

THE BOYS OF ICEHEARTS AND THE 'HOOD

A perspective on the everyday realities of growing up in a disadvantaged
neighbourhood in Finland

Meri-Tuuli Mattila
Thesis, Fall 2014
Diaconia University of Applied Sciences
Degree Programme in Social Services
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ABSTRACT

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The premise of this thesis is to present the case of young boys growing up in a relatively disadvantaged neighborhood fairly typical of its kind in contemporary suburban Finland.

It aims to give a voice to the everyday realities and lived experience of its target group through ethnomethodological descriptions of young boys growing up in the suburb of Mikkola in northeastern Vantaa in the capital city region, and the exposure method created in the context of diaconal community development work in mainland Europe. Moreover, the Icehearts method is explored in as much depth as is feasible within the scope of a Bachelor's Thesis in Social Services from a University of Applied Science. The key concepts of validation and acceptance, and disadvantaged childhood with its everyday realities are explored from the perspective of the integral theory in social work and critical theory in social science research.

The Icehearts method, simultaneously applied in school work, free time activities and hobbies, can act as a mediator bridging communication and cooperation between schools and homes, acting as a local force for change and a channel of communication between a given neighbourhood, the district social services and school boards, municipal government as well as national politics. It is a cross-functional multi-professional approach for bringing together the needs of local children and families, and the objectives of schools as well as national social policies implemented on the municipal level, whose common goal is often underscored by voluminous legislation and massive bureaucracy coupled with the scarcity of available resources.

The findings suggest that in countries with a highly developed welfare infrastructure, such as Finland, team sports have consistently been gaining ground as a social work method for children that brings social work to the neighbourhood level, close to the families, schools and communities. Sports can be therapeutic, sports can be used as a tool for democracy, and sports can be, and are used as a method in social work worldwide.

Keywords: childhood disadvantage, validation and acceptance, Mikkola, Icehearts method, sports for development and change

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Boys of Icehearts and the 'Hood, the working title of this thesis in the drafting stages, was inspired by the critically acclaimed 1991 film by John Singleton, *Boyz n the Hood*, depicting the circumstances of young African American boys growing up fatherless in South Central Los Angeles. While the culture of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Finland in the 2010s is still worlds away from the gang violence and related incidents experienced by youths growing up in deprived neighbourhoods in North America, the title remained. Some of the themes explored prior to this thesis work by Icehearts educators (e.g. fatherless boys in the schools) are presented here while discussing the Icehearts ideology and method. In addition, the Icehearts method itself has been awarded as an innovative tool in crime prevention.

Moreover, having grown up in the suburbs of Montreal, Canada, the street lifestyle of disadvantaged youth is not entirely unfamiliar to me, even as the most deprived neighbourhoods in Montreal do not exhibit rates of violent crime comparable to major American cities. Methods of community development are ordinarily implemented in social work in and around a major city such as Montreal in the francophone province of Québec, and a part of this thesis discusses this vis-à-vis the heavily bureaucratic and strictly regulated social work practiced in Finland. Furthermore, the third sector is a major actor in interventions aimed at delinquent youth and youth facing the risk of marginalization in Québec, and while the scope of this thesis does not include comparative perspectives, in the early stages of research preconceptions and prior understanding of the phenomena of interest were rigorously examined in order to gain ethical and unbiased insights into the topic. The working title remained, in the spirit of the Icehearts ideology as expressed in their motto, everybody plays, for real.

The operating principles of Icehearts are founded on long-term multi-professional child protection work. Icehearts assembles a group of 6-year-old boys facing the risk of exclusion, who are assigned an educator. The educator commits to the group for 12 years, until the boys reach the age of majority. The

group forms a sports team that plays hockey or basketball, for example. The educator coaches the boys and supports them through problems encountered in school, at home and during free time (City of Vantaa 2012).

The second generation of Icehearts teams in the suburb of Mikkola in the Korso district of the city of Vantaa is now in its fourth year of operation, with a second-year team and a pilot team for girls running alongside. The pilot team is the first team for girls in nearly two decades of operation of Icehearts activities, actively responding to the increasing need for support and counseling in the daily lives of schoolchildren that municipal services are no longer resourced to effectively respond to, as the competition for available resources is fierce in tough economic times that have challenged the coping skills of adults and children alike.

During the recession of the 1990s, when the outlook for Mikkola was rather bleak, the first Icehearts team in Vantaa was started in Mikkola in 1996 at the request of the Korso district child protection services. That request was renewed in the 2010s and a new team was launched in 2011. Social problems have again clustered in the area during the economic crisis of the late 2000s, while local services have been scaled back for the entire district, with the health center in Korso, some two kilometres away and smaller local schools facing closure, and the relocation of all social services to Koivukylä, a district centre some five kilometers away from Mikkola.

Excessive setbacks force people to swim upstream. While swimming against the current, adverse events cause feelings of disempowerment and disappointment, which can make people act in an adverse manner, take a different route from others, in other words, to exclude themselves from what is good and from friendship. Preventing this is the responsibility of an educator. Children swimming upstream must rapidly be turned towards a favorable current, so that they are not forced to acquire friendship, good treatment, empowerment, warmth, education and safety in the wrong ways. Providing all of this is the responsibility we adults have towards children (Icehearts 2012.)

2 BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

The founder of Icehearts, Ville Turkka discovered while working in children's homes during the recession of the 1990s that children are too often left to their own devices. Moreover, lacking adult supervision, guidance and emotional support tends to lead them astray. Furthermore, lack of opportunity and positive role models carries deep-rooted insecurity into adulthood, leaving boys in particular ill-equipped or altogether unable to cope with the demands of functioning in contemporary society. Together with his father Ilkka, he envisioned a sports team dedicated to helping troubled boys over the long term, and the first Icehearts hockey team was born in Vantaa in 1996.

2.1 Motivation

As a teacher's aide by profession, I have professional and first-hand experiential knowledge of the damage short-sighted reforms can cause, and the long term effect of that damage. I have seen the eyes of the child that some of the boys on this team have been, and in the past it was incredibly hard to have to go behind my professional role. I had to accept that the only thing a teacher's aide in a local school can do is try, and report to the authorities as necessary. I did not feel that on this team. I came in as a new person, as a woman on a boys' team, and only being there two afternoons a week at the onset, I have to admit that I felt like an outsider at first.

However, being a long-term resident of the area helped things along. As I got to know the boys, I discovered that the world really is very small, even in a district the size of Korso with its total of nearly 30 000 residents. One was a good friend of my next-door neighbour's son, and nearly ran into my arms in the stairwell one morning running up the stairs to my neighbour's door as I was going down the stairs on my way out. Another one asked me the names of my daughters whom I had mentioned in passing and said: "yeah, I know them, they're friends

of my cousin.” Another one was a classmate of my younger daughter, and his big sister is a good friend of my older daughter.

Yet another had played with my daughters when they had been at his house on a playdate with his sister when they were younger. Some knew another neighbour’s daughter who attended Mikkola School and knew my daughters through her, or through the local youth house. And everywhere I turned on the school yard during recess time, I would see either former students of mine from other local schools that I had worked at prior to my studies, or former classmates of my daughters’, or friends of my daughters’, who all greet me like they have known me their whole life. In some cases we have known each other since these children have been between 3-5 years old.

My personality also has an observant side, and I tend to observe and take in my surroundings first and then decide what the best course of action is. That may not work well in situations where you need to react first and think later, but for me, observing also tells me what I will need to react to, and how. Over those first seven weeks in the spring of 2013 the boys accepted me as I am, taught me the basics of football and did not mind that I was terrible at it. Some I established a rapport with, to others I was surely just another grown-up walking around with an imaginary rule book. But each one responded within the scope of their abilities, that tells me that they have also seen me instead of us spending those first seven weeks being mutually invisible.

2.2 Developing the Research Theme

The process was initiated in February 2013. Having explored potential thesis ideas and areas of interest, a suggestion was received from the thesis supervisor, who had been contacted by Icehearts regarding potential thesis topics that the organization had to offer. One was of particular interest, and it was agreed that an internship would take place at Icehearts Mikkola. The team educator, who was to be the internship supervisor, was contacted and met with in March, and the internship proceeded as agreed.

The thesis proposal was presented in May 2013, and a meeting at the Icehearts office was set up in June 2013. Research methodologies and potential research questions were explored at this meeting, with full support from the organization even as the topic had begun evolving differently from the one initially suggested. A second internship was agreed to take place in the fall of 2013. A meeting to review the thesis process in the fall was also set up, a template for research permit applications from the city of Vantaa was written, and the thesis proposal was rewritten during the summer of 2013.

The meeting in the fall was a group meeting with other students in the thesis process for the same organization. This was found useful, both from the aspects of peer support, and valuable insights from fellow students. The thesis itself began to take shape during the fall and by spring 2014 a draft was completed. The teams at Mikkola were then revisited, and a meeting with the thesis supervisor took place during the summer of 2014. As a result, research scope was broadened in terms of methodologies, as the study was an example of experience-based learning, and as such, drew on aspects of different methodologies in the qualitative tradition.

2.3 Research Question and Purpose of the Study

The research question is: what are the everyday realities of children at high risk of exclusion in suburban Finland? Moreover, the research environment is explored in some depth as an adequate representation of a fairly typical neighbourhood of its kind, not unlike many others in contemporary Finnish cities that misfit youth call home. The study aims to understand the deeper structure of the phenomenon of disadvantaged childhood in city neighbourhoods in contemporary Finnish society, in the context of Icehearts teams operating in the Mikkola Comprehensive School in Vantaa. Research objectives, such as studying the reality of everyday life in/and the given research context, as well as the impact of sports for social change as a tool for development are explored from the perspective of the benefit to the community from the implementation of methods of preventive child protection work.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS

The theoretical framework of the research is based upon the notions of the integralist theory of social work. Thomas (2004) summarizes the integralist theory in human development, social work and social sciences research as a conceptual framework that is heuristic, from the perspective of intentionality, behaviour, culture and society. An integral approach does not offer a new theory of intervention per se but a means of integrating the modern and postmodern paradigms that inform the clinical and macro dimensions of human behaviour theory and social work practice (Thomas 2004.)

3.1 Integral Approach

As per Thomas (2004), an integral methodology requires the concurrent phenomenological tracing of the various levels and then identifying their correlations without reducing anyone to the other. This expands approaches to research and epistemology that include phenomenological and empirical as well as qualitative and quantitative methods. Such a conceptualization helps social work reach a more sophisticated level of transdisciplinary and transcultural theoretical inquiry, drawing on concepts from many different cultures and traditions (Canda 1991, cited in Thomas 2004). The result is a social work approach to inquiry that relies on both methodological and epistemological pluralism, a nonrestrictive stance toward the variables suitable for inquiry and a conception of research that actualizes values (Thomas 2004.)

