

# Lectio praecursoria<sup>1</sup>

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**Honorable custos, honorable opponent, ladies and gentlemen.**

"**W**hen the apple was ready she painted her face and disguised herself as a farmer's wife, and then went over the seven mountains to the seven dwarfs' house. She knocked, and Snow-White put her head out of the window and said: 'I'm not allowed to let anybody in, the seven dwarfs told me not to.'

'That's all right with me,' answered the farmer's wife. 'I'll get rid of my apples without any trouble. Here, I'll give you one.'

'No,' said Snow-White, 'I'm afraid to take it.'

'Are you afraid of poison?' said the old woman. 'Look, I'll cut the apple in two halves; you eat the red cheek and I'll eat the white.'

But the apple was so cunningly made that only the red part was poisoned. Snow-White longed for the lovely apple, and when she saw that the old woman was eating it, she couldn't resist it any longer, put out her hand, and took the poisoned half. But hardly had she a bite of it in her mouth than she fell down on the ground dead. Then the Queen gave her

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a dreadful look, laughed aloud, and cried: 'White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony! This time the dwarfs can't wake you!'

And when, at home, she asked the mirror:

*Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
Who is fairest of us all?*

at last it answered:

*Queen, thou art the fairest of us all.*

Then her envious heart had rest, as far as an envious heart can have rest" (Grimm, Grimm, Jarrell, Burkert, & Tehon 1972).

We all compare ourselves to others from time to time:

*How is my performance compared to my fellow students?  
How much do I earn compared to my male colleagues?*

Social comparing is natural. It can be upward or downward; it can motivate us to strive for new achievements; it can cause unhappiness and make us feel inferior; or it can give rise to envy and resentment. Fortunately, it rarely ends as dramatically and violently as in the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by the Brothers Grimm.

In my study, I used comparison in a scientific context. The overall objective was to investigate and compare the nature and role of school social work within the contexts of the German and Finnish welfare regimes and child welfare systems based on theoretical examinations and empirical investigations. In addition, this study had the aim of mapping the field of cross-national comparative research in school social work.

One of the central questions within cross-national comparative research is *why?* Why should we compare a specific phenomenon in different countries? And why should we compare the nature and role of school social work within the contexts of the German and Finnish welfare regimes and child welfare systems?

While there would be some interesting stories about my motivation in connection with my own biography and practical experience, I would like

to refer to my scientific and professional motivations today, as I see myself as both a researcher and a member of the social work profession.

In line with Karen Baistow, I assume that comparing a phenomenon in different countries allows for learning about, from and with each other as well as learning about ourselves. With reference to Janet Anand and Chaitali Das, I used comparison as a means to obtain a deeper understanding of the nature and role of school social work. Thus, in accordance with Wolfgang Hörner, the comparative method had an idiographic and melioristic function, meaning that it aimed to clarify the characteristics of the nature and role of the phenomenon in both countries, and the reasons behind these characteristics, and to identify elements in each country that might support improvements in the other country. I assumed that comparing the same phenomenon in two different contexts would yield a deeper understanding compared to an individual review of one country.

Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2016, 44) states that "social work as a profession has three mandates: the first one given by the clients, the second one by the state or agency as representatives of society and the third one by the organised profession itself. The third mandate legitimises *relative* professional autonomy." Thus, the "main characteristic of professionalism" is "to form one's own picture of problem situation on a scientifically justified and professional ethical basis" (Staub-Bernasconi 2012, 276; translation K. F. B.).

To reach the overall objective, I conducted four sub-studies. Each of them focused on a specific aspect with respect to the established research objectives.

Sub-study 1 was aimed at identifying relevant aspects of education and child and youth welfare and clarifying the terminological and conceptual diversities of school social work in Germany based on a systematic approach to reviewing the literature and creating a narrative synthesis.

Sub-study 2 mapped the field of cross-national comparative research in school social work. Its aims were to discuss central issues within cross-national comparative research, particularly why, how, and what to compare; to clarify methodological challenges; and to present the main focus areas, comparative countries and school social work practice themes of previous studies and publications. These aims were achieved via a systematic approach to reviewing the literature, a narrative synthesis, and a coding process.

Sub-studies 3 and 4 researched and compared the responses of

German and Finnish school social workers to an exemplary case of child maltreatment as well as work-related stressors that accompany them while assessing children's well-being. The methods included semi-structured interviews, the case vignette technique, computer-guided content-structuring content analysis and a coding process.

School social work and pupil welfare services in Germany and Finland are influenced by various factors. They are shaped by the surrounding culture and needs of a school and by a professional's personality, as outlined by Pirkko Sipilä-Lähdekorpi. They are also closely connected to the local welfare systems, as stated by Suvi Lakkala, Tuija Turunen, Merja Laitinen and Arto Kauppi. Finally, they are, similar to social work, essentially influenced by and shaped through the welfare regime in which they are embedded, as outlined by Juha Hämäläinen, Haluk Soydan, Anna Meeuwisse and Hans Swärd.

