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Identifying Deficiencies in Children's Residential Care in Finland: Inspectors' Views on Working With Information

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ABSTRACT

Abusive and illegal practices in residential care are a recognised issue in child welfare internationally; thus, the question of how these institutions are supervised is important. However, children's residential care is complex by nature, making its supervision a challenging task. This article examines residential care supervision by looking at the 'knowledge work' that two central legality supervisors in Finland—the Parliamentary Ombudsman and Regional State Administrative Agencies—conduct when inspecting children's residential homes. Here, 'knowledge work' refers to the process of working with information to identify deficiencies in care. Eleven interviews and 16 inspection reports are analysed with a focus on the nature of the information that these supervisors gather when inspecting residential units and how they evaluate the significance and reliability of the information. The results show that to complete their institutional task, the inspectors gather information from various sources, including documents and interviews with children. The significance of the information is then assessed by comparing it with legislation and the supervisory mandate, and its reliability is verified by considering the diverse information sources as a whole collection of information. The results suggest that how well 'knowledge work' is conducted highly affects the impact of supervision.

1 | Introduction

Abusive practices in children's residential care have been identified as one of the most typical failures and violations against children's rights in child welfare systems internationally (Biesel et al. 2020). In Finland, as in many other countries, the expectations concerning the protection of children set for residential homes are not always met; cases of maltreatment and other illegal treatment of children in out-of-home care have emerged both historically (see Sköld and Markkola 2020) and recently (e.g. Eduskunnan oikeusasiamies 2020). Current issues relate to, for example, unjustified practices, the poor treatment of children and deficiencies in decision-making (see Eduskunnan oikeusasiamies 2023). Studies have also indicated that children placed outside their homes experience lower well-being and more challenges later in life than their peers (e.g. Heino and Johnson 2010).

The Finnish view on such errors and mistakes in child welfare has been argued to be deficiency driven, meaning that failures and deficiencies are viewed as a deviation from 'good practice' (Julin and Pösö 2020). That is, the institutional reaction is not to target individual practitioners but to 'abolish the deficiencies of the system' (Julin and Pösö 2020, 95) by, for example, increasing legislative regulation and creating other guidelines to aid practitioners in their task of providing 'good quality' services. Another key characteristic of the Finnish system is its emphasis on legality and children's rights (e.g. Pösö and Huhtanen 2017). Thus, the public supervisory system in Finland specifically aims to secure the practice's compliance with legislation. The emphasis on improving practice by legislative regulation is also eminent in other countries' child welfare systems and is often captured within the concept of juridification; child welfare is increasingly regulated by law, discussed and guided by a legal discourse, and social problems are deemed to be solved within

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the legal framework (Ponnert and Johansson 2018). Similar to the aim of juridification, the basic purpose of supervision is to improve social justice and the legal security of individuals—in this case, the children living in residential care (Ponnert and Johansson 2018).

Among the different strategies of supervision developed to prevent and react to deficiencies, one is on-site inspection visits targeted at residential homes (Biesel et al. 2020). Inspections as a mean of supervision are intended to evaluate whether the service follows regulation. However, the process of making social work and, for example, child welfare and residential care ‘auditable’ is difficult; it can oversimplify the complexity of practice and even be ‘destructive’ (see Munro 2004; Pålsson 2020). Despite the importance of the supervisory strategies that control service quality from the viewpoint of children’s rights, (empirical) research concerning the functioning and impact of inspections is limited, especially in the context of child welfare and residential care. It has been suggested that the complexity of residential care poses a challenge to conducting effective inspections, with one particular issue being how to gain insight into children’s everyday lives in residential homes (Pålsson 2018). The information gathered and gained through the inspections plays an integral role in the quality of the assessment of the provided care and the ability to guide and sanction service providers when deficiencies are identified.

This study examines the inspections of Finnish residential homes for children conducted by two supervisors: the Finnish Parliamentary Ombudsman (EOA) and the Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs). It focuses on how the inspectors describe conducting inspections and their practices for identifying care deficiencies. As gathering and assessing information is a main aim of residential care inspectors when inspecting residential units, the concept of ‘knowledge work’ (Lamponen 2022) is used to examine the nature of information and what is done with it in the context of residential care inspections. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the identification of deficiencies in residential care by examining (1) what kind of information supervisors use when inspecting children’s residential care and (2) how they assess the information’s significance and reliability.