3.2 Critical Theory

Some elements of the critical theory are applied, as it is generally characterized as a value-oriented approach that analyzes social life, questions everyday assumptions and reflects on issues such as power, injustice, the nature of identity, and forms of agency and rationality (Depoy, Hartmann & Haslett 1999,

cited in Thomas 2004). It has influenced social work primarily through its emancipatory goals of practice, such as empowerment and liberation. That is, it intends to abolish social injustice and reveal repressive interests hidden within forms of science (Thomas 2004).

By definition, criticism involves the application of principles or values in order to make judgments for the purpose of bringing about positive change. Critical social scientists believe that it is necessary to understand the lived experience of real people in context. Critical approaches examine social conditions in order to uncover hidden structures. In a word, analysts working in this tradition align themselves with the interests of those opposed to dominant order of society. They ask questions about the ways in which competing interests clash and the manner in which conflicts are resolved in favour of particular groups (Seiler 2008.)

3.3 Literature Review

According to a 1998 report by the OECD exploring the integration of schools and community services, there has been increasing concern about passivity among young children who spend far more time sitting in front of television sets or computers than previous generations. Local authorities, with the encouragement of central governments, have developed programmes to enable the use of school buildings for child care and sports facilities for recreational activities after school hours and at weekends. In many OECD member countries there is a movement to return to basic skills, or to have a core curriculum which focuses sharply on numeracy and literacy, in recognition of the fact that inability to master these skills constitutes the main barrier to adult participation in lifelong learning. At the same time there is recognition that failure at school is most frequently the result of dysfunctional families, poverty, and the breakdown of social relationships in urban environments (OECD 1998).

The OECD argued in 1998 already that schools alone are often incapable of supplying the range of services that pupils from such backgrounds need, and these schools would benefit from closer co-operation with other educational services as well as social services, particularly those which deal with dysfunctional families. The OECD (1998) findings suggest that schools are also in the front line of the breakdown of some urban societies where many of their pupils come from dysfunctional families and have not encountered stable relationships or regularly employed adults. In these circumstances, schools are sometimes a refuge from an uncertain world. In addition, the OECD (1998) reported that more recently there has been a growth in provision of child care facilities and out-of-school recreational activities which are closer to the immediate practical concerns of parents. The absence of child care is a major factor in the decision of many parents as to whether to return to work. The increase in the number of working mothers, in particular, led to public concern about the safety and wellbeing of children outside school hours (OECD 1998.)

O'Neill (1999) argues that life is full of experiences, but for some children these experiences are negative and can include; hunger, loneliness, boredom, lack of stimulation, neglect and cruelty. Such children may be, "shouted at or hit for exploring, messiness or noisiness, they may never experience the joy of finding out how things work or of sharing in a stimulating conversation or action" (B.A.A.F. 1984, cited in O'Neill 1999), with a caring adult in their home. Such young children have constricted ideas of themselves and their place in society and very often present in schools at an early age as "unmanageable and unteachable." A number of babies are born disadvantaged while others can become disadvantaged through circumstances or experiences (O'Neill 1999.)

Feldman (1998, cited in Smith 2006) identified poverty as a major factor affecting parenting capacity. Other factors that have a great impact upon the capacity to parent include substandard housing, insufficient social supports, social isolation, high stress levels, own experience of being parented, a history of maltreatment, depression and poor self-esteem, little exposure to day-to-day family life in their own childhood, homelessness, inability to access the formal

service system and to access competency-enhancing supports (both formal and informal), as well as the temperament, personality and specific needs of each child. However, according to O'Neill (1999), research (Clarke 1976, cited in O'Neill 1999) indicates that favourable on-going experiences and future expectations can help a child, to a large extent, to "overcome the damaging effects of early neglect, rejection or ill-treatment" (B.A.A.F. 1984, cited in O'Neill 1999.) The earlier they take place, the better for the child's ultimate achievement of his development potential (Smith 2006, O'Neill 1999.)

3.4 Key Concepts

The key concepts are validation and acceptance, and disadvantaged childhood with its everyday realities. In addition, the perspective of team sports as a tool for empowerment and conviviality arose during the process as a result of the realization that while sports for development and social change is the very method used in the research environment, the scope of scientific literature on the topic is very limited.

The aspects of the realities of everyday life are discussed from the point of view of Icehearts educators as they see their teams, from the perspective of the integral approach to social work, and the context is described through the added perspective of critical social science, which critiques basic social structure. As critical social science makes a conscious attempt to fuse theory and action, critical theories are thus normative; they serve to bring about change in the conditions that affect our lives (Seiler 2008).

3.5 The Concepts of Validation and Acceptance

Whether one is male or female, our view of ourselves is determined by value and acceptance. To sum it up in a single word, we are on a quest for validation. When something is valid, it is accepted because its value is believed. It is acceptable. If one does not receive such validation from their parents, then they

are sure to seek it out on their own. However, as children are often ignorant of how to properly do that, they may end up doing so in a destructive manner.

When study groups are large and school staff is forced to operate at the utmost of their capacity, those students who are regarded as a menace to successful outings are often excluded from field trips and camps. As a rule, these excluded students are the same students who are excluded from hobbies, clubs and later on, from youth houses and school camps as well. Exclusion from the group is always abandonment (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

When rejection repeats itself in school, clubs, youth houses, at home and during free time, it is no longer enough for the child that everyone says that it is due to misbehaviour. It should be understood by adults that at that moment is when the child needs an adult's time and presence the most. This does not mean an isolated incident, but rather a chain of events where, for instance, a misbehaving student is regularly left as an outsider in school, in hobbies and during free time. It is always a direct message that you are neither liked nor accepted. This is exclusion and enforcing marginalization. Marginalization is always the fault of the adults (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

The inability of schools, as a general rule, to focus exclusively on a single student is no fault of the schools or the teachers. It is the failure of the system and of society, where not enough value is attached to a peaceful and caring relationship between children and adults. As a third sector actor, Icehearts has the possibility to arrange personal time for a child in the group right when they need it. In co-operation with the school, Icehearts enables the child to miss his father in the company of a safe adult, without feeling the need to vent in a violent manner when they are feeling blue (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

Yearning and feeling blue is always a more pressing issue than studying math! Internalizing this approach and elevating it to a higher importance over the curriculum is the responsibility of every teacher. The main thing for the child is to learn to be with himself, as well as with others, in such a manner that he feels

he is important, accepted and welcome on each school day (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010). As per the OECD's findings, schools alone cannot overcome these handicaps to learning (OECD 1998).

For the groups at risk of exclusion, lifelong learning means rethinking the relationship between formal schooling and vocational training, creating pathways to the world of work and developing new partnerships between schools and other social and vocational organisations (OECD 1998.) Using the Icehearts school work method, it becomes possible to enable the participation of all students in field trips and school camps, when the educator goes along paired up with the teacher. Each day should be equal and full of possibilities for all children. Each student should be able to feel that they are welcome in school each morning (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

As a third sector actor, the threshold to encounter the parents of the children, as well as to be openly accepted is far lower than it is for the school or social services. The discussions that take place on the side of a football field or on the benches of a camp sauna about managing in school and during free time, or about on-going fights are held in an entirely different spirit than official meetings in closed conference rooms. While discussing the rules of the game, breaking those rules and redressing the breaches, it is easy to move on to discuss problems seen in school. To many a parent, the behaviour of their children in school may seem completely foreign and different from their behaviour at home. At these times it is difficult to understand and accept the viewpoint of the school. It becomes easier to place the blame with the teacher (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

As well, sometimes it is difficult for a teacher to envision a child who acts out in school behaving famously in other settings. These differences are apt to spark even severe conflict situations between homes and the school. The educator can be in a key position, building bridges and understanding between them. The educator gets to know the boys in his group and their different ways of behaving alone with an adult, in school, at camps, during free time or in a thrilling

situation, such as games. This also ensures the viewpoint that, even though the child might be in constant difficulty during the school day he can act in a radically different manner in hockey practice, for instance. This is an excellent opportunity to search for answers in a positive way on why it is difficult to behave well in school (Vartiamäki & Niemelä 2010).

Fernandes (2014) implemented a project in a similar age group at Icehearts Vuosaari designed to generate a sense of belonging in a small group of boys who showed a tendency to withdraw from the group during daily activities, while instilling some sense of self-confidence that proved necessary to put in the effort required to compensate for lesser natural affinity with team sports. Within the scope of his project during a 10-week internship, he selected four grade 2 students, boys aged 7-8 who had either exhibited a tendency to withdraw from the group or simply prefer individual activities over group activities during a previous seven-week internship. He proposed to teach them some basic skills in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a form of martial arts, with a view to assessing whether a short project may or may not instill self-confidence, which research has shown that practicing martial arts has a positive effect on, and generate a sense of belonging within the team in boys who had presented as less eager to participate in team practice.

The results of his project showed that while the desired positive outcomes for these four boys also required a complement of his presence outside BJJ sessions in order to encourage participation in team activities and hockey games, as well as to foster evidence of developing sportsmanship - thereby also validating the necessity for all-around commitment of Icehearts educators discussed in section 7, even in a short-term intervention it is possible to engage the focus of children who may have difficulties with maintaining focus in a group setting when teamwork, as well as peer support and tutoring methods are implemented in pairs. Moreover, he stressed the importance of play to engage such young children, and maintained that the benefits of a short-term intervention must be carried on by supportive adults and peers over the long

term in order for them to become ingrained in daily interactions (Fernandes 2014).

3.6 The Concept of Disadvantaged Childhood with its Everyday Realities

Policies to advance the wellbeing of children are prevalent throughout the developed world, and United Nations agencies alongside international NGOs have worked tirelessly since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 in order to improve living conditions in the developing world. However, the degree of implementation of child welfare policies varies from country to country and is subject to resource allocation.

Finland has prided itself in progressive policies and its reputation as the best country in the world for children, yet in recent years we have witnessed an unprecedented shortage of public resources to meet the demand. Part of the significant increase of child protection cases stems from the tightening of the legislation in 2008, essentially erasing any threshold for notifying the authorities, leading in part to burdening social services and education personnel, as well as a shortage of qualified social workers and educators. Moreover, the ever-increasing outsourcing and privatization of municipal services guaranteed by law is having a negative impact on both public resources and long term outcomes of interventions, the latter of which are becoming exceedingly hard to get, short term in nature and extremely costly. And while there exists a public debate on the need for the community to get involved as well as for an increase in civic activity, not-for-profit organizations relying solely on grants, donations and scarce sponsorship struggle just to keep even a minimal operational budget while attempting to respond to the need for long term support and prevention of potentially disastrous outcomes.

