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Activities for Families in Reception Centers

Asylum Seeker Parents' Experiences of Empowering Practice

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<p>The purpose of this Bachelor's Thesis was to collect feedback from asylum seeker parents about their everyday life and about the activities that they or their family members participated in. The main focus of the study was to find out whether the activities were meaningful for the families and whether the families had a chance to influence the services and activities offered to them in Helsinki.</p> <p>The study was carried out in cooperation with The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters whose project 'Asylum-seeking families with babies 2012-2015' aims to increase the wellbeing of families with babies and small children in reception centers. The findings of this study aim to help the Federation and other organizations which work with asylum seeker families to improve their services.</p> <p>This study is qualitative and the data was collected by carrying out individual and group interviews. In total 10 parents were interviewed. The collected data was analyzed thematically. Empowerment was used as the theoretical framework for this study. The interview questions were examining whether the services and activities for asylum seekers are organized in a way which supports their empowerment.</p> <p>The results of this study suggest that most parents had positive experiences with the activities they participated in. However, some parents perceived the resources and the amount of activities as insufficient, as well as their own capacities for leading an active life. Furthermore, most parents perceived that their opinion is rarely taken into consideration although many parents gave useful ideas for improvement in the activities as well as in the reception services generally.</p> <p>Based on this study it can be concluded that in order to improve services and to support empowerment, asylum seeker parents should be provided with more opportunities to influence services designed for them.</p>	
Keywords	asylum seeker families, refugee, reception center, activities, empowerment, participation

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<p>Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli kerätä palautetta turvapaikanhakijavanhemmilta koskien heidän jokapäiväistä elämäänsä vastaanottokeskuksissa sekä heidän perheilleen suunnattuja aktiviteetteja. Työ keskittyy tarkastelemaan aktiviteettien merkitystä perheille sekä perheiden mahdollisuuksia vaikuttaa heille tarjottuihin palveluihin ja toimintaan Helsingissä.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyö tehtiin yhteistyössä Ensi- ja turvakotien liiton kanssa, jonka projektin 'Vauva-perhe turvapaikanhakijana 2012-2015' tavoitteena on ollut vauva- ja pikkulapsiperheiden hyvinvoinnin lisääminen vastaanottokeskuksissa. Opinnäytetyön on tarkoitus auttaa Ensi- ja turvakotien liittoa sekä muita tahoja, jotka työskentelevät turvapaikanhakijoiden kanssa, parantamaan palvelujaan.</p> <p>Kvalitatiivisin menetelmin toteutetussa tiedonkeruussa käytettiin yksilö- sekä ryhmähaastatteluja. Yhteensä kymmentä vanhempaa haastateltiin. Kerätty aineisto analysoitiin temaattisesti. Opinnäytetyön teoreettisena viitekehyksenä käytettiin voimaantumisen käsitettä. Haastattelukysymykset pyrkivät tarkastelemaan, olivatko turvapaikanhakijoille suunnatut aktiviteetit ja palvelut järjestetty tavalla, joka tukee heidän voimaantumistaan.</p> <p>Aineistosta ilmenee, että suurimmalla osalla haastatelluista vanhemmista on ollut positiivisia kokemuksia aktiviteeteista, joihin he ovat osallistuneet. Osa vanhemmista koki resurssit, aktiviteettien määrän sekä omat voimavarat aktiivisuuteen puutteellisiksi. Lisäksi suurin osa vanhemmista koki, että heidän näkemyksensä huomioitiin harvoin, vaikka monet vanhemmat antoivatkin haastatteluissa hyödyllisiä kehitysehdotuksia koskien aktiviteetteja sekä vastaanoton palveluja yleisesti.</p> <p>Tämän opinnäytetyön pohjalta voi päätellä, että palvelujen kehittämiseksi ja voimaantumisen tukemiseksi turvapaikanhakijavanhemmille on tarjottava enemmän vaikuttamismahdollisuuksia koskien heille suunnattuja palveluja.</p>	
Avainsanat	turvapaikanhakijaperheet, pakolainen, vastaanottokeskus, toiminta, voimaantuminen, osallistuminen

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1 Introduction

Immigration policies, especially concerning refugees and asylum seekers, are currently the focus of extensive societal discussion in Finland and in the European Union. Facing economic challenges, Finnish policy makers are reconsidering the resources invested in asylum seekers, refugees and immigrant integration. At the same time, the number of asylum seekers and refugees is increasing significantly worldwide, including Finland. By October 2015 the amount of asylum seekers in Finland was five times more than altogether last year. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015a)

The asylum seekers are usually accommodated in reception centers. In addition to the services provided by the reception centers, there are also non-governmental organizations (NGO) that are interested in offering services for asylum seekers. NGOs may offer their services inside or outside of the reception centers, aiming to enhance asylum seekers' wellbeing during a challenging time in their lives.

