

The case vignette implied four key areas of CM. However, the German SSW identified additional areas of attention, as they were concerned that Daniel might feel guilty and not know how to cope. Therefore, they would try to calm him and stay in contact with him. Figure 2 shows a Code-Matrix-Browser that visualizes the number of segments of the transcripts coded with the different codes in Germany and Finland. The size and colour of the squares indicates the number of coded segments.



**Figure 2**

The Code-Matrix-Browser shows that despite the fact that all German SSW highlighted sexual abuse as the most important area (one participant suggested sexual abuse and nutrition as equally important), they spoke more about malnutrition. This topic was followed in terms of the amount of discussion by sexual abuse, hygiene, Daniel, violent environment and other needs. The higher number of coded segments concerning the area of nutrition might be partly traced to the lack of free school lunches, which forced them to develop several ideas to support Florian. In contrast, the Finnish participants highlighted sexual abuse as the most important area and talked predominantly about that, followed by nutrition, hygiene and violent environment.

### *Sexual Abuse*

All Finnish and German SSW saw the sexual abuse of Florian as the topic of highest priority, except for one German participant who highlighted sexual abuse and nutrition

equally. Nonetheless, differences in approach were found. According to one Finnish participant:

So, I would actually speak to Florian and say that, okay Daniel said that you were at that place and he showed you some kind of movies that made you feel uncomfortable. Can you tell me a little bit more about that. So, if Florian then says: Yeah, I was shown kind of naked things and then felt really uncomfortable. Then it's clear, because that's considered sexual abuse and breaking the child's boundaries, sexual boundaries. So, I would contact the-, the police social worker. And then see how to take things further from there and then make a child protection kind of- inform the child protection services. Say that this has happened (F1).

Accordingly, SSW would act fast and purposefully by reporting to the child protection services and the police social worker. She also considered the distribution of responsibilities in the case of suspected child sexual abuse, thereby indicating a clear hierarchy between SSW and the police:

Police first in this kind of-. In cases where there's suspected sexual abuse, it's police first and then child because police would conduct the-, conduct the investigation. So, we would-. They would inform us how-. How and who and what, you know, we-, we can do, so that we don't interfere with the investigation. So, we go with the investigation line in this kind of cases (F1).

The fact that the SSW is required to directly inform the police social worker and child protection services is seen as positive:

I think we are lucky, because we have such clear-. Sexual abuse has been clearly defined for us as professionals. So, it is really easy to see, okay well this is showing that pornographic materials do go under that. A child age nine is not in a position where they can handle an-, an adult showing them pornographic material. It's really clear (F1).

And we have to remember that nowadays we don't need any more to make the child protection. Because of the new law. The first one who notices that a child has a problem has to directly contact (the statutory authorities) (F2).

In contrast, all German SSW indicated that they would fulfil the regulations set out in Section 8a SGB VIII, and that some of them would additionally obtain professional advice in conjunction with Section 8b SGB VIII. This is expressed by two German participants as follows:

[...] first of all, I would obtain professional advice after-, what is it-, Section 8b SGB VIII-. I would first of all obtain this anonymous information at the youth welfare department and seek professional advice, more specifically, ask how to continue (G2).

I would contact-, contact my supervisor because sexual abuse occurred. I would fill out an 8a document and would discuss the next steps with my supervisor. Yeah (G1).

The Section 8a document mentioned above documents 'what was seen, by whom, when and where' (G1). Also, 'facts (indicating an endangerment) are noted' before an 'assessment is done about how seriously the child is in danger, yeah. Is there a danger to life? (G1)'. Then, the next steps are planned, and a new appointment is made to check whether the agreed upon measures have been implemented. Finally, the document is signed by the SSW and the supervisor (G1).

All German SSW emphasized the responsibility that they bear in cases of CM. One participant (G3) stated the following with emotion:

There is a very high responsibility, especially in a case like this involving pornography. Because such cases aren't solved overnight, so at first you really feel the burden until you get to the point where you know: Ok, such and such has been done and a good solution for everyone has been found. But until it is found, you are often left thinking: How does he feel right now, or is there any sign of his even worse endangerment? Then, there's always the thought: What if nothing gets better (for him)? Or what else can I do? Did I overlook something?

Additionally, the participants complained about how long the procedure takes. One participant (G3) said that it can take up to three weeks before the first risk assessment is made, raising concerns 'especially when the children are younger, when they can't protect themselves' (G3).

When comparing both approaches, one can see differences. The Finnish SSW would directly inform child protection services or the police in the case of sexual or physical abuse, which would then lead the process. Accordingly, the SSW's role is limited to the duty to notify and to make the referral. In contrast, German SSW would make a risk assessment and seek professional advice. Despite the fundamental differences between these two approaches, both groups are in line with the legal requirements in their respective countries. Thus, the practice of SSW in such cases is shaped by national legislation in both countries.