Dhakai (2012) states that while the Finnish model of universal social services is often lauded as one of the best functioning social services systems in the world, from a community development work perspective social services lack genuine

interaction and dialogue. The Finnish social service model is historically focused on individuals and their 'need' while community development work focuses on marginalized groups. The first initiatives for community work as a part of ordinary social service in Finland date back to the 1970s in Espoo (Turunen 2009, cited in Dhakal 2012). Today there are clear debates going on in Finland concerning the need to integrate and ensure community development work methods along with the 'predominant strategies' in the Finnish social services. Reports suggest that community development work in Finnish neighbourhoods have proved a promising way to enhance residents' social participation and civic engagement. The examples of such work, conducted professionally are growing particularly in Lutheran parishes across the country and also in social centres in bigger cities, particularly in the East Helsinki region (Dhakal 2012.)

In tough economic times, education and child welfare are among the first aspects of the welfare state to suffer cutbacks, and we are already reaping the harvest of the 2008 global economic crisis. In recent years we have seen a significant increase in the numbers of children being placed in foster care, as well as family tragedies in Finland, as the result of the downsizing of mental health and substance abuse services, increasing poverty for families in an uncertain job market, and as recently as in 2012, the city of Vantaa announced the termination of special education classes, planning to integrate all students enrolled in special education in regular classrooms while laying off 100 teacher's aides. According to Addy (2012), if you want to find out the values of a society you should not look at values expressed in policies, mission statements and the like. Rather, you should go to the weakest part of the society, of the social context and find out how people there are treated and what their place and perspective is. He argues that when people say we have to 'face up to reality', we have to recognise whose reality is being referred to. Moreover, it is also fallacious to assume that simply by mixing people, fear of difference will automatically be overcome (Addy 2012.)

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative methodology from an ethnomethodological perspective, and aims to understand the phenomenon of disadvantaged childhood in city neighbourhoods in contemporary Finnish society, in the context of Icehearts teams operating in Mikkola Comprehensive School in Vantaa. The focus of interest is upon the deeper structure of meaning which characterizes the phenomenon, therefore methods such as ethnography and exposure have lent themselves to the process. Some aspects of action research and participant observation have proved to be relevant as well. Research objectives, such as studying the reality of everyday life in/and the given research context, as well as the impact of sports for social change as a tool for development are presented through diverse descriptions.

Moreover, these objectives are implemented within the contextual frame of the study, with consideration to its limitations (see section 4.3). Previous studies, the realities of everyday life, as well as diverse descriptions of the theme and key concepts are managed through continuously engaging in rigorous extended and critical self-reflection throughout the process. Bracketing, e.g. articulating preconceptions, predispositions and biases that may potentially arise from a prior understanding of the phenomenon of interest as per the researcher's experience has guided the process.

4.1 Target Group and Research Environment

According to Osborne (1990), terms such as "participant" or "co-researcher" are preferred to the term "subject" in order to emphasize the co-operative and voluntary nature of the research. Participants are usually fully informed of the nature of the research. An atmosphere of respectful concern for participants, a shared interest in illuminating the phenomenon, and good rapport, are essential for the dialogical relationship between researcher and co-researchers. The

researcher aims for accounts of co-researchers' pre-reflective experience rather than cognitive constructions of experience based upon co-researchers' assumptions of what was intended. The aim is to remove as many demand characteristics from the research situation as possible and replace them with a relationship of empathic understanding and trust so that genuine experience will be conveyed (Osborne 1990.)

Moreover, as per Osborne (1990), the number of participants needed is variable. The researcher needs as many participants as it takes to illuminate the phenomenon (Wertz 1984, cited in Osborne 1990). Sometimes one person may be sufficient, but usually more than one person is advisable for reasons such as attrition or because some participants may not illuminate the phenomenon. The aim of the research is to achieve perspectival understanding of a phenomenon and identify its structure. The interpreted structure obtained from one person should be found in the experience of other persons, if it has empathic generalizability. Generalizability is established a posteriori rather than by a priori procedures based upon sampling theory (Osborne 1990.)

On the whole, the boys on Icehearts teams are generally referred to as "problem children", and the team at Mikkola is no exception. They may have difficulties in school from the very beginning, such as problems with social interaction, self-directing, problems with teachers and/or other students, or learning disabilities. Severe perception troubles and anti-social behaviours are common. The boys are not accustomed to rules and boundaries, let alone to an adult who consistently enforces them.

They are insecure in their relationships with adults, as most have faced impermanence and losses early in their lives, have trust and respect issues and their backgrounds are largely characterized by general instability, and in some cases, abuse. As a small child has no ability to cope in such circumstances, they respond by acting out. Sometimes their parents and guardians are just worn out, particularly where neurological and developmental disorders are also involved, or the boy comes from a large family with many siblings.

Mikkola School is a comprehensive school, where approximately 820 students study in grades pre-school through grade 9. There are general study classes, integration classes, small group classes and preparatory classes for immigrants in the school. Music classes are also functioning in grades 3 through 9 (City of Vantaa 2013.)

At the beginning of 2003, Mikkola housed some 3000 residents. According to census forecasts, the population is not likely to grow, but rather take a slight downward turn by 2010. The years of vigorous growth took place in the 70s, but after the mid-80s, growth stagnated. The building of the Maarukka suburb has turned population growth upward in the last couple of years. The age structure is close to the city average (Niva 2003).

Mikkola is a borough built in the 70s that is located in northeastern Vantaa – near Korso. Some 3000 residents inhabit the area. According to the statistics of the city of Vantaa, Mikkola is an apartment house residential area that is lacking in resources, with the weakest income and educational attainment levels in Vantaa. The rate of unemployment was 13% in 2000, when it was 7.5% in Vantaa overall. Lower socioeconomic status is also indicated by the proportion of income support recipients, which is 21% in Mikkola and 11% in Vantaa overall (Rauhala 2008).

According to census forecasts the population will not grow, taking a downward turn instead. In the future, the proportion of senior citizens will increase as the population ages. Approximately 40% of Mikkola residents live alone, and the proportion of single parents is greater than average. The area is also the most international in Vantaa (Niva 2003: 1-2, 7-8, cited in Rauhala 2008). Statistically the immigrant population of Mikkola has exploded from 10% in 1999 to 24.6% in 2013, the proportion of the elderly population is indeed on the rise and the special needs student body of the entire district has been concentrated in the school. While the school offers a multitude of special education methods, these methods only affect the time spent in school, and there is a distinct trend for children and youth to spend their free time playing computer and videogames

without parental supervision, and with unlimited internet access at their disposal, children are often exposed to material not suitable for their age and developmental stage.

At the start of 2014, Mikkola is facing the relocation of the tenants in the rundown city-owned buildings, which will affect the number of students in the school. Moreover, many of the residents of these buildings come from foreign backgrounds, and while the Mikkola School has established programs of preparatory classes for immigrants, small group teaching for students with difficulties in school, several student welfare teams and keen co-operation with homes, that is not necessarily so in other schools.

The city rental board assures that all tenants to be relocated will be ensured proper housing, but they cannot affect the services that schools in other boroughs are able to provide. Over time, the Mikkola School has been largely tailored to suit the needs of the residents of the borough, and while the school pioneered the integration of special needs students in regular classrooms, it is also the only school remaining in the Korso district with special needs classrooms (Mikkeli 2009, City of Vantaa 2013). In the future there will be an increase in the proportion of aging Mikkola residents. The proportion of people living alone has risen dramatically in Mikkola as well, being 42% of households (34% in Vantaa overall). The average size of a household in Mikkola is 2.1 people and the average in Vantaa is 2.24. The proportion of single parents in Mikkola is greater than average (Niva 2003).

4.2 Data Collection

As defined by Osborne (1990), phenomenological research is not intended to test a hypothesis. The aim is to understand a phenomenon by allowing the data to speak for themselves, and by attempting to put aside one's preconceptions as best one can. The method provides us with descriptions of experience which are then interpreted by the researcher from a particular theoretical perspective.

However, if there is a structure to the phenomenon it will transcend particular interpretations (Osborne 1990.)

The data collection was carried out mainly by immersion in the data through an ethnographic approach based in existential-phenomenological metatheory, the exposure method and empirical observation grounded in the hermeneutic approach, as well as elements from an action research perspective implemented through the method of participant observation. Data was collected during internships acting as an educator-trainee at Icehearts Mikkola, in the spring of 2013, continued in the fall of 2013, and completed in the spring of 2014. These approaches, perspectives and methods presented themselves as appropriate in each stage, each subsequent stage building on the accomplishments of the previous stage and were adapted to practice in a natural succession stemming from the experiences of the co-researchers. The term co-researchers is used to refer both to the adult educators on the teams as well as the teams themselves

Opportunity for continuous dialogical reflection was provided on a daily basis by either the internship supervisor or other educators on the teams. Critical reflection and exposure was conducted both between internship days and periods. However, the opportunities for immediate documenting proved to be scarce, therefore immersion in the data proved to be necessary and was supported as well as structured by regular internship reports

Empirical observation and exposure was carried out over the course of seven weeks in the spring of 2013 in Mikkola, both on the team and in the area, and continued in the fall. The groundwork for the elements of participant observation was laid during this time. The empirical observation and exposure consisted of seeking to identify the familiar phenomena and artifacts in the environment, as well as to analyze and be aware of what was foreign or unfamiliar to the researcher and vice versa - and to ask 'why'. In addition to being a structured method of observation, exposure is also a way of knowledge production (Valve 2012).

Tasks consisted of getting acquainted with the co-researchers, familiarizing with the environment, the organization and its structures, participating in the daily after school activities of the team and establishing some measure of authority as an adult on the team. The latter of which proved to be challenging and time-consuming, building trust proved to be imperative. Exposure to the neighbourhood and its community was conducted at different times of day, as well as on different weekdays and weekends. Research for the purposes of both the internship report and thesis proposal was also employed as a method of data collection, and an exposure journal was kept on approximately a bi-weekly basis.

The main objective of the second internship was to continue data collection, as the research environment and target group were already familiar at the start of the second internship period of 10 weeks in the fall of 2013. Background knowledge of the phenomena of interest, the working methods used and the historical perspective leading to contemporary Finnish society had been deepened through extensive reading, dialogue with thesis supervisors, fellow students, teachers, and contacts both in the researcher's professional and personal spheres for insight. In addition, intense reflection and review had been conducted, while also comparing with similar social phenomena previously experienced in Canada - a society with similar structures, harboring both similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches towards similar phenomena. Having already established myself as a familiar adult to the boys on the team, the premise was to build on the groundwork laid in the spring, as well as to explore data collection options while refining research objectives. However, with a new team of first graders having started running alongside the already established team a month before the internship began, a swift revision and adjustment of plans proved imperative.