In my study, the observed differences were explained from a systems theoretical perspective and theoretical conclusions were essentially based on interpretations of differences between the German and Finnish welfare regimes and child welfare systems. Whereas systems theory provides insight into the relations between systems and, therefore, offers insight into the interrelations between school social work, welfare regimes and child welfare systems, ecological systems theory focuses on the relations between a person and their environment and, therefore, supports understanding how school social workers perceive their assigned roles and identifying potential conflicts between these assigned roles and subjective perceptions concerning these roles.

I assume this study should be interesting, but is it relevant at the scientific, practical, and societal levels?

Although various scholars, such as Karen Baistow, Juha Hämäläinen, Günter Friesenhahn and Anette Kniephoff-Knebel, highlight that the cross-national comparative approach has different functions and opens up various opportunities, cross-national comparative studies in school social work remain rare, which is why there is a persistent lack of knowledge of this area of work. Building on existing knowledge, this study contributes towards filling the gap not only in cross-national comparative research on school social work but also in research on the nature and role of school social work within the contexts of the German and Finnish welfare regimes and child welfare systems. With some exceptions, such as the publications of Wilfried Wulfers or Gun Andersson, Tarja Pösö,

Erja Väisänen and Aila Wallin, almost all publications regarding school social work and pupil welfare services are in the German or Finnish language. Thus, this study provides information concerning school social work in Germany and Finland that was previously unknown outside these countries, thereby enabling international scientific communication and exchange of information.

Thus, the study has high scientific relevance, but is it also relevant at the practical level? Stefan Borrmann notes that social work must clarify the relationship between its discipline and profession. Based on his remarks, I am convinced that scientific knowledge is helpful for reflecting on practice.

This study enables insights into the interrelations between school social work, welfare regimes and child welfare systems in Germany and Finland – thus, as Andrea Barth (2007, 97; translation K. F. B.) formulates it, in the ”fundamental structures, on which the individual action is dependent” – and, accordingly, it offers practitioners insight into how their practice is interrelated with societal systems. In that regard, it allows practitioners to question their own taken-for-granted practice and promotes critical reflection.

In addition, the scientific findings can not only be used to reflect on professional practice but can also stimulate further developments in school social work practice. Schools and their professionals in Germany and Finland have a specific role in early detection of signs that indicate maltreatment, as outlined by Sigrid Bathke, Riitta Väänänen, Riitta Vornanen, Pirjo Pölkki and Juha Hämäläinen. Comparison provides knowledge of alternative good practices that can lead to improvements in one’s own practice; that is, one country can function as a role model for another. But, of course, we must bear in mind that we cannot easily import practices to another country, as they have developed within their national context and may not work in another context.

In addition, this study deals with a topic that is not only relevant at scientific and practical levels but also at a societal level. Although children have the right to grow up without corporal punishment in both countries, it still affects some children, which is problematic not only for the affected children but also for the societies in which they live. Erik Allardt (1993, 89) defines welfare as a condition in which individuals are able to satisfy their needs and summarizes the ”central necessary conditions of human development and existence” with the catchwords *having*, *loving* and *being*.

Werner Obrecht defines a need as an internal state more or less far away from the satisfactory state for the organism.

When children are exposed to physical violence, their need for physical integrity – that is, to avoid injury and exposure to intentional violence – is denied. When children are neglected, their need for emotional affection – that is, for belonging and love – is denied.

If needs remain permanently unsatisfied, need tensions arise which can be processed either internally or externally as health problems, hopelessness, a feeling of inferiority or self-destructive behaviour but also latent aggression or the joining of groups that promise relief from the stressful situation.

Individual tragedy leads to and reflects societal issues.

Thus, societal relevance not only refers to the relevance of a phenomenon for a society but also to the relevance of society in the development of a phenomenon. In line with this, Silvia Staub-Bernasconi clarifies that social problems not only arise from the inability to meet one's own needs but also from problematic societal structures that make it impossible for human beings to meet their own needs. These are to be transformed.

The findings of this study show that the nature and role of school social work in Germany and Finland is interrelated with each country's respective welfare regime and child welfare system. The interrelations specifically concern the central principles and ideas of the respective welfare regime, as well as the legislative foundations and requirements of the respective child welfare system. While this situation stipulates the similarity between the two countries, the respective content arrangements stipulate the differences. While the nature and role of school social work are interrelated with these contexts, conflicts between legal requirements and professional values, as well as between legal requirements and insufficient time and personnel resources to fulfil them, may lead to work-related stress.

But what did the comparative perspective actually achieve?

The findings offer several important suggestions from a comparative perspective that can expand national reform discussions. In addition, the findings include implications for school social work practice, education, and research.

This brings me back to the beginning of my *Lectio Praecursoria*.

I read a short passage from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I did this because I wanted to make it clear that social comparison is innate.

Alicia Nortje (2021) states that the "direction of the comparison doesn't guarantee the direction of the outcome"; that is, both upward and downward comparisons can lead to positive and negative effects. Perhaps social comparison does more harm than good.

Nonetheless, in a scientific context, I am deeply convinced that we can all benefit from comparison; that we can all obtain a deeper understanding of our own ways of doing things through comparison; and that comparison can provoke in all of us interesting, horizon-broadening impulses and ideas to improve ourselves.

Provided that we are willing to critically reflect.

Provided that we allow ourselves to think that things can be done differently.

And provided that we remain open to being surprised and irritated, although we might end up questioning things that we did not even want to question.

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