2 | Children’s Residential Care in Finland

Out-of-home placement is one of the most established ways of organising a child’s care when the child’s home circumstances are not considered safe or adequate (Burns, Pösö, and Skivenes 2017). The main legislative framework for substitute care in Finland consists of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (ratified in 1991 in Finland), the Child Welfare Act (CWA) (417/2007) (n.d.) and the Act on Child Custody and Right of Access (190/2019) (n.d.). According to the CWA, a child can be taken into care and placed outside of their home if the child’s health or development is ‘seriously endangered’. The CWA defines family care (i.e. foster homes) as the primary place of substitute care and states that placement into a residential home should occur only if professional competence is needed, such as to address the challenging nature of the child’s symptoms. Residential care is provided in children’s

homes, reform schools and other comparable residential institutions, of which an estimated 80% operate within the private market (Shanks et al. 2021). The children are placed in residential units as a part of voluntary ‘in-home services’,¹ as an emergency measure or as a result of a care order (Pösö and Huhtanen 2017).

The main purpose of substitute care is to ensure the balanced development and well-being of the child while also considering their individual needs and wishes. The CWA also regulates such aspects as the adequacy and suitability of available facilities and the education and number of personnel within a unit. The tasks and purposes of residential care are manifold. It has been suggested that residential care is expected to protect and control, take care of and rehabilitate children and secure their education and school attendance (see Hoikkala and Lavikainen 2015), thereby pointing to the varied and complex needs of children. Additionally, the demands and expectations for residential care are said to be disproportionate to resource availability (Hoikkala and Lavikainen 2015). Residential homes, especially reform schools, have been said to deal with the most ‘hard-to-help’ children (see Pekkarinen 2017), often teenagers with mental health and behavioural and substance abuse problems (Pösö, Skivenes, and Hestbaek 2014).

In comparison to some other countries, there are no secure care residential units or other forms of closed accommodation for children in Finland (Pösö, Kitinoja, and Kekoni 2010). Instead, restrictive measures are used when needed in residential institutions (Pösö, Kitinoja, and Kekoni 2010). Such measures are regulated by the CWA and include restrictions on contact and freedom of movement, the confiscation of substances and objects, bodily searches and physical examination, physical restraint and isolation, among others. These measures can only be applied to secure the child’s or other person’s health or safety to a necessary extent (CWA, section 11). ‘Special care’ can also be applied as a restrictive intervention; if a child endangers their own life, health or development, or a vicious circle of crime or substance-abuse needs to be stopped, the child’s freedom of movement and social contact can be restricted by placing a child in a closed place or room within the unit (max. 90 days; CWA, sections 71–73; Pösö, Kitinoja, and Kekoni 2010).

As residential homes are simultaneously a tightly regulated part of the public system and a home for the children placed in them, they have been described as ‘public homes’ (Enroos 2016). In practice, residential homes must consider legislation, (organisational) guidelines,² professional principles and children’s wishes and opinions while also interacting with different professionals, family members and the supervisory system and keeping record of the situations that they face (Enroos 2016; Hoikkala 2020; Pösö 2016; Saastamoinen 2016).

From practical, professional and experience-based viewpoints, residential homes have been described as contradictory by nature; they exist in a network of complex and changing social relationships, histories and expectations and have the task of simultaneously protecting and restricting the children living in them (Pösö 2004). Moreover, the rhythm at which the professionals and residents operate is fast; events happen quickly and often unexpectedly, though the material reality remains seemingly stable and unchanged. On a practical level, the

professionals' work is concretely caring for the children and living with them, with everyday life consisting of routines and interactions with the children and occasionally with the parents. At the same time, these workers handle the difficult situations that emerge from the presence of injured childhoods, poorly defined professionalism and the surprising nature of the work (Laakso 2009). The care in residential homes, therefore, is based on encounters between the professionals and children; and though individual situations are faced, handled and often forgot quickly (Pösö 2004), they can also produce experiences of well-being, continuity and caring or unpredictability, stigmatisation and abuse (Eronen and Laakso 2017).

3 | Supervision of Children's Residential Care in Finland

The supervisory system in Finland is multilevel, decentralised, partly overlapping and complex. In practice, the task of supervising the residential units and the care they provide for children is divided between several different authorities with multiple means and tools to conduct supervision as effectively as possible. The supervision of child welfare is currently regulated mainly in accordance with the CWA. The most concrete responsibilities of supervising child welfare and residential care are divided between welfare services counties, the social worker responsible for the child's affairs, the AVIs, the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira), the EOA and the operational units (self-monitoring) (see Terveiden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos [THL] 2023). The clients—in this case, the children or parents—also have the right and are expected to supervise the services and make complaints, if necessary. The means and tools of supervision can be divided into proactive and reactive means (see Julin and Pösö 2020). Proactive supervision is performed by regulating practice through legislation and instructions, registering social workers and licensing services and service providers. Reactive supervision includes filing complaints, conducting inspections and mandatorily reporting shortcomings. Self-monitoring can be seen as both a proactive and a reactive means of supervision.