The opportunity to observe and acquaint with a brand new team in the forming stage was extremely valuable, but the practicalities required a very hands-on approach. When a 7-year-old boy looks you straight in the eye and addresses you with an epithet usually connected with what is colloquially known as the

“oldest profession in the world”, there is a choice to be made in research methods. The option to withdraw into observing and note-taking was swiftly discarded as inoperative, and what was interpreted as an open challenge to become fully immersed in the data was accepted. Naturally, the research method evolved from participant observation from an action research perspective into a form of action research itself, and regular documentation proved to be critically exacting. Documentation evolved from regular, reflected research journaling into keywords scribbled on pieces of paper intended to trigger recall of key situations, events and perspectives upon review. The constant dialogical reflection with the other adults on the teams proved to be invaluable both for research purposes, and maintaining balance and perspective in a constantly hectic situation, thus leaving room for necessary reflection and systematic revision.

The final stage of data collection and reviewing research methods took place in the spring of 2014 during a shorter time spent revisiting the teams. Thesis work had begun in earnest, and it was observed that the younger boys on the newer team more readily welcomed me even after an absence of six months, than the older boys on the earlier team. Naturally, individual variations relating to each boy’s personality were observed, but overall, the attitudes of the older boys can be summarized in a sentence as “oh, you again”, and the younger, more challenging boys’ as “come play with me!” Moreover, new boys on the teams welcomed me in an unreserved manner, particularly after it was discovered that some of the older boys also knew my daughters through the local youth house, therefore to them, as the mother of someone they know, I am familiar even when we have never met before.

These observations opened up new avenues of reflection, as well as research perspectives, and over the course of this brief period spent revisiting, not only were visible and tangible signs of the evolution of the teams as well as the boys’ relationships with their educators observed and recorded, observations were also made and recorded on the effects of introducing a new adult to an already formed team vis-à-vis introducing a new adult to a team still in the forming

stage. This inspired further research into the effects of both age and developmental stage as well as into the stages of becoming a group that are beyond the scope of this thesis work.

4.3 Data Analysis, Validity and Limitations

Genzuk (1999) writes that the researcher is the detective looking for trends and patterns that occur across the various groups or within individuals (Krueger 1994, cited in Genzuk 1999). The process of analysis and interpretation involve disciplined examination, creative insight, and careful attention to the purposes of the research study. Analysis and interpretation are conceptually separate processes. The analysis process begins with assembling the raw materials and getting an overview or total picture of the entire process (Genzuk 1999.)

The researcher's role in analysis covers a continuum with assembly of raw data on one extreme and interpretative comments on the other. Analysis is the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units. The analysis process involves consideration of words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and big ideas. Data reduction strategies are essential in the analysis (Genzuk 1999.)

As phenomenological research methodology is based upon different metatheoretical assumptions than those used in natural science (Wertz 1986, cited in Osborne 1990), and therefore looks to the actuality of human lived-experience as the primordial reality, it strives for empathic generalizability rather than statistical generalizability. Phenomenological research aims at the elucidation of meaning and understanding of human existence (Osborne 1990.) Existential-phenomenological research is a descriptive science (Giorgi 1986, cited in Osborne 1990), and as such, if the researcher is studying one group in depth over a period of time, generalizability may be limited. However, the study may be relatable in a way that will enable members of similar groups to

recognize problems and possibly to see ways of solving similar problems in their own group (Bell 1999, Osborne 1990.)

The research findings may well be generalizable to other Icehearts teams in similar neighborhoods, but as the aim of this study is to present descriptions of the boys of Icehearts, and their environment as well as their ways of interacting with it, from the perspective of presenting aspects of the Icehearts method that can be successfully implemented in other contexts, empathic generalizability can be achieved. The reliability of the findings can therefore be tested elsewhere, provided that the target group and their context bear enough similar characteristics for the Icehearts method to be effectively implemented.

Phenomena arising from the data were grouped in integral theory quadrants in order to get a visual overview of the raw data (see Appendix 1). A simple cluster analysis of the data was then conducted (see Appendix 2), with issues facing the Icehearts boys grouped in one cluster and assigned a larger or smaller subcluster according to the relative importance of the issue as a factor hindering successful outcomes. Icehearts as the principal actor favoring the potential for change, and as mediating agent between boy meets world, e.g. his teachers, classmates, team mates, neighbours, as well as other adults and children that may encounter the boy is placed in the middle. The values governing Icehearts activities are grouped in another cluster and assigned a larger or smaller subcluster according to the relative importance of the value/s assigned to each subcluster in producing positive change over the long term. A third subset of data is presented as descriptions of some of the skills that the boys practice and acquire on Icehearts teams through the perspective of team sports for development and social change as a tool for empowerment and conviviality.

According to the SAS Institute (n.d.), the purpose of cluster analysis is to place objects into groups, or clusters, suggested by the data, not defined a priori, such that objects in a given cluster tend to be similar to each other in some sense, and objects in different clusters tend to be dissimilar. One can also use

cluster analysis to summarize data rather than to find "natural" or "real" clusters; this use of clustering is sometimes called dissection (SAS Institute n.d.)

Chatfield & Collins (1980) explain that the term dissection is used when one has a single homogenous population, so that there is no natural grouping, and yet one still wants to split the population into subgroups. In this situation, the number of subgroups is clearly arbitrary as is the method of obtaining them. Marriott (1974 p.60, cited in Chatfield & Collins 1980) points out that one simply chooses the most convenient practical method which is appropriate for the given situation. No statistical theory is involved (Chatfield & Collins 1980.)

As per Osborne (1990), Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975) describe a fairly structured tabular presentation of thematic analyses of the data. The researcher begins by reading over the descriptions to get a feel for the data. The themes are then clustered in a way similar to a rational factor analysis. The final structure can be presented in schematic form or as a figure (e.g. Osborne & Kennedy 1985, cited in Osborne 1990) and as a written synthesis (e.g. Alapack 1986, Stevick 1971, cited in Osborne, 1990.) The final shared thematic structure can be presented in tabular form, as a schematic, or as a written synthesis. Phenomenological researchers who have highly developed interpretive and writing skills may decide to immerse themselves in the data and present the phenomena as a descriptive narrative (Alapack 1986, cited in Osborne 1990.)

4.4 Ethical Considerations

A research permit application was written in the early stages of the process in order to obtain permission for potential interviews, as methodology and the focus of the study was still evolving at that stage. The template for further research permit applications from the city of Vantaa was thus created and turned over to thesis supervisor Mr. Mika Alavaikko of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. The methodology eventually chosen for this study did not require research permits or consent forms. All data is presented anonymously,

snippets of conversations are quoted with names omitted, and events are described with regard for the rules of confidentiality, in third person form throughout this report, and ethicality has been given a great deal of consideration in the descriptive writing process. All data and findings are used solely for the purpose of this thesis work and data has been handled in strict confidentiality.

4.5 Exposure

“Okay, you, you, you and you, you get to go to the woods, there are enough adults to go around today.” The boys take off like Nato-missiles towards the trees, with me and the team civil serviceman heading out on their trail. The boys lead the way to the frozen brook and proceed to skate along with us grown-ups treading knee-deep in snow while discussing the virtues of snowshoes. They get to a bend by a small bridge and are told to hang back as the bridge belongs to the home owner whose house borders the brook in the woods. The boys gather some sticks and stones and within seconds, proceed to “ice-fish”. They are every bit as excited as if it was a real fishing excursion, one is pounding a hole in the ice with a rock, another one is shouting excitedly that there is a huge one right below the surface, and one is looking for bait while another one is making a fishing rod. We are instructed to “make a campfire” and get ready to cook.

The “catch” is reeled in with much excitement, particularly as it being stolen by a sea monster is narrowly avoided, cleaned, cooked over the campfire and consumed. The afternoon passes in a flash with happy boys and for a moment, I was transported to camp in my own childhood three decades prior. The boys protest when instructed to head back to the school but comply, while discussing their afternoon’s catch excitedly and planning their next ice-fishing trip. On sight of the school, suddenly two boys are in the snow pounding each other with fists and literally no one knows what just happened to set them off. They are unceremoniously separated, one of the two is taken aside by the civil

serviceman and I lead the rest of the fishermen back to the school yard, telling my supervisor what just happened and supervise the rest while he takes the other scrapper aside to hear out his side of the story. The rest of us play in the snow while the fight is sorted out and settled, and then it is time to go home.

As we wait for the school taxi for one of the scrappers, another boy is bombarding me with questions. "Do you have any children? How old are they? Where do they go to school? Do they have any hobbies? What are their names?" I answer the questions while the boy waiting for the taxi climbs a snow bank. Upon hearing the names of my daughters, he chimes in "I know them, they're friends of my cousin." Surprised that he had even been listening, I ask who his cousin is, wondering if I know her. As it were, I have known his cousin since she has been in the same kindergarten with my own daughters several years ago, and not only do I also know her parents, I know the boy's grandmother, have met his mother and little sister and have even spent time with him and his family at an event we had mutually attended the previous summer, and exclaim "I'm so sorry, you've grown so much that I didn't even realize that it's you until you mentioned the connection!" He gives me a shy smile and says "that's okay", and for the rest of that internship, we bonded, clearly the connection outside the team was important to him, as if it was comforting to have a grown-up on the team who knows his background and family, and is identified as a friendly adult, as my older daughter and his cousin were best friends at that time, to the point where my daughter spent nearly as much time at his cousin's house after school as at home in the evenings.

"Hello Meri! How are you?" I am jolted "awake" by an enthusiastic greeting on my way to the grocery store while mentally going over my grocery list and planning what to cook for supper. "Why hello there, just going to get some groceries for supper. And how are you?" "I'm fine, see you next week!" The tone of the greeting and the display of good manners took me by surprise, not two days before that same little boy had been screaming "I hate you! You're no different from any of the other adults!" at the top of his lungs, and the only thing it had taken to set him off had been being told that he cannot take a swing at

another boy with a floorball stick just because he is getting impatient at not being passed the ball. His face had been bright red and his little frame shaking with fury, and at the end of the day he had gone home still angry, shouting obscenities all around and swearing that he would never come back to “stupid Icehearts” ever again. If anything, I would have expected to encounter anger running into him on the street during time off, but he was a different boy altogether and happily continued along his way while chatting with a friend.

- What happened?
- That ~~ass~~ broke my phone! I’m going to rip his guts out for what he did to my phone, look at it!
- My dear boy, your phone was already in pieces, and if we’ve told you once to not take it out during Icehearts time, we’ve told you a thousand times, and that rule is enforced because accidents can happen.
- I hate you! And I’m going to break every bone in his body!

It takes two grown men to separate the boys, and the rest of that afternoon’s free playtime in the gym is spent keeping a safe distance between these two, because the one who is upset will not let it go, and the other one just laughs at him. The “perpetrator” is one of the boys who also likes to play by himself, so I join him and he happily constructs a bowling alley on the side of the gym and we bowl, while trying to ignore shouts about the police, the courts and death threats from across the gym. My companion seems happily unaffected by the threats on his health and wellbeing while busying himself with bowling and modifying the bowling alley as we go along to make it more interesting for us.