#### *Failure to provide adequate nutrition*

All SSW from both countries considered the failure of Florian's parents to provide adequate nutrition as an important point of concern, yet their approaches to addressing

the concern differed. The Finnish SSW noted that there is no need for a packed lunch because school meals are free, and two of them did not respond to this part of the vignette. When prompted to respond, they answered as follows:

We didn't respond because this is not a topic for us. Because if there is someone hungry, he always gets food. Nobody needs to be hungry at school (F3).  
We don't have packed lunch (laughing). School lunch is for free, for everyone, so (F1).

However, it became evident that some Finnish children attend school without having eaten breakfast. Two participants pointed out that such cases are usually first detected by their teacher, as one stated that it is more common that the 'teacher notices that the pupil hasn't eaten' (F2), while the other explained that:

[...] they (teacher) know a child that is really hungry at lunch; that's usually that kind of indicator that the child hasn't eaten breakfast. But in this case (vignette), the teacher, especially the class teacher, would have already spoken to the child and the family. And if they haven't then my advice to the teacher would be to speak to the family first (F1).

In contrast, the German SSW presented several strategies to address this issue. One participant (G2) developed multiple ideas to support Florian, namely, to empower Florian to prepare a packed lunch for himself, to develop an eating plan with him and his parents, and to inform his parents about the option of buying a snack at school, if available. Another participant (G1) pointed out the following:

Well, at our school we have a healthy breakfast each day. That is to say, fruit is available each day. So it would be possible to provide a child discreetly with- hmm a little bit more. Then, the question arises as to whether he can buy something for himself if his mother doesn't have the time to prepare breakfast for him in the mornings. But it says here (in the vignette) that they are living in a deprived area. So that raises the question about the financial situation of his mother.

This participant linked the fact that Florian is living in a deprived area with the nutrition issue. Additionally, she went on to explain that it would be possible for Florian to have school meals, which are not free of charge, but that under certain conditions it would be possible to get an allowance towards school meals based on the education and participation package (G1), which was established on April 1, 2011 by the Federal Government of Germany. It takes the education and participation needs of children into account, and includes financial support regarding school meals, among other things (Apel & Engels, 2012).



Another participant (G4) suggested, firstly, that he could provide the child with breakfast himself and, secondly, went on to imply that children could share their packed lunches with each other:

    Hmm- there are often, to mention one direct method, children that have more packed lunch with them than they eat.

Another participant (G3) stated that she would contact the parent's council of the school and the local church to ask if they have a budget available to support children in need like Florian. Additionally, she considered informing parents about the possibilities to receive a child benefit supplement under certain conditions. Furthermore, she suggested that Florian could participate in school lunches each Tuesday, which are prepared 'by the pupils for the pupils' and cost 1.50€, and on other days have a daily school lunch, prepared by an external supplier, at a cost of 2-3€ per day.

When comparing both groups, it is evident that the Finnish respondents did not react to the issue proactively. Viewed in a national context, this result is not surprising considering that the provision of free school meals has a long tradition in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 1): As early as 1943 Finland enacted a law guaranteeing free school meals for all pupils in compulsory education, with this goal realized in 1948 (Haarmann, 2016, p. 155; referring to Lindroos, 2013, p. 104-105). Moreover, Section 31 subsection 3 of the Basic Education Act (628/1998) guarantees a 'balanced and appropriately organised and supervised meal on every day', reflecting the idea that 'a school meal is more than nutrition, contributing to learning, healthy growth and development' (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 1); consequently, providing pupils with a free school lunch seemed to be deeply rooted in the Finnish SSW's minds when responding to the vignette. In contrast, the German SSW, aware of the lack of resources for the provision of free school meals, came up with several ideas. Some participants considered supporting Florian's parents in applying for a school meal allowance based on the education and participation package. Nevertheless, only 21% of all children under the age of 18 and entitled to benefits make use of this allowance, and half these pupils have to show a written confirmation in school to receive the allowance, 6% of whom perceived this procedure as either very uncomfortable or rather unpleasant

(Apel & Engels, 2012). Therefore, a clear difference can be noticed between countries: While Finland proactively provides all children with free school meals, Germany reactively supports children and families that need support.

*Failure to provide adequate hygiene*

All SSW considered the fact that Florian lives in unsanitary conditions, and comes to school unwashed, as an issue of concern and responded in similar ways. Both groups would seek a direct dialogue with Florian and his teachers. Two Finnish participants expressed particular concern, and expressed the incomprehension of not being informed earlier:

Why hasn't the teacher told (me about this situation) before? I would call the parents and make an appointment (F3).

I wish the teacher would have asked me what to do because of him being unwashed (F4).