First, criticism of supervision in Finland relates to reliance on the trust between people and the authorities. Though this may be a wise use of resources, it can also result in a lack of systematic analysis of errors and mistakes (Julin and Pösö 2020). Second, the implementation of proactive and reactive means of tackling errors is challenged by the shortage of human and organisational resources (Julin and Pösö 2020). Moreover, the appeal systems are adult-centred and may thus obstruct children's access to justice (Kallioma-Puha, Pösö, and Toivonen 2020). Therefore, obtaining national and regional statistics, systematic investigations, reports and academic research concerning the deficiencies of the system is necessary to improve it (Julin and Pösö 2020). Other emerging issues and themes of supervision are the growing importance of and emphasis on service providers' self-monitoring and client safety (see, e.g. Kurki, Jylhä, and Kekoni 2021). The recently revised Act on Supervision of Social Welfare and Health Care (741/2023) (n.d.) emphasises the current issues in social and health services and their supervision, such as the incongruity and arbitrariness of supervision and the changing environments and markets in which service providers

operate. The aim of the law is 'client-secure' and 'high-quality' services. The most significant changes concern the standardisation of requirements and responsibilities of both private and public service providers and creation of a register for the providers. The act also highlights the importance of expanding the role of self-monitoring of both the service organiser and provider, thus decreasing or redirecting the role of supervisory authorities.

This article focuses on the AVIs and EOA, whose tasks include conducting inspections and whose objective is to assess services and their compliance with legislation—in particular, the CWA. The AVIs carry out inspections on their own initiative; according to the CWA, they specifically supervise the application of the previously mentioned restrictive measures. They must also provide an opportunity for the children to have confidential discussions with an inspector during the inspections. The AVIs also handle complaints concerning all social welfare issues, including child welfare and residential care (see Act on Regional State Administrative Agencies 896/2009 n.d.). The EOA, in turn, is the supreme supervisor of legality in Finland that specialises in matters concerning children and their rights, especially child welfare. The EOA supervisors handle complaints and conduct inspections into residential units under a special mandate; the EOA is the national preventive mechanism (NPM) under the United Nation's Convention against Torture, OPCAT (Act on the Parliamentary Ombudsman 197/2002 n.d.). In practice, both the AVIs and EOA can give notice to the service provider and/or guide them to improve their practice to better follow the law. The AVIs can also impose a conditional fine on the supervised entity or unit or file a report with the police. The EOA can similarly propose a (financial) compensation or press charges.

4 | 'Knowledge Work' in the Context of Inspections

The nature and processing of information have been a central theme in social work in relation to social worker's decision-making (e.g. O'Sullivan 2011). Lamponen (2022) examined the nature and processing of information empirically and theoretically in the context of decision-making concerning children's emergency placements and developed a specific model of 'knowledge work'.

In her model, the basis of 'knowledge work' is the task of the decision-maker and the framework within which they work, which enables the evaluation of information during the decision-making process. There are four levels of 'knowledge work': The first has to do with the *different forms of information* (e.g. factual, intuitive and relating to the child), which are used as *tools* within the second level in order to move forward with the decision-making process. The third level concerns testing the information and examining the hierarchies between the different forms of information. The fourth level is the context in which the decision-maker assesses the whole process and makes a decision.

Taking inspiration from Lamponen's modelling, this article examines inspections as an adaptation of 'knowledge work'. Although the task and intervention of the inspectors differ from those of social workers, both contexts include the process of working with knowledge to complete the actor's institutional

task as a public authority. In this study, inspections are defined as processes of gathering and evaluating information to identify deficiencies in care, which thus satisfy the supervisors' institutional task. Here, it is proposed that the *basis* of inspections conducted by the AVIs and EOA is the legislative framework. To complete the task set by the legislation and mandate, the inspectors *gather certain information* to use as a *tool* to *make a decision* regarding whether there are deficiencies in the care that need to be handled and/or sanctioned in some way. Figure 1 presents an adaptation of Lamponen's (2022, 174) visualisation to show the various levels that enable 'knowledge work' in the context of inspections in children's residential homes.