On my way home from the grocery store in Korso in the summer, I stop to watch a bunch of boys skateboarding on the loading dock by the parking lot. They have been told a million times by store personnel that it is an extremely dangerous activity and they really should not be doing that. I know these boys

and therefore it is not really a surprise that they consistently ignore warnings. So I stop to watch while having an ice cream, they show off their best tricks and then decide to go do something else elsewhere. Not a word is said between us, they smile as they go and I raise my hand as I head home.

It is no place for children to be playing, particularly not with scooters and skateboards, but there is no place to practice skateboarding tricks for free anywhere near this part of town, and the fees for the indoor skateboarding hall across the railroad are just not affordable for the less affluent families, so the children skateboard on the loading dock of the grocery store, and down the ramp towards the railway tunnel while causing general annoyance and frustration in commuters. I am a familiar face, a couple of them are Icehearts boys, and a few others are classmates of my younger daughter, if I do them the courtesy of allowing them to show off their skills to me as I pass by and covertly supervise their safety, I do not have to say a word. They know they should not be practicing there, and go find something else to do after they have shown me what they have learned since last time.

“What kind of phone do you have? The coach used to have the same phone but it was stolen! What games do you have on your phone? What level have you reached?” I get an incredulous look when I say that I haven’t got the faintest idea of what games came installed in the phone, as I do not play nor am I overly interested by them. I am swiftly given a lecture about all the videogames and Internet games that the boys play for hours on end, and sometimes act out on the school yard. Most are intended for players well beyond their years and all involve guns and violence. Their virtues are extolled and suddenly I am asked if we could go to the school library and on the computers there. Seeing as it is a beautiful day outside, my answer is no, and in response I get a “that’s okay, I’ll hit the computer when I get home and play as much as I want.”

After the internship, I was working at one of the very few special needs schools still left in Vantaa, and a coworker said “you did some internships at Icehearts Mikkola, didn’t you? Do you know so and so?” She mentions the name of a boy

who seems unable to spend two minutes without fighting, and goes on to talk about how his mother is an old friend of hers, and how the boy used to be the sweetest little thing, such a good little boy who did well in school, and now all he does is play videogames and his mother lets him, because it is easier for her that way. I listen, it is the perspective of a family friend who of course has an opinion of her own to express, but the contrast between the sweet and bright little boy she is reminiscing about and the little fighting machine that I have gotten to know who clearly does not care what anyone says to him is startling. There are mixed findings about the effects of gaming, but this is just another story that seems to support my own observations about its effects on children with special needs.

“You go on, we’re gonna swing by the woods and come join you.” Of course I followed them. “Darn it, she found us out! Please don’t tell anyone that we’re building a fortress here?” “Why not?” “Because the other boys would just come wreck it, they’re stupid like that.” I phoned my supervisor that I was going to stay on as “construction site manager” and got permission. It was a warm spring day, the spring had come much earlier this year than the previous one, when the school yard had looked like a glacier well into April. The boys found some discarded bricks and boards and busied themselves with the construction. From listening to their conversation, I gleaned that they had discovered this spot some time ago and had already worked on it outside school and Icehearts time, and had plans to also build a treehouse in the summer. They were a little disappointed when I called time, but made plans to come back after supper. That day was the first time I walked home with my friend the bowling alley master, who was also a fortress builder. He lived along the way not very far from my house and we walked together a few times that spring, he seemed to like that.

“Hey everybody, what’s happening here?” “The teachers are playing football in a tournament with the 9th graders, coach is playing with the teachers!” The older boys are keenly watching the game, loudly cheering for their coach, and the coach of the younger team seems to have his hands full with a couple of his

boys, so I join the other trainees in supervising boys from both teams watching the game or playing in the school yard. The teachers win the game and everyone rushes to high five the coach. The rest of the student body goes inside for their afternoon lessons while our gangs stay out on the school yard.

The Icehearts girls are on the swings. “Guess what boys, we’re going swimming!” “We don’t care, we’re doing boy things with our team!” “Well you should care, it’s really hot out here and swimming is a lot more fun than playing on a sandy yard!” As it were, all three teams are heading for a swim at a nearby beach where the water is shallow enough to accommodate even those who do not know how to swim yet. All children are as happy frolicking in the water as happy can be. It was one of my last few days spent revisiting the teams, and quite possibly as perfect an afternoon as it gets with this bunch, cheering for their coach and having fun in the water on a hot day had been far more important than taunting and fighting and getting into mischief. Even after all the sometimes hair-raising days that I had spent with these children, I was again keenly aware of how much I was going to miss them.

Wednesday afternoon, May Day Eve. The boys had been sugar-rushing and bouncing off the walls all afternoon. The air was thick with pollen as it was a record-breaking spring for birch pollen in Southern Finland. The adults on the team had been suffering allergies for some weeks, and this afternoon had been particularly bad, as the boys had been rather unmanageable and the grown-ups had been feeling miserable. I usually walked home, but partly because I was in a hurry, and partly because my itchy, watery eyes and runny nose, constant sneezing and coughing had done away with all of my energy I decided to take the bus.

The bus stop was across the street from the school and provided an excellent vantage point for empirical observation. One of the older boys shouted a hello from a balcony above my head, in one of the buildings set to be demolished, one of the younger ones was rollicking around the bus stop trying to get the attention of another trainee, who was doing his level best to indicate that in spite

of the proximity of the school, he was now just himself, not their educator-trainee for the rest of the day. His attempts were lost on the little boy, and I noticed that the challenging one who did not seem to like me did not make the difference between on-duty me and off-duty me either. He was shamelessly taunting me on the street, and absolutely no one paid him any mind.

I ignored it, knowing as I did that he was merely looking for a reaction, and if I gave him one, he would do it again when he would see me on the street even after my internship ended, so I let it be. As well, I was more interested by the fact that everyone going about their business on the street carried on, as if it was a commonplace occurrence that a little boy is waving his middle finger in the air and shouting obscenities at a grown-up. It seemed as commonplace an occurrence as the boy trying to get the other trainee's attention having lost interest and proceeding to pick a fight on the street behind the bus stop.

I had seen the same kind of behavior in youths, ranging from 6-10 years older than them (e.g. approximately 13-17 years old) while out observing on the shopping centre grounds, in the neighbourhood in evening time and on weekends, as well as during similar times in Korso near the commuter train station. The children and youths could behave any way they pleased in public, and no one seemed to notice. I had seen young girls dress provocatively, girls and boys alike spit, curse, smoke before middle school, fight, shoplift and I had witnessed underage drinking in public as a casual observer while I purported to go about my daily life. Not a single person seemed to take notice.

It was all the more striking in bright daylight as people were coming home from work and their holiday shopping and these 7-year-olds were behaving like unruly teenagers while being passed by as if nothing was happening. The everyday realities of the children and youth of these neighbourhoods unfold in plain sight, and it is as if no one even sees it. Laissez faire, live and let live, or live and let die?

5 MIKKOLA AND ICEHEARTS: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

In the small shopping centre, there is a kiosk, a pub, a cash machine, a barber shop and two convenience stores. The parish and the youth house are also situated on the premises. Down the street from the shopping centre is the maternity clinic. Gas stations by the main road, one of which is open round the clock are also part of the services (Niva 2003)

5.1 The Neighbourhood

The proportion of tenants is 44% in Mikkola and on average in Vantaa, 36%. The housing density (32,9m²/resident) is near the Vantaa average. The average size of dwellings is 64m²/dwelling, which is considerably less than the average in Vantaa, but can be explained by the apartment house-dominated distribution of housing (the proportion of high-rise apartments was no less than 96.5% in 2000). The residents of Mikkola are the most international people in Vantaa, because those with a foreign background constitute more than 10% of residents (Niva 2003).

Based on a residential survey conducted in 1999, Mikkola is less appreciated as a residential environment than boroughs in Vantaa are on average. 15% of the residents of Mikkola do not feel at home in the area and want to move elsewhere. The proportion of the dissatisfied is great even by Vantaa standards. Among other factors behind the lack of appreciation are the following: apartment house dwellers and tenants tend to appreciate their area less than home- and condominium owners. Correspondingly, the older the respondent, or the longer the time they had spent as a resident of the area, the more they appreciated their borough (Niva 2003).

The community spirit of the area and the residential activities were experienced as more half-hearted than average, nor were the residents of Mikkola eager to participate in associations. In a residential survey conducted in 1997, the

residents of Mikkola evaluated the range of services in their area as slightly above average. There are a total of 6 daycare centers in Mikkola, and the comprehensive school is large, housing approximately 820 students. The nearest high school is Lumo, in the Korso district centre (Niva, 2003).

Mikkola is considered insecure, 30% had experienced the area as being either very or moderately unsettled, and no less than 18% experienced the insecurity as limiting their movements at nighttime. Often the reasons behind this were disturbances caused by intoxicated people, but housebreaking was also a problem in the area. The area is situated near the Vantaa average in criminal statistics (Niva 2003).

5.2 Service Structure

Social services in the area are similar to other neighborhoods in the vicinity. The nearest health center is located by the Korso railway station some two kilometers away, and all social welfare services for the entire district have been centralized in the district of Koivukylä some five kilometers away. The local maternity clinic remains in the newer school building next to where the youth house is currently located, and dental care services are offered on the school premises, but the maternity clinic nurses, school nurses, and the youth workers serve only their designated age groups, and the amount of social and health care services in the borough are limited to services offered to the students enrolled in the school.

Access to services for the elderly, the disabled and the disadvantaged is moderately difficult. Public transit services in the area remain reasonable, a bus route to Tikkurila – the regional centre of eastern Vantaa – through the district centres of Korso and Koivukylä, as well as Peijas-Rekola general hospital runs approximately 3 times per hour on weekdays, a bus route to Helsinki city centre runs through Mikkola approximately 3 times per hour on weekdays as well, and a commuter bus route from Mikkola across town to Myyrmäki – the regional

centre of western Vantaa - runs once per hour or so on weekdays during commuter rush hours.

However, local services have diminished to the services offered to the school students, kindergarten pupils, the services offered by the parish, the two small convenience stores that remain, two gas stations, a cash machine on the shopping centre premises, a kiosk in one of the buildings set to be demolished and rebuilt, and a franchise of a German discount department store chain across one of the main roads, near the expressway connecting the cities of Helsinki and Lahti, and all towns and boroughs located by the side of the expressway, which runs approximately a kilometer away from central Mikkola. Therefore, while the transit services are comprehensive for a borough located some distance away from the commuter train station and the fast railroad services, local services are highly specific and tend to exclude everyone not belonging to the target population of these services. In summary, the school houses the only real health and welfare services still offered in the borough.