One participant described her approach in such cases, including a cooperation with family services. It also became apparent that such issues are quite common in her work:

This kind of being unwashed and not having eaten. That is something that we would, yeah, I would- speak with Florian, speak with his teacher, see how long this has been going on, if the teacher has been in contact with Florian's parents, what has been agreed. And then I would call the mom and then see how things are, said that we are really concerned, we should arrange a meeting and maybe have somebody from family services to attend that meeting and see if there is any kind of things said, we could find that could be supportive for the family. Yeah. This is really common. Like a really common situation (F1).

The German SSW also all commented on this point of concern. One participant (G2) stated that she considers poor basic hygiene as an indicator of child endangerment, and that 'these (indications) should be definitely taken seriously' and should entail a conversation with the parents. This participant also stated that it would be necessary to get more information by contacting the class teacher:

[...] or the issue with his dirty clothes. Because if I just see him 1, 2, or 3 times then I don't know if he's like that every day-. So I'd ask how he looks every day-; what condition is he usually in when he comes to school (G2).

Another participant referred to her own professional experience, and pointed out the following:

It can be also- or it regularly happens, that in cases of children with extremely poor hygiene there are difficulties (at home) with (getting) electricity or hot water. This would be also something to check. Whether it is not because of a lack of will, but instead due to a lack of resources (G1).

Additionally, she (G1) and another participant (G3) suggest talking about this issue openly with Florian.

To summarize, the failure to provide Florian with adequate hygiene was viewed similarly by both the Finnish and German SSW. Both would seek a dialogue with Florian's parents and teacher to confirm the information they had received, and to work towards a better situation for him. Moreover, it was shown that in such cases the Finnish SSW would also work with external social services.

#### *Exposure to violent environments*

The issue of Florian living in an area where crime rates are high was less mentioned during the interviews. The Finnish participants did not address this topic at all. Two German participants responded to the issue, one of them as follows:

The question is how much time is the child at home? Does Florian also leave the flat, and go into this difficult environment, with difficult social circumstances? Would it be beneficial for the child to attend an after-school care centre as a way out of the situation? (G1)

She also commented that Florian could attend sports clubs to reduce the amount of time that he has to spend at home. In contrast, the other participant (G3) was much more resigned, saying that '[...] this (situation) is a little bit difficult, maybe this can't be changed at all.'

To summarize, the topic of exposure to violent environments was barely mentioned by both groups. However, two German SSW reacted to this part of the vignette.

## **Conclusion and implications**

This paper compared the response of Finnish and German SSW to a case vignette, hence indicating multiple forms of CM. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted that provided a great amount of data concerning their first reactions, professional approaches and country-specific measures regarding the case vignette. The transcribed interviews were subsequently subjected to a content analysis. This study shows that Finnish and German SSW work strictly in conjunction with national legislation, thereby complying with the assumptions of several scholars from other countries, namely that social work practice is shaped and constructed by its country-specific context (e.g. Friesenhahn & Kniephoff-Knebel, 2011; Hämäläinen, 2014).

Due to the small sample, no general conclusions can be drawn regarding school social work in both countries. However, three recommendations can be deduced from the findings. The first implication concerns the adequate provision of nutrition for children in both countries. In Germany, children are not provided with free school meals nationwide, although a school meal allowance contributing towards the cost of meals is available. In cases where the meal allowance is not obtained or is insufficient, the SSW rely on the support of outside resources to ensure the provision of nutrition. In Finland, all children are provided with free school meals. Still, there are children in Finland who go to school without having eaten breakfast, and without being provided nutrition during non-school days. Consequently, there is a recommendation for a combination of a free school lunch as a basic service for all children without the risk of stigmatization and independent of parental income, as well as means-tested benefits for those who need greater support.

The second implication relates to the early identification of CM in both countries. Child neglect often remains 'undetected, unreported, and uninvestigated', as it consists of omissions that are less obvious than abuse (Brown, 2016, p. 108). Furthermore, mandatory reporters often 'struggle to identify less overt forms of maltreatment', such as emotional abuse (McTavish et al., 2017). Thus, it is recommended to introduce

advanced training courses for SSW and school personnel to help identify neglected children early, and to sensitize them regarding all forms of CM.

The third implication concerns the exposure of children to violent environments. The results show that only a few SSW reacted to this part of the vignette, and those who did react were ambivalent about their ability to change the situation, with the exception of one German SSW (G1). This result is surprising, considering the ethical principles developed by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the IFSW, according to which clients should be seen within their environments and be treated as a whole (Hall, 2012). In addition, social conditions that are a hindrance to an inclusive society must be challenged. Accordingly, it is recommended that SSW recognize all aspects that affect their client's welfare, and strive to remove or diminish societal structures that contribute to any worsening of their situation.

To summarize, SSW spend a considerable amount of time with children and young people at school. As a result, they are able to assess their well-being, detect signs of CM at an early stage and notify the proper authorities in time. Therefore, a sustainable cooperation between SSW and teachers, as well as clear operational practices, are essential to ensure that no child is left behind.

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