5 | Methods

To shed light on the supervisory process of identifying deficiencies in care in children's residential homes, this article poses the following questions:

1. What kind of information do supervisors use when inspecting children's residential care?
2. How do they evaluate the significance and reliability of the information?

5.1 | Data

The data consist of interviews ($n=11$) with inspectors working in the EOA office (3) and AVIs (8) and 16 EOA inspection reports.

5.1.1 | Interviews

The inspectors are seen as experts in child welfare, residential homes and the supervisory system, as well as objects of enquiry. Meuser and Nagel (2009) defined an expert as someone who has the power and authority to structure the actions of other actors—that is, supervisors have institutionalised authority to reinforce the supervisory system's ideals of 'legitimate' residential care. The interviewees were interviewed individually on Microsoft Teams (10) and in an office (1), and the interviews lasted for 2h on average. The data were recorded and transcribed. Eight of the interviewees were women, and three were men. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60 or over years old, with 50–59 years being the most common range. The interviewees' educational backgrounds varied, but most had a master's degree in social sciences (social work) and/or a degree in law. A few of the interviewees also had other degrees, such as in educational or administrative sciences. Among the interviewees, four had worked in their current duties for 1–5 years, four for 5–10 years and three for 10 years or more.

The interviews included 36 questions about the inspectors' duties and how they conduct their duties in practice. The interview frame was tested with consultants and scholars within the university and supervisory agencies. Most of the interviews followed the framework, but free reflection around and outside the themes and questions was also encouraged.

The researcher contacted the interviewees via email after consulting with their managers and/or other representatives from the organisation. Both the managers and interviewees were

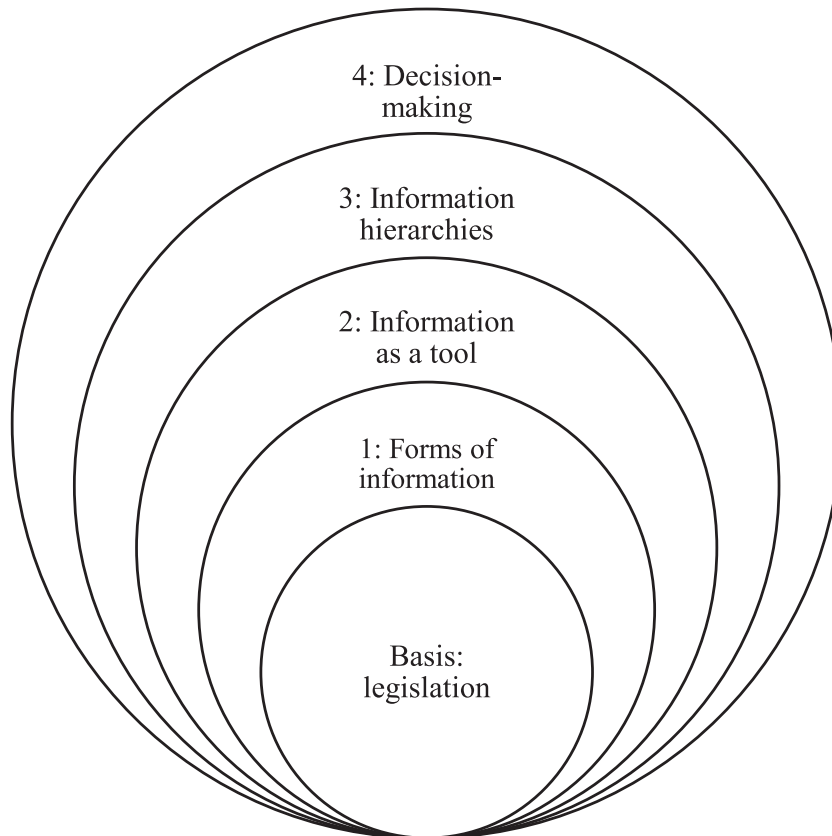


FIGURE 1 | Levels of 'knowledge work' in inspections of children's residential homes.

given a handout about the research and a privacy note concerning data protection. All participants provided verbal consent, which was recorded, to participate in the research and were given the opportunity to discontinue the interview at any time. The research process thoroughly followed the guidelines for the responsible conduct of research and the principles of good research practice set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta 2023).