The social status of the residents of Mikkola has been measured against several parameters. Taxable revenue per capita was 18275€ in 2001, which is 80% of the average in Vantaa. Measured against income levels, Mikkola is the least thriving of Vantaa boroughs. The educational attainment is worse in Mikkola than in Vantaa on average, 50% have graduated comprehensive school at the most (41% in Vantaa overall). The unemployment rate of the residents of Mikkola was 13% in 2000, while it was 7.5% in Vantaa overall. The proportion of income support recipients indicates the same lower socioeconomic status (21% in Mikkola, 11% in Vantaa overall) (Niva, 2003).

Despite the statutes and legislation and city council strategies, over the course of the 15 years that have passed since surveys and evaluations have been conducted, Mikkola remains lacking in resources. The elementary school was discovered to be moldy throughout in 1999, following a decade of health-related complaints from staff, students and concerned parents alike, and was thoroughly renovated when a dangerous mold was discovered throughout the

structures. A second building was erected in 2002 and the school incorporated both elementary and middle school levels into one comprehensive school (Turunen 2000, Mikkeli 2009).

There are parts of the housing distribution, chiefly by the side of the main roads that are considered rather calm living environments and most of these buildings house condominium owners. The buildings running through the middle of the block are city-owned rental dwellings, some of which, across the street from the school and shopping centre are run-down, to the point where the city rental board is proposing to have them torn down and rebuilt in their entirety. The library that had moved to the new building of the school along with the maternity clinic was closed in 2013, and the youth house moved to the library space. The proportion of residents with foreign backgrounds has attained 24.6% and the entire population of Mikkola in 2013 was 3347. The area is home to a greater than average number of families with children, and the proportion of the elderly is indeed on the rise (City of Vantaa 2013).

5.3 Preventive Child Welfare Work

Schieren & Hämäläinen (2011) state that the new Finnish Child Welfare Act (2007/417) which came into force in the beginning of the year 2008 aimed to include child welfare and fit it into the modern social order. Some 24 years had gone by since the former Child Welfare Act (1983/683) which was already based on the modern idea of subjective rights of a child. The new Act emphasized more and more preventive measures and cooperation between authorities from different administrative fields. The new law gave detailed instructions for this purpose from which many, at least partly, had already been in use in administrative practice. It obliged municipalities also to draw up a plan for arranging and developing child welfare services, to review it at least every four years, and to take this plan into account when drawing up the budget of the municipality (2007/417, section 12). This statute brought about and pushed ahead strategic planning of the local child welfare policy and strengthened the

unity of child welfare as a comprehensive system (Schieren & Hämäläinen 2011.)

Preventive child welfare work makes children and their circumstances visible, and calls the adults to account for their own actions. It can empower and protect those children in particular who have many experiences of being discriminated against and of living at the mercy of hazard. As well, the goal is to prevent problems, e.g. to aim to prevent the emergence of problems, and the appearance of factors compromising the welfare, growth and development of children. Therefore, all societal, communal and individual action that promotes the welfare of children, and prevents the malaise of children is preventive work (THL 2007).

The prevention of problems implements itself in all services geared toward children where their parents or guardians also receive support. Through preventive work, it is possible to increase the number of structures to safeguard the welfare of children, as well as to reduce the vulnerability of children in the face of different risk factors threatening their welfare. The important thing, in addition to removing the risks is to build a favorable environment for children and families. Social and family policy, community planning and environmental policy are used to affect the growth conditions of children and youth (THL 2007.)

5.4 The Icehearts Model

Larkin explains the integrative approach to social work as given the mission of the profession social workers have a responsibility to both facilitate the growth and development of people in the context of society and to address the wellbeing of society as a whole. Attending to the interactions between people and their environments, joining direct and indirect approaches is the unique vision of the social work profession and gives social work the unmatched ability

to act as the primary mover in a personal and societal transformation that is needed now more than ever (Larkin 2006.)

Icehearts is a model of team sports for the benefit of the child, as well as support for social work, school and free time. The objective for Icehearts is to prevent exclusion, to foster social skills and to establish a long-term secure relationship with a reliable adult through the critical phases of growing up. The Icehearts philosophy supports the maturing of the child into a self-reliant and considerate member of a team. The model is based on values that offer equal opportunity for each child (Icehearts 2009).

In the early 2000s, Icehearts' activities expanded to encompass the after school care of special needs groups. The after school activities began in the neighbourhood of Hakunila in Vantaa in August 2002. At first the children were gathered from those already participating in Icehearts' activities who were in need of after school care, but later on places also became available for other students in the schools (SLU & Niemelä 2005).

A second Icehearts team was started in in Mikkola in 2013, again in grade 1 in order to support boys in the area exhibiting the greatest need for consistent free time activities and adult supervision. 2013 in Mikkola saw the pilot of the first Icehearts team for girls as well. The school grounds and the multitude of natural resources that remain in the area are propitious settings for outdoor activities. However, access to the school indoor sports facilities is limited by the large number of physical education classes taking place throughout the school days in such a large school with a student body between the ages of 5-16.

About 2/3 of the children in the group are special education students and require a great deal of time and attention from adults. The activities in question are of a preventative, and perhaps even corrective nature. The children need supervised and structured activities, and that is the need that the after school activities aim to respond to. The basis of the after school activities as well as the whole Icehearts model is physical activities for children and youth. Team sports-

oriented after school activities offer the opportunity for children to participate in physical activity in its different forms (SLU & Niemelä 2005).

According to Addy (2012), the key to a liveable city and a liveable community is communication and shared interest. So we could say that community of *place* has to be accompanied by community of *face-to-face*. Even if we make efforts to organise communities based on shared identity and also bring different communities together in multicultural centres, this may not directly touch the lived experience in city neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood is an important factor in the liveable city (Addy 2012.)

The Mikkola neighbourhood offers some amount of services to its residents. The main ones are the comprehensive school of approximately 820 students and a small shopping center. According to a survey conducted in 1999, 15% of residents do not feel at home in Mikkola. The community spirit in the area was experienced as half-hearted, and the residents were not eager to participate in associations or residents' activities. 30% of Mikkola residents also considered the area as insecure. The reason behind this was usually disturbances created by intoxicated people and housebreaking. Mikkola carries the stigma of an area with a bad reputation. (Niva 2003: 6-8, cited in Rauhala 2008).

The Icehearts team at Mikkola Comprehensive School in Vantaa is comprised of both special education students enrolled in the school, and some students from the nearby Leppäkorpi Elementary School. The team is in its fourth year of practicing floorball, and while the majority of the boys are grade 4 students, there are grade 3 and 5 peers on the team as well. The developmental challenges range from behavioral issues to Autism Spectrum Disorders, but every child is treated equally while taking into account their individual needs as necessary. Everybody plays, for real. That is the Icehearts motto, which is implemented regardless of ability and each child is an equal member of the team in and out of the rink. The educators are present during the school days as well, often teaching the boys in smaller groups, and the after school activities are not different from any other after school group, with time spent playing

outside as much as possible, including excursions to the nearby woods and regular practice for the team, as well as free playtime in the school gym. Smaller activity groups also take place according to the availability of supervising adults.

The Icehearts model has been awarded as the most innovative crime prevention method in Europe, for instance, and as recently as April 2013, a special education teacher in Helsinki was fired for disciplining an unruly student. Legislation has left the schools to deal with far more administrative work than ever before, at the expense of partnering with families in the upbringing of their children, and lack of funding has stripped the schools of resources to deal with the fallout thereof. Moreover, the Icehearts model of long-term support has obtained positive results since its inception in 1996, and the growing need requires stable funding to finance the activities, which is part of the reason why this research was commissioned.

5.5 Social Mixing

As per Payne (2005), individual variation in the collective is a sign of its quality, because it contains the resources that allow and help its participants to develop. They may only do so by participation in and submission to the collective, but in turn the collective will need to respond to them and their needs. Experience within the collective is the only basis of knowledge; critical questioning allows all participants to learn from their experiences. People gain ideas about how it is possible to, or how they would like to, behave, and the collective gives them the will and also controls how they behave, so that they may perceive other ways of doing so (Payne 2005.)

People educate themselves in interaction with others and in the interchange of perceptions about the world. Liberation is found in the mediation of one's views and behavior through the collective, in which language plays an important part, since self-understanding comes through discussion and debate in the collective.

Values, psychological, social and material resources may further or hinder a person's personality development or growth allied with that of a group and social institution of which they are part (Payne 2005).

Moreover, as Kulju (2014) points out, the participation point of view for learning considers that learning takes place by participating in some action of meaningful community. From the point of view of participation, learning is a process of socializing to the community and growing to the community. In the process, the operation and communication practices of the community are adopted as well as how to operate according to the norms of the community. From the participation point of view of learning, learning is a process, which gives new possibilities for participation for the individual (Hakkarainen 2000, cited in Kulju 2014.) Furthermore, Hakkarainen (2000) states that belonging to the community and participating in its operation are remarkable resources for learning (Hakkarainen 2000, cited in Kulju 2014.)

The public school system in Finland was built on the ideal of a classless society, where the children of disadvantaged neighbourhoods studied side by side and interacted with the children of more affluent communities, and for many decades, this principle of social mixing produced equal opportunities for success for all children based on individual abilities and motivation. The economic recession of the 1990s affected social structure and social policy in Finland in a fundamental manner, and none of the cutbacks that took effect during that recession have ever been fully reversed. The most drastic measures have been remediated, but in the last two decades incomes have stagnated while the cost of living has skyrocketed. Technology has replaced manual labor and unskilled workers have fallen by the wayside. Competition for both education and regular employment is fierce, and since the global economic crisis of 2008, the labour market has experienced a sharp rise in temporary employment with minimal wages and benefits, the downsizing and outsourcing of basic municipal services has dramatically affected the population on a national level, and we've seen a drastic increase in the need for health care and social services among the most vulnerable layers of the population, such as

children and youth, families with children, the disabled and the elderly. Long-term and structural unemployment are prevalent in all fields of work on all skill levels, but those most affected remain young adults and working age people with little or no formal education beyond comprehensive school and low to intermediate skill level.

As Addy (2012) summarizes, the nation, with its bureaucratic control of life and its solid institutions as well as national industries created a real sense of shared fate. But now we are not 'all in the same boat' and we should, according to the dominant culture, each look for our own solution or survival strategy. This is a very difficult environment for marginalised groups because they face a situation which is deeply unstable and fragile, especially in times of stress or crisis. It is doubly difficult for immigrant groups to enter into the reality of work and social life in Europe, when there is a general feeling of risk and threat (Addy 2012.)