In our view asylum seeker families deserve special attention. The parents and the children have to adapt to a completely new environment. At the same time, waiting for a decision on permission to reside is stressful, as well as the circumstances one faces at a reception center. For parents, these factors can make taking care of a child's and their own wellbeing challenging. Therefore the role of organizations that carry out activities with asylum seeker families is very important. The activities can for example support the families in learning about life in Finland, provide a chance for peer support, or simply help by entertaining the children for a while.

In Finland, most individual rights are based on nationality or residence permit. Therefore asylum seekers have very restricted opportunities to influence their living conditions and the services provided for them. As a result of their legal situation, the efforts made by others to support them have a great significance. We believe it is valuable to provide opportunities for asylum seekers to express their views about the services that are designated for them. Their feedback can help in improving the quality of the services and in making them more effective, which is important during this economically challenging time. In addition, the ability to influence provides possibilities for empowerment.

This thesis was done in cooperation with a project of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters called *Asylum seeker families with babies 2012-2015*, which arranges activities for families who seek asylum. The project workers were interested in cooperating with us and wanted to discover the service experiences and needs of families with children in reception centers. The initial purpose of the cooperation was to collect feedback from the families who had participated in the activities that were provided by the project. However, the task turned out impossible because most of the families had already left the reception centers and it would have been difficult to reach them. Instead, we collected information from families who were staying in the reception centers of Helsinki at the time and asked questions regarding all the activities they had come across during their stay. The purpose was to provide the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters as well as other organizations with information that could help them to develop their services with asylum seekers. This is a qualitative study, and the data was collected by interviewing 10 asylum seeker parents in the reception centers of Helsinki. The interview questions were based on the theoretical concept of empowerment. Alongside with the experiences with the activities, we also examined whether the families had taken initiative to organize some own activities in the reception centers in order to improve the quality of their lives.

2 Context of the Study

This chapter includes some essential information concerning the context in which this study was made. First the process of seeking asylum in Finland, the legislation that guides it, and some recent statistics of asylum seekers are presented. Then asylum seekers' living circumstances and services in reception centers are described, especially from the viewpoint of families. Finally, the working life partner organization's work is introduced.

2.1 Applying for asylum in Finland

The right for asylum in Finland is determined by the Aliens Act which uses rather straight adaptation of the definition of refugee from the 1951 Geneva Convention. The act has also been modified according to European standards mostly as a result of following the Qualification Directive. (Nykänen, et al., 2011, p. 87.)

In Finland someone can apply for asylum if he/she has a well-grounded reason to fear that in his/her home country he/she would be persecuted on the basis of his/her political views, origin, religion, nationality or belonging to a social group. This application must be done in the territory of Finland and it has to be done in person as soon as possible after entering the country. The asylum has to be applied for at the border control authorities or the police. An additional condition is that the person applying cannot ask his/her country for protection due to his/her fear. (Aliens Act, 2004, s.87.)

After an application for asylum is handed in, the border control authorities, the police, the Finnish Immigration Service or the reception center are obligated to inform asylum seekers about their rights and responsibilities. They also have to give information about the procedure of asylum seeking in Finland. This has to be done in the native language of the person who seeks for asylum or in another language that he/she understands. (Aliens Act, 2004, s.95.)

Asylum seekers may arrange accommodation for themselves, or they can be offered a place in a reception center (Finnish Immigration Service, 2012). Some may find accommodation through relatives or other private persons who wish to take an asylum seeker to stay with them. Also asylum seekers who are staying in private accommodation need to be registered in a reception center. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015b.) Later on in the process of applying for asylum the applicant is interviewed by The Finnish Immigration Service to find out the details of the persecution or the violation of rights and the threats connected to them that the applicant experienced in the country he/she left to seek protection. (Aliens Act, s. 97.)