5.1.2 | Inspection Reports

The inspection reports (16) were gathered from the EOA's website, on which they are publicly available. The reports are from 2012 to 2022 and comprise 546 pages in total, with the shortest being three pages and the longest being 110 pages. The inspection reports construct a documentary reality of the inspections (see Atkinson and Coffey 1997); they are reflections of the institutional rules and ideologies that guide the inspections and reporting about them (see, e.g. Berrick et al. 2018; Hoikkala and Pösö 2019). Thus, in this study, the reports are considered written manifestations of what the EOA institution considers important in inspecting residential homes. The reports were used mainly to validate the data and confirm the analysis and results.

5.2 | Analysis

The study's analytical focus was on the inspectors' answers to certain interview questions and on the parts of the documents concerning the information needed, deemed important and gathered when describing and reporting the process of inspecting children's residential homes. By adapting the 'knowledge work' model, the analysis focuses on the forms and sources of information the supervisors use and how the significance and reliability of the information is evaluated in the process.

The data were analysed following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and using ATLAS.ti 23 software. Prior to the actual analysis, the structures of the inspections were searched in the dataset, meaning descriptions of how the object of the inspection is chosen, how long the inspections last and who is involved in inspections. A short description of the final procedures after the visit was also added to the end of the results section.

In the first part of the analysis, the descriptions of and reports on the information gathered before, during and after the inspections were coded into units according to the source and content of the information. As a result, two main categories, as well as subcategories, of information were identified, comprising (1) textual material (existing information, statistics and plans and documents) and (2) descriptions, accounts and observations of everyday life (child and personnel interviews and discussions and observations).

The second part of the analysis focused on exploring the relations between the different forms of information and on the considerations whether the information is relevant and/or reliable. The inspector's reflections in the interviews and the reports on the limitations and credibility of the gathered information were

divided into the following two main categories: (1) legislation as the reference point and framework and (2) verification of the information.

Although there were some differences in the answers provided by the AVIs and EOA inspectors in terms of their specific tasks, their descriptions of the inspection visits and information gathering were highly similar. When the differences are relevant to the objective of this study, they are reported.

In the presentation of the results, the first research question is answered first, followed by the second. Quotations from the interviews are used to demonstrate the categories and have been translated from Finnish to English.

6 | Results

6.1 | Elements of the Inspections

The inspections of the children's residential homes can be announced or unannounced and be planned or reactive. The inspectors reported different reasons for choosing the unit to be inspected; for example, it can be because of an identified risk (e.g. multiple children from a unit have complained or been in contact with the supervisors) or because the unit has not been inspected for a while. The inspection usually lasts 1 or 2 days. Most AVI inspectors and all EOA inspectors stated that they conduct the inspections with a colleague. The AVI inspectors also said that they sometimes visit units with a representative from the municipality in which the unit is located as the municipalities also have a responsibility to supervise residential homes. Because of the OPCAT mandate, the EOA inspectors can bring along other experts, such as care-experienced people. A significant part of the inspections is the interviews with children. The inspectors stated that they usually interview the children individually; however, sometimes, the children wish to talk to the inspectors with a friend, and, in those cases, they might be interviewed in pairs.

Often, before inspections, the inspectors carry out preparatory work. This includes planning the actual inspection visit and obtaining and familiarising themselves with existing material (from the supervisors' systems) as well as material requested from and delivered by the unit to be inspected (when the visit is announced). The visit usually consists of a tour around the premises and discussions with the management, personnel and children.

6.2 | Descriptions, Accounts and Observations of Everyday Life as Information

To gain an understanding of the everyday life and practices in residential homes, the inspectors rely on textual materials, discussions with the residents and personnel and observations during the visit. Their interest is in the routines, practices, rules and activities, general condition and atmosphere of the home, as well as the relationships between the children and personnel. Thus, the different forms of information are used to reflect these different aspects.

6.2.1 | Textual Material

As part of the inspections, the inspectors examine numerous different textual materials, which depict certain aspects of everyday life and routines in textual form. The first type of textual material includes existing information and documents about the chosen unit. The inspectors search for information from their own systems and registers. EOA inspectors also consider the supervision records of other supervisory authorities, such as the AVIs. Three inspectors also stated that they sometimes visit the unit's website to see how they describe the service they provide. The second type of material constitutes documents, statistics and papers that the inspectors ask the unit to provide either before or during the inspection, including information about the personnel (e.g. quantity and education), children placed in the unit (e.g. quantity, age distribution), the rules and other instructions, plans on self-monitoring and plans for good treatment.³

The homes' decisions on restrictive measures and the daily entries concerning the individual children are of great interest to the inspectors. Hence, as a third type of textual material, the inspectors ask for these documents with certain criteria; they might, for example, request all decisions on bodily searches and physical examinations from the last 3 months. In addition to examining the actual descriptions of how these measures are conducted, the inspectors pay attention to how the decisions are written and reasoned, as well as how the documents are stored and the practices of communicating the decisions to the child in question.