5.6 The Suburbs

The first pilot projects in the suburbs were begun in the late 1970s. At the time, the development of resident democracy and propagating channels of influencing in neighbourhoods was deemed important. Entering the 1990s, old suburbs had come to the need for renovation, therefore the initial repair projects focused on the structural matters of the suburbs. After some time, the actual wake-up call in the projects was the fear that suburban segregation would give rise to slums. The focus of attention began shifting to the internal factors of the suburbs, such as unemployment, social problems and the risks of social exclusion (Rauhala 2008).

A new challenge came with the adaptation problems of immigrants. As it were, "We're all in the same boat," Mr Katainen insisted. Chance probably played a role. As a Eurozone member, Finland was not at risk of a local foreign exchange crisis in 2008. Like other Nordic countries, Finns were seared by a banking crisis in the 1990s, an episode few want repeated (Financial Times

2008.) In the 1990s' suburban projects, employment, cultural services, living conditions and improving the functionality of communities were also experienced as important. The use of the term "suburb" changed, and was replaced by "neighbourhoods" and "residential environments", at least in municipal housing policy strategies. (Karjalainen 2004: 6-9, cited in Rauhala 2008).

With time – or fueled by prejudices – different notions are born around local residential areas. These are often black-and-white formalities that easily take on a life of their own and feed upon themselves. Externally set news thresholds of the media prefer shocking phenomena that typically focus on distractions, such as has been the case in the relatively deprived neighbourhood of Jakomäki (e.g. the so-called Jakomäki-phenomenon) in northeastern Helsinki. Slower and long term development processes do not really interest external publicity, and that is why notions generally pile on as one-sided formalities. This pertains to elite- as well as to suburban residential areas. This kind of stigma immediately affects the price of housing, for instance (Niva 2003).

On the other hand, it can work as a recalcitrant positive by cementing inner cohesion and solidarity – the wrong kind of publicity can be a good enemy. Satka & Harrikari (2008) reiterate that in the early 1990s, the Finnish economy went through a particularly deep economic recession. As a result, a new type of governance took place alongside the economic, political and societal changes that were carried out. This period has been considered as the key moment in the formation of a new kind of strategy of social control (e.g. Kekkonen 2003, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008, Niva 2003.)

Osborne (1990) argues that there are a number of important implications of such a view for human science. We cannot compartmentalize each other. We cannot consider the environment independent of the ways in which people construe their environments (Bandura 1978, Page 1972, cited in Osborne 1990) nor can we consider persons' experiences of their environments without considering the ways in which those environments have influenced persons'

experiences of them (Osborne 1990.) Kulju elaborates that the concept of conviviality was first presented in modern times by Ivan Illich (Addy (ed.) 2013, 18, cited in Kulju 2014). According to Illich (1973), the concept of conviviality describes the autonomous and creative relationships between persons and between persons and their environment (Illich 1973, 11, cited in Kulju 2014). Conviviality refers to the old traditions of neighbourhood support, which was promoting living together (Addy (ed.) 2013, 4, cited in Kulju 2014.)

The social problems in rough neighbourhoods are substantial, and the marginalization of children and youth is intense. Their parents' laborious coping, mental health and substance abuse issues, and pressures to manage reflect in the melancholy and outright desperation in their children's behavior (Turkka & Turkka 2008). As per Satka & Harrikari (2008), several Finnish studies point out that both the direct implications of the economic depression and the practiced social policy were exceptionally harsh towards families with children (e.g. Sauli et al. 2002, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008). The status of children and the structure of families with children changed; both single-parent families and blended stepfamilies began to appear alongside the traditional two-generation nuclear families (Jallinoja 2006, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008). The proportion of poor and low-income families increased (Satka & Harrikari 2008.)

Supplements for families with children were cut, while low income families with children became increasingly dependent on welfare. Basic social services for families with children declined in all areas of social care, ranging from maternity clinics to youth work. However, the economic situation of families with children has started to improve since the late 1990s. The flipside of this otherwise positive economic trend has been the clear weakening of the economic situations of single-parent families and families with many children. One clear indication of this is that the relative number of children living under the poverty line trebled between 1990 and 2004 (Moisio 2006, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008). In addition, the number of children who are clients of child protection services has trebled over the past fifteen years (Lastensuojelu 2005, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008.)

Social problems tend to cluster in neighbourhoods with a large percentage of low income and social housing. It is not that the members of such communities are bad or unfit people, even though they are largely single parents, immigrants, unemployed, seasonally employed, have multiple issues or large families, they are ordinary people and plenipotentiary citizens. The schools in such areas are often crowded, with large classrooms and several special education groups. Social workers in these neighbourhoods are fully booked and the waiting times are often unreasonably long. Youth workers and volunteers patrol the streets on weekends and public holiday eves, and never without reason (Turkka & Turkka 2008).

Opportunities for supervised free time activities are scarce for the children of such communities, and every major city in Finland has its share of these neighbourhoods. The children aren't "bad" children, nor do their parents wish for them to have a bleak future outlook (Turkka & Turkka 2008). Satka & Harrikari (2008) argue further that social and economic inequality has led to a new type of polarization among families with children. The public concern of children was raised so that distinctions are made in the discussions and discourse in the field between the 'good' family values of those families who were able to regain their economic footing after the recession and those families in which the parents 'don't know how to parent', 'the children are at risk' and 'young people are exhibiting unprecedented levels of bad and delinquent behaviour' (Jallinoja 2006, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008). The concern about the children and young adults of 'not-so-good-families' (cf. Parton 2006, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008), the moralization of parents and calls for stronger and more effective social intervention aimed at families by the middle-class community activist and media have gone hand in hand with the increases in the registered number of child welfare cases, and the psychological problems of children and young people (e.g. Harrikari 2008, cited in Satka & Harrikari 2008.)

6 REFLECTION

Based on my observations during the internships, and upon casual encounters of the boys in the neighbourhood, I noticed one major underlying theme. It is as if the boys on these teams are constantly asking, "Can you see me?" I say hello when I see them while I go about my daily life, and I may get a shy hello and an "I'm fine" when I ask how they are that day, but the next time I come across them, they'll wave from afar and greet me. I have "seen" them and hence they are more comfortable acknowledging my presence outside the team. This of course varies from individual personality to personality, I have been greeted enthusiastically while I have been walking down the street ruminating on whatever concern was on my mind at the time by a more outgoing boy, but the effect of a smile and a warm greeting is the same. To me it is simply more noticeable about the more introverted boys. Outside one or two exceptions, they all tend to lash out when their emotions overtake them, and acting out releases tension, be it from restlessness, or having to take other people and circumstances into consideration. Overall, they talk the big boy talk and try to walk the walk, but for me as a new person to have noticed the children who just want to be seen in themselves, speaks for an immense amount of progress made in two-three short years since the team's inception. It is not always a given that an adult will notice what a child actually is attempting to convey through their behaviour.

The first thing that happened on my first day back was one of the boys who caused the most worries for all adults involved in his life in the previous semester calling my name from afar, hugging me, greeting me with an enthusiastic "Where have you been? I missed you!", and within seconds, beating the stuffing out of another boy who happened to annoy him. Welcome back to Icehearts Mikkola, where we missed you while you were gone, but it is business as usual, so I ran after him, separated him from his living punching bag, held him back and gave him a maternal talking to. He understands, always promises to do better next time, and forgets all about it the second that a prank

catches his fancy or somebody catcalls him while passing by, so we repeat the exercise, over and over again, sometimes several times within the space of maybe 10-20 minutes. The new team was a match-strike in a gun powder cellar waiting to happen. The second thing that happened on my first day back was a little 7-year-old boy with a month of experience in Icehearts to his name telling me that I am the worst Icehearts adult in the history of ever because I cannot do anything at all, and calling me by a five-letter epithet often used in association with the oldest profession in the world. Lovely children, really, as charming as any mother could ever wish for. Setting my goal for the time I would have to spend with the new team, alongside the older boys was only too easy, as some respect for women was clearly in order. I had my work cut out for me. While I could plainly see that the amount of progress made with the older boys was nothing short of phenomenal, the new team was as challenging as they come. Special needs were less evident at this stage than on the older boys' team, even after two full years of support up to and including private tutoring by their educator and his nearly constant presence in the classrooms, but challenging behaviour abounds.

One of the smallest boys on the team ceased to function the second he was not supervised by a familiar adult, a simple thing such as getting him dressed to go outside becomes an athletic feat for any adult who has not constantly supervised him. Another one of the smallest on the team seemed to sincerely believe that demanding to get his way was the proper means to communicate with the world around him, and he seemed unable to comprehend any clear instructions or signs of the contrary, and the least he would do was spit on whoever opposed his will. Yet another had great difficulty functioning even in the smallest group situation, roaring like a dinosaur when annoyed and was generally aggravated by anything at all, and seemed unable to communicate with adults other than by demanding their undivided attention at all times. Yet another was socially adept and showed signs of being a team-player, until he had a sudden meltdown, throwing himself on the ground and spending the next 20-30 minutes curled up in a ball, roaring obscenities at everyone around him, the adults in particular.

7 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers (Nelson Mandela n.d.)

Sport is the universal means of communication throughout the entire world. Give a child a ball, and they will play. Such is the belief embodied by international organizations and INGOs, such as Coaches Across Continents and the Global Rugby Collective, national programs such as football scholarships in North America, local associations such as Club de Soccer de Rigaud in Canada and Koivukylän Palloseura in Finland alike, street children in Brazil, India, and Nepal, and children in refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan, who find solace in playing with a ball made of garbage and string that won't deflate on rocky dirt; and national third sector actors such as Icehearts. In the Northern Hemisphere there is an equal belief in the concept of giving a child a puck, and they will play.

An excluded or marginalized child has no need for seminars or meetings for adults, where they think about what can be done, what they need is an adult to do with them (Turkka & Turkka 2008). Such aspects as insecure relationships with adults and peers, learning disabilities, developmental and social challenges, crowded housing conditions, lack of adequate supervision and resources for appropriate free time activities in children's lives are only too common in Finnish apartment complex neighbourhoods, such as Mikkola, and the concrete jungle therein rarely has the resources or the engaged community necessary to turn out balanced, functioning members of society. Schools are understaffed and underfunded, overcrowded and overworked, as well as largely burdened from their teaching vocation with the cooperation with child protection services required of them by law, as social problems tend to cluster. In extreme cases children are taken into care after open care measures fail, but social

services are also burdened by their legal obligation to investigate every notification made to them, and face the same problem with resources as schools do. The cost of one child being taken into care is sufficient to keep an entire Icehearts team operating for a full year, and ideally, when a new team begins operations on a yearly basis, the benefits to the community are seen within five years.