The applicant may be granted an asylum or a residence permit based on subsidiary or humanitarian protection or "other reason". Those who receive a residence permit based on subsidiary or humanitarian protection are then placed to a Finnish municipality and offered housing. The applicant may also receive a negative decision or be denied processing the application, which leads to removal from Finland. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2012.) An asylum seeker has a right to appeal to a decision within 30 days from the notification (Pakolaisneuvontary, 2010).

According to Finnish Immigration Service's statistics, 3651 people came to Finland as asylum seekers in 2014. Most of them came from Iraq, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Somalia and Nigeria. The number of asylum seekers in Finland has slightly decreased

after its peak of almost 6000 applicants in 2009, but it has been rising again during the past few years. In 2015 there is an exponential rise of refugees and by the end of September 2015 there are already 17 851 asylum seekers. Currently most asylum seekers coming to Finland are from Iraq, Somalia, Albania, Afghanistan and Syria. (Finnish Immigration service, 2015a.) It has been estimated that the total amount for 2015 will continue to increase significantly. Finland has usually taken in much fewer asylum seekers than other Nordic countries, except for Iceland which practically takes in a handful of applicants. For instance in 2013, Finland received approximately 3000 asylum seekers, whereas Denmark received 5000, Norway 12 000 and Sweden 54000. (Haagensen, 2014, p. 49.)

It is noted also in the legislation that asylum seeker families with children deserve special attention. Section 6 of the Aliens Act (2004) emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration the best interest of a child in making any decision concerning them, especially if it may influence the conditions of the child's health and development. It also stresses that in cases where children are involved the processing should be done fast.

It is important to note though that the Asylum Procedures Directive, which directs the EU member countries towards common standards for asylum seekers, has been considered to be too vague. It has been argued that it gives too much freedom for the countries in establishing their own rules disregarding the commonly agreed norms. To improve the situation, a new Directive has been made which became applicable from 21 July 2015. Amongst other changes, the new Directive aims to make the asylum application rules clearer and the processing of applications faster. (European Commission, 2015.)

In 2014 the average waiting time for a decision of asylum was 170 days, which is approximately half a year (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2015c). The waiting time naturally extends if one appeals to the first decision. In 2014 about 3000 asylum seekers in Finland were customers of reception centers, and more than 2200 were also accommodated there (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2015d).

2.2 Reception centers and families

In Helsinki there are two reception centers that accommodate asylum seekers: Metsälä and Helsinki. Helsinki reception center is divided into two units: Kaarlenkatu and Puna-

vuori, and they provide altogether 400 places of accommodation. Metsälä reception center offers 46 places, and it is a transit center, which means that the asylum seekers who arrive there are to be soon transferred to another reception center elsewhere in Finland. Also, in Metsälä reception center there are 40 places in detention center which is a closed unit for asylum seekers who are waiting to be deported from the country. (City of Helsinki, 2015.) To respond to the rapid increase of refugees coming to Finland, new reception centers for refugees have been opened by public, third and private sectors. By October 2015 Metsälä reception center has opened two new units, one in Koskela and one in Laajasalo. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015e.) However, the data collection of this thesis was carried out in the April-May 2015, which was before the opening of the new centers.

Reception centers offer basic services which are determined by the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers. In addition to accommodation and fulfillment of basic needs, the reception includes necessary social and health care services, social assistance and interpretation services for meetings with authorities. According to the available resources, work and study activities can be also organized at the centers. It has been stated in the law that accommodation has to be arranged in a way that families have the possibility to live in the same place. Reception centers may charge a fee for their services, which however cannot be profitable. The centers have to lower the fee or remove it entirely if it causes a threat to an individual's or a family's ability to cope financially. (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers, 1999, ch. 4.)

Asylum seekers cannot choose the reception center in which they will be accommodated. If possible, families are given a private room. Some reception centers offer meals, whereas in others asylum seekers cook for themselves. Depending on one's financial and family situation, and whether they are offered meals at reception center, adults may receive 75-310 Euros and children 59-198 Euros of financial assistance per month. Adult asylum seekers have a right to emergency health care and necessary treatment for illness, whereas children are entitled to the same level of health care than Finnish residents. The work and study activities that are possibly organized in reception centers could be such as cleaning, organizing groups, studying Finnish or Swedish, or learning about the local culture. (Pakolaisneuvonta ry, 2013.)