6.2.2 | Interviews and Observations

When interviewing the children, inspectors often focus on how the children describe their experiences and how everyday life 'flows' in the unit. As one of the inspectors stated:

I often try to ask them how they feel, [how] they are being treated, whether they are being listened to there, whether they are being taken seriously, their concerns, and if they feel like they are safe in that unit. And then about restrictive measures and penalties. I ask what happens if you break the rules, for example.

(Inspector 7)

This quotation shows that because everyday life happens in a network of relationships within the residential homes, the inspector is interested in how the children describe these relationships.

All the inspectors described interviewing children as something special; they need to prepare and be ready to make adjustments in relation to the child being interviewed. As the inspector above describes, they cannot ask directly about the restrictive measures being used because the child may not understand the bureaucratic and legislative terms. Thus, they rely on more everyday vocabulary and practices that the children may recognise more easily. In establishing the connection with the children, the inspectors emphasised the 'well-trying practices', approaches and methods they have

acquired, usually through experience in interviewing and working with children.

The role of the residential home's personnel in the inspections usually materialises when the inspectors have gathered information and need to ask for clarification in reference to, for example, what the children have raised in the interviews. However, according to the inspectors, (systematic) interviewing the employees in the unit is not mandatory for the inspectors or the personnel. It seems that including the personnel in the inspections depends on the situation, such as if there is time to discuss with them, if any employees are available and willing to discuss and if anything needs clarification or the personnel's input.

The inspectors describe making all kinds of sensory observations during the inspection visits, as described by two of the inspectors:

You can observe the unit with many different senses; it is, overall, a very comprehensive situation.

(Inspector 2)

We observe the way that adults and children communicate during the day we are there. Though, we, of course, understand that it is just that one particular day. But we observe how the adults react if a child starts to rage, scream or cry, or something like that. Those are the things we observe.

(Inspector 8)

Such comprehensiveness carries through the whole process of inspection visits; the inspectors need to keep all their senses open to detect any significant details that may inform them of 'how things really are' in the unit. In the second quotation above, the inspector describes the possibility of observing a 'real-life' situation or even a conflict during the visit. The inspectors also describe paying attention to and reporting on the rooms and premises in general; they may, for example, examine if the premises are 'homelike', safe (e.g. the presence of fire extinguishers or broken furniture) and accessible, for example, to wheelchairs.

6.3 | Evaluating the Information

6.3.1 | Legislation as the Reference Point and Framework

First and foremost, the legislation is the reference point and framework for evaluating the significance of the information about the inspected unit. The legislation serves a twofold role: It gives inspectors the mandate to inspect residential units and defines the aspects to be supervised. Below, an inspector summarises the fundamental role of legislation:

As we are the supervisors of legality, the legislation is probably the basis from which we start out.

(Inspector 6)

The legislative basis of the mandate is also outlined in the inspection reports. The inspectors mentioned, either directly or indirectly, multiple relevant legislative sources in both the interviews and the reports, including individual laws (e.g. the CWA), other legal literature (e.g. application guides) and prior decisions and legal cases.

As the legislation sets the mandate for the inspectors to act, it also guides their interest in what they need to know to complete their institutional task. Below, an inspector specifies the matters inspectors try to elicit from the children:

Of course, in the background, there is the thought process of what we want to know. We don't want to know about the child's own problems, and, of course, we tell them that. It is more about the general interest in how it is like to live in residential care and how people act in the unit.

(Inspector 2)

The legislation also emphasises, for example, the importance of supervising the use of restrictive measures, which makes such information highly significant when inspecting the units. This explains why all interviewees mentioned documents concerning decisions about restrictions as a source of information and described discussing the topic with the children. In practice, in matters concerning restrictive measures, supervisors may question whether a common practice constitutes part of a 'normal upbringing' or de facto use of restrictive measures (i.e. certain procedural provisions need to be followed).