Over the course of 12 years on the team, the boys acquire social and teamwork skills that would otherwise have been out of their reach, improve their academic standing, increase their fitness level, learn persistence in achieving their goals and respect for others, and most of all, learn responsibility. Moreover, the team keeps them from seeking out the sense of belonging they need from unsuitable peers, and the method has been shown a useful tool in crime prevention, as well as a tool for long term support in child welfare. Teamwork, social skills, conflict resolution and negotiation skills are just some of the developmental aspects that the children practice on a daily basis under the guidance and supervision of their educators. The educators make it a point to also give individual attention to each child whenever possible, as well as to openly express affection even as discipline is enforced. Conflicts are immediately addressed and promptly dealt with, while modeling a mature way of addressing issues and giving equal consideration to all involved.

Respect for coaches and team mates is of paramount importance, every effort is made to foster team spirit, and despite the diverse backgrounds and relatively new team, the children are not hostile towards new adults on the team. That is not to say that new adults don't get tested, and the boys constantly push their boundaries. Their behaviour can become very challenging for no apparent reason, requiring a great deal of situational awareness and ability to function on several levels at once, while maintaining a secure environment at all times of their educators. An educator in a special needs group needs to be more aware of their own coping skills than average, even as that is one of the main aspects of work with people in general, and a greater deal of support is as necessary for the adults as it is for the children to ensure the wellbeing of the entire team.

8 DISCUSSION

Overall, the current situation of Finland's child protection services is rather alarming. Since the brutal death of a little 8-year-old girl in 2012, the competence of child protection services has been called into question, people have come forward with their own stories that have added fuel to the fire, and there has been voluminous public debate on the coping skills of the social service workers themselves. Silventoinen and Strandberg-Eld (2013) have published a joint thesis researching Bachelor of Social Services' (sosionomi AMK) ability to cope in social worker positions. The tendency in recent years has been to hire Bachelors of Social Services on fixed term employment to function in positions that require a Master's of Social Work degree as a basic qualification for permanent employment, as not enough qualified candidates are graduating and applying for municipal positions to meet the need for child protection services. Their research concluded, among other things, that while the strength of Bachelors of Social Services lies in interactive skills, however the knowledge, and therefore the ability to implement relevant legislation in the best interest of their service users is limited vis-à-vis their Master's of Social Work colleagues (Silventoinen & Strandberg-Eld 2013).

Moreover, the ability to cope of a Bachelor of Social Services in a demanding and under-appreciated position is largely tied to their organization's sympathy towards their employees' continuing education. While the support network of the workplace can be excellent at best, the greatest challenge lies perhaps in the number of service users per social worker, causing the outcomes to be questionable at best when an extensive client-to-worker ratio exists (Silventoinen & Strandberg-Eld 2013.) Third sector actors, such as Icehearts, are also limited in their ability to carry out their mission, as children referred to them and funding are often tied to the resources of municipal social offices. Furthermore, in spite of the public outcry for a swift reform of the cumbersome bureaucratic system and a cabinet shuffle in Parliament, the current Minister of Basic Services would rather wait for conclusions of the ministerial work groups

examining the situation of child protection services, as well as for the reform of the health and welfare system that has been stagnating for months. Members of the Finnish House of Representatives have gone on record in the last year to demand an immediate rectification of the situation.

Clearly there are no quick fixes and all research into the topic is both relevant and necessary, but chiefly the tough economic times have led to a rise in last resort measures, to the detriment of families and children everywhere. Child protection service has also become a booming business in recent years as municipal services are streamlined and outsourced in ever-increasing volumes. The intention may well be to provide services required by law in a timely manner, but the costs of privatized child protection services are approaching 700 million euros per year. Moreover, the child protection law of 2008 itself is intended to enforce preventive measures, which are sorely lacking in the open care services of most municipalities, due to a lack of resources that location often contributes to. It has been shown that the cost of one child being taken into care is enough to keep an Icehearts team operating for an entire year at full capacity, and good results have been obtained through long-term support of the most vulnerable members of society.

The benefit to their communities has also been shown, and national economy along with youth unemployment having been a hot topic and a pressing problem in recent years, the sensible option should be to invest in proven results. There is an evident need for a paradigm shift in Finnish child protection methods, which all third sector actors are doing their level best to bring forward, and while research helps promote that objective, the question remains that while we wait for scientific and academic results and conclusions, how are we not to repeat the mistakes made during the previous recession, as we still reap what we sowed 20 years ago? It is for the greater good that these services are receiving as much media coverage and public attention as they are at this time. On the one hand there is an outdated system of bureaucracy that does no favors neither for its public servants nor its service users, on the other hand there are

children and families not receiving the help they need when they need it, until the law forces extreme measures on them.

Breaking up fights and constant vigilance is still the daily work of an educator after two years on the team. While the amount of progress made in 1/6 of the life span of a team is heartening, becoming an Icehearts educator is a tremendous commitment that will test a person's resources to their utmost time and again. It is sometimes difficult to visualize compulsory comprehensive education as a privilege to some of the boys. The difficulties they face both in terms of educational attainment and social interactions are so great that it requires an exceeding amount of vision and creativity of all adults involved in their lives. Taking the curriculum devised by the national Ministry of Education, finding ways to teach it all to the children and maintaining a functional setting in the classroom for all students can be an arduous task.

From a professional point of view I must conclude that there likely is not a single school in the city of Vantaa that would not benefit from having an Icehearts educator present. The trends in social services are shifting. The move from state intervention to preventive work and community development is beginning to take root, but projects tend to leave an empty shell once the funding is used up. Meanwhile in the current economic context, the sensible course of action would be to implement methods already perfected in the third sector, both for the benefit of the communities, and the sustainability gap that the current government has popularized, and bases every fiscal measure on. We cannot turn back time and undo the mistakes made during the previous recession that we are now reaping the harvest of, but what we do have the ability to do is to turn current trends around and renew our resources-strapped and cumbersome welfare system without stripping it of its inherent intention of social security, and equitable distribution of resources for all. It is the matter of choosing to do so that seems to foster resistance. Change is often scary and clinging to the status quo seems like the safest option, but our children will not wait. The time they spend as children can be over surprisingly fast in today's world.

9 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The necessity of long-term commitment is crystal clear, not to mention the fact that there are several other boys on the team as well. What I learned of myself during those 10 weeks in the fall of 2013 is that while my sorely limited sports-related abilities are a very real handicap with the most challenging boys, there is room for all different personalities among the adults, and with time and familiarity we completed each other efficiently. The necessity for extra eyes is the most evident thing, but in situations where one adult is having a hard time calming a distraught child, another one is able to intervene successfully, all the while modeling a respectful manner that does not undermine the authority of another adult, a key element missing in many modern dysfunctional or single-parent families. And while certain boys always seem to be at odds with the same adults, the presence of other adults enables them to defuse the situation as necessary and teach the boys another concrete lesson about successfully dealing with different personalities. As well, the moral support of other educators on the same premises is of paramount importance when working with such a large number of children with a great degree of special needs, sometimes the need for informal debriefing is immediate, and due to the great extent of special needs, the educators are also required to spend a great deal of time in official meetings, requiring the other educators to step up and supervise both teams.

Since I have known these boys, I have learned that it is quite acceptable even in a professional context to care unconditionally, give affection freely, and still demand that my authority be respected and that I should be treated equally, regardless of my gender, abilities or status on the team. The ability to use peripheral vision and hearing acuity is highly useful, and often an adult needs to act decisively at lightning speed, the ability to separate decisive action from emotional reaction is often tested. The respect of personal boundaries also needs to be constantly enforced, the boys will test that time and again, which requires consistency whether you are feeling the part on a given day or not, and

the need for constant vigilance is also there, whether you slept well or have eaten or not. As rewarding as the work is, one cannot stress the importance of taking care of one's own self enough when dealing with such a challenging group on a daily basis.

I was even encouraged by my supervisor to use my voice as necessary, which I secretly found rather amusing because I am not always known for my infinite patience and soft-spokenness, but I sometimes got the feeling that these boys have not always known women to be patient and soft-spoken, because they subtly responded to me in different ways than they did to the male educators. I will be the first person to say that they absolutely need male role models, but research has also shown that we tend to seek out relationships in our adult life that bear a resemblance to the ones we had in our childhood, if I have shown even one child that not all of us are the same as what they have experienced thus far, my good deed is done. Working with these boys also reflects back to my own life, no question about that. I was often tired after work, which speaks for the intensity of involvement during working hours, but so immensely gratified that while I had to tell my own children to go easy on me on those evenings because I was "tired in the head", I also did not react the same way at home as I normally do, perhaps because I had spent the entire afternoon on a hair-trigger, but the gratitude I felt to be able to provide a loving, secure environment for my own daughters even through the toughest times of our lives cannot be described.

That has since become the cornerstone of my professional ethics, I have always known that a sense of belonging is a basic human need, as is the need for security, both physical and emotional, but I am now conscious of those needs on a new level. What I did not know when I started these placements, was that it was going to be the best thing I have done for both my professional and personal development thus far, but I sure do know that now. I learned that it is fine to be sensitive and to feel vulnerable, and to show it. Children have an innate ability to get on your last nerve, but they are not naturally inclined to exploit your soft spots, if they do, somebody somewhere made them that way.

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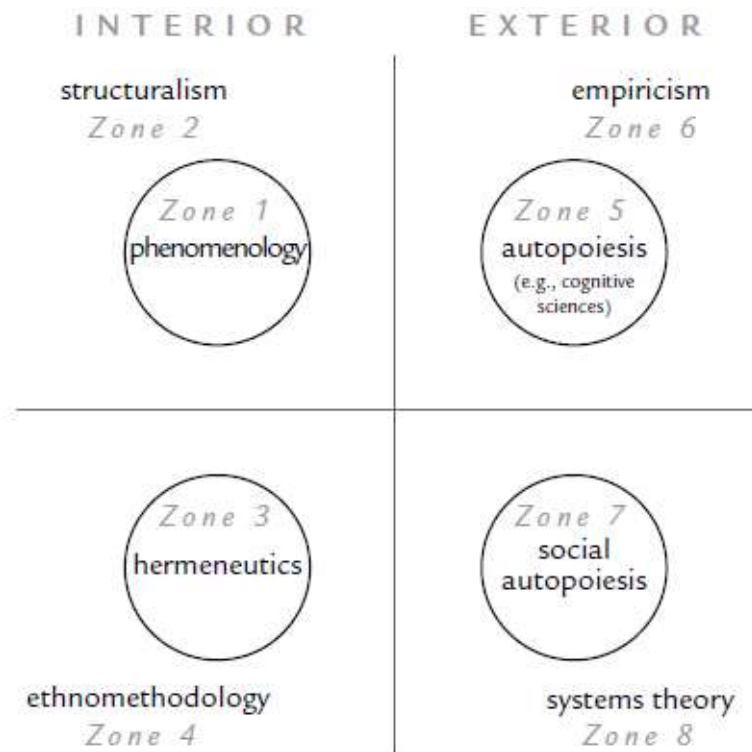
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Methodological zones of integral theory



(Esbjörn-Hargens 2010.)

Appendix 2

Cluster Analysis