The institutional task of inspecting the residential units from the viewpoint of detecting deficiencies of care seems to direct the inspectors to concentrate on general operating principles and courses of action that include problematic—that is, illegal—aspects. In relation to the inspectors' mandate, institutional tasks and interests in some aspects of care and children's matters are deemed someone else's responsibility and thus transferred to a more suitable authority. Below, an inspector describes 'drawing a line':

If the child starts talking a lot about their own individual matters, then the discussion gets a bit difficult. Then you have to direct the discussion and say that you are not the person who takes care of the child's personal matters, and then, I have said many times that if you give me permission, I can talk with your social worker about the things you said you are worried about. Most of the time, the child gives permission to talk with the social worker, and that is how we proceed. We don't have that much influence on, for example, how often one gets to visit home during the placement.

(Inspector 5)

6.3.2 | Verifying the Information

Inspectors need not only consider whether the information they have gathered depicts the aspects that they are supposed

to supervise and whether the practices reported are in compliance with the legislation; they must also verify the reliability of the information—that is, whether it accurately and 'truthfully' depicts everyday life and practices. Inspectors may express certain doubts directly, or they may consider the ways in which the personnel from the unit question the accuracy of the inspection. Such doubts frequently materialise in relation to children's narratives, such as when children may be recounting questionable information, as can be seen in one of the inspectors' descriptions:

What we are told in these interviews is taken as the child's subjective truth. And in relation to that, we then ask for clarification and comments from the service provider. And based on that, we then assess the relation between the child's experience and the objective reality. Just a short while ago, I was talking on the phone with a service provider, and they asked how we can believe all the things the kids are telling us. So, I said that it is our methodological starting point. We start with it being a fact, and then we ask them for an explanation, and then we see what the outcome is. We, as the supervisory authority, cannot start with the mentality of thinking that the children are lying.

(Inspector 4)

The inspectors are not only concerned about residents 'telling the truth'; they are also cautious about what is written in the documents. Below, one inspector comments on questioning the reliability of the employees and how they report on their actions and practices:

The fact is that, yes, the children's documents say a lot. Though, we have just recently noticed that what is written in the documents is not that detailed anymore. Or that the employees have practiced a style of writing where certain things don't show up in the text anymore and not all of the text in the documents is that honest. But it goes like that: when you get caught about something, you try to avoid getting caught again. Or, I think that is how people work in general.

(Inspector 11)

To tackle the issue of unreliable, partial or insufficient information, the inspectors rely on cumulating multi-viewed information. If, for example, many of the children mention similar problems and the accounts are backed up by the inspector's observations or documents, the inspector is more likely to accept it as true. As one inspector explains:

We usually get to talk with all the children there, and they often talk differently but about similar things. I mean, usually, the problems start to repeat in all of their speech. Some people may say they have planned what they are going to say in advance with each other,

but actually, the situation is that they haven't had the opportunity to do so. But, of course, we need to ask for clarifications from the personnel and what their views are on these issues. Then, depending on the issue, we can check if there are any documents etc. that tell us something related to what we have heard elsewhere.

(Inspector 9)

Thus, verifying the information's reliability is done by gathering as much information as possible from different sources and testing those sources against each other.

6.4 | Finishing the Inspection

The procedures following the visit differed between inspectors. The AVI inspectors complete the inspection themselves by writing the report, concluding remarks and whether further measures need to be taken because of the findings. The AVI inspectors in particular emphasised negotiations with and guidance of the management and personnel as the key means of handling deficiencies and improving practices. The EOA inspectors act as rapporteurs in the final stages of writing the inspection report; they write down their observations and prepare the text for the Deputy EOA, who finishes the report and makes the final statements and decisions. Additionally, both authorities continue supervision if necessary; for example, they may ask the unit to provide a report on how they plan to improve their practice.

7 | Discussion and Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine the process of identifying deficiencies in care by focusing on what inspectors do when they inspect children's residential homes. As the concept of 'knowledge work' (Lamponen 2022) was used as a theoretical framework, the focus of the analysis was on the forms and sources of information the inspectors use and how they evaluate the information's significance and reliability. The results show that the inspectors familiarise themselves with the everyday life and practices of the inspected unit by reading, interviewing, asking questions and making observations. After gathering the information, they evaluate its significance and reliability by comparing it to the legislation and other forms of information.

The *basis* of 'knowledge work' in the context of inspecting children's residential homes is legislation as a reference point and framework—the legislation defines the inspectors' institutional task, and the framework determines the aspects the inspectors supervise and pay attention to, which determines what kind of information they gather. To gather the required information, inspectors need to familiarise themselves with the everyday life and practices in the inspected unit by reading textual materials, interviewing the children, asking questions and clarifications from the personnel and making observations. These are *the forms of information* that the supervisors utilise as *a tool* to make sense of everyday life and

its deficiencies in the residential home being inspected. The multiple forms of information shed light on different aspects of everyday life and practices from varying viewpoints. The inspectors then need to evaluate the significance and reliability of the information—that is, to validate it by examining the *information hierarchies* (see Lamponen 2022). Consequently, the process is then considered as a whole, and the inspectors summarise their observations and make decisions regarding whether deficiencies were identified and whether they need to intervene.

Inspectors' legislative and institutional task is to unravel 'what is actually happening' in the residential homes and whether there are any illegal, unjustified practices targeted at the children. A central way of gathering this information is by interviewing the children; despite the possible problems with the significance and reliability of their accounts, children are seen as a primary source of information because they live their everyday lives in the residential homes and thus 'know the best' how it is to live there. This tendency to highlight children's accounts is in accordance with the UNCRC, national legislation and the ideology underlining the right and capability of children to express their views and for these views to be taken into account in matters concerning the child (see Pålsson 2017; Toivonen 2020, 497). Pålsson (2018) observed that one of the most significant issues in the efficacy and impact of supervision relates to the information gathered being asymmetrical; the people living and working in residential homes know more they can transfer to the inspectors. Although the inspectors interviewed in this study recognise this risk, they do not necessarily see it as a problem as their task is to assess and inspect certain aspects of the homes, which can be done by relying on the plethora of information they gather. For example, the source or form of the information does not necessarily define its significance; instead, inspectors evaluate information in relation to legislation and their institutional task as well as comparing it to different forms of information. They also ask additional questions if needed. It is noteworthy, however, that the accounts of the employees who are in constant contact with the children are not treated with such a thorough interest as those of the children.

It also needs to be noted that the inspectors' interest is in examining practices and not individual situations specifically. Individual situations are important in the sense that they portray practices that may be systematic, such as how different situations and conflicts are typically handled. This focus relates to the notion that the nature of individual situations and how they are handled can, in the long run, produce experiences of unpredictability, stigmatisation and abuse for children (Eronen and Laakso 2017). However, there is a risk; what children see as important may not be relevant to the inspectors and their experience of what needs to be handled and how may differ from the inspectors' concerns. As the results show, certain issues, such as those related to the child's individual situations and everyday decisions, are usually transferred to other authorities, such as social workers. Correspondingly, research conducted in Sweden showed that inspectors sometimes found it difficult to act on deficiencies in care that the children deemed important as the issues were not clearly linked to regulation and standards (Pålsson 2017).

As this study shows, to complete their institutional task by practicing ‘knowledge work’, the inspectors are set with a particularly difficult and complex task. They need to include many people in the process, which also makes them responsible to all those people for conducting supervision that is as effective and well informed as possible. How well the ‘knowledge work’ is conducted can directly affect the functioning of the residential homes as well as the children’s lives and the protection of their rights, which highlights the impact of inspections. As the results demonstrate, inspections rely significantly on negotiations and guidance instead of imposing concrete sanctions. According to previous research, for example, in 2019, not one licence from a children’s residential unit was revoked, nor were any fines issued (Pålsson et al. 2022). This is not to say that all issues are or can be resolved by discussion and guidance. The downside of supervision based on legislation may be that the inspectors cannot take a stand or resolve issues that do not fit within the legislative framework. Additionally, the inspectors noted that due to their role and task, the positive aspects of residential homes and their practices are not usually officially reported or emphasised. More research is also needed on how children experience the effects of supervision as well on the issue of employees’ views not being systematically considered in inspections.

7.1 | Limitations

A central limitation of this research is its reliance on the accounts of the inspectors—that is, how they describe what they do—rather than actually observing inspections. The study also focused on only two supervising authorities; from a children’s viewpoint, more attention should be paid to how the social workers supervise the residential homes into which they have placed children. The actual effectiveness and impacts of the inspections were also not the focus of this study and constitute a topic for future research on the supervision of children’s residential care.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ Removals as part of in-home services (or ‘open care’) are used as a supportive measure if it suits the family’s needs. They are done on a voluntary basis. See Pösö and Huhtanen (2017).

² For example, the updated national quality recommendation for child welfare (Malja et al. 2019) was introduced in 2019. It includes specific instructions for substitute care and its supervision; the starting point is that such care is in compliance with the law, safe and of good quality (meaning that it responds to the child’s needs and to the objects of substitute care).

³ According to the CWA Section 61, all service providers providing residential care must prepare a plan for good treatment, which includes plans for the use of restrictive measures, practices on strengthening and supporting children’s self-determination and how the children are told about their rights to complain.

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