Children between the age of seven and sixteen have the right to go to public school. Before attending regular classes, asylum seeker children usually participate in classes where their Finnish or Swedish language skills are improved. Asylum seeker pupils are provided with textbooks free of charge like other pupils in Finland. (Pakolaisneuvonta ry, 2013.)

Asylum seekers who have an identity certificate are allowed to work after staying in Finland for three months. Without an identity certificate, one has to wait six months to be given a permission to work. An asylum seeker is allowed to move freely, to study and to have hobbies outside the reception center. He/she is free to apply to vocational institutions and universities. Adult education centers are options as well. Asylum seekers are not entitled to student benefits. (Refugee Advice Center, n.d.)

In 2014, the Finnish Immigration Service conducted a customer satisfaction research in 18 reception centers. Stated in the summary of the research, the 600 asylum seeker respondents generally perceived reception centers as safe and the workers as trustworthy and helpful. Moreover, the asylum seekers viewed the amount of activities offered in reception centers reasonable, but not satisfactory regarding their needs. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2014.)

The Act on *the Reception of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of temporary protection* give an outlook on the everyday circumstances in which asylum seekers live in Finland, especially in reception centers. However, there is significant variation in the circumstances between different reception centers due to available resources for organizing activities: personnel, premises, amount of clients, and location, among other things. Fortunately there are third sector organizations which aim to enhance asylum seekers' well-being, and these organizations' work are an important addition to the support which is given by the reception centers. The organizations may provide the support to asylum seekers in various ways, for example by arranging activities or events such as discussion groups, day trips or other sort of group activities. The activities may be open for all clients of reception centers, or designated to a certain group, for example to women, men, children or families.

2.3 The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters

The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters (Ensi- ja turvakotien liitto) is the labour market collaborator for this thesis. As a summary, the Federation is a Finnish national NGO which is focused on child protection. Founded in 1945 and located in Pasila, Helsinki, the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters is a roof organization for its 29 member organizations, which maintain 10 mother and child homes, 6 mother and child homes that are focused on substance abuse, and 12 shelters all over Finland. The main objectives of the Federation are to help children and families in difficult or unsafe life situations and to prevent family violence. The Federation receives funding from the Slot Machine Association (RAY) and Children's Day Foundation, and raises some of its funds itself. The Federation has established a number of services, methods and projects to work with mothers, fathers and children. (The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, n.d.)

One of the Federation's current projects is *Asylum-seeking families with babies 2012-2015* which aims to increase wellbeing of families with babies and small children in reception centers. The project seeks to develop individual and group methods and to root family work in reception centers. The project has organized plenty of family get-togethers: family cafés, trips, groups, workshops and parties, as well as individual meetings with clients. There are two workers in the project and in addition a large number of volunteers and students are involved. (The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, n.d.)

The purposes of the project are strengthening interaction between children and parents, cheering up, giving tools for parenting, offering peer support and knowledge regarding family issues in Finland, and enhancing participation and empowerment. The project workers also arrange training and give out lectures for the employees of reception centers, and for the workers of mother and child homes and shelters. Furthermore, the project receives donations and arranges their distribution to the families. (The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, n.d.)

At its last year of funding in 2015, the project focuses on rooting their practice and has organized only a few trips, individual meetings and a family camp. The project has also arranged a circus workshop and an art club to be organized by third parties, such as volunteers, in the reception centers of Helsinki continuously this year. *Asylum-seeking families with babies* –project is applying for further funding.

The workers of the project brought up most of the questions which are the focus of this study. It was discussed that it would be most beneficial to gain information about asylum seeker parents' needs and experiences regarding services and activities, an exploration of children's views as well, and whether the clients generally perceive that they may influence the services they are provided. It was planned that the findings of this study will be applied to designing future activities.

3 Theoretical framework

Empowerment was chosen as the theoretical background of this study because it provided a framework to examine the main aspects that the Federation was interested about. The Federation was interested to attain information both about the activities organized for families in the reception centers, as well as about the possibilities that these families are provided with to influence the services made for them. Empowerment is a broad theoretical concept which is used in various contexts, and in which the agency of people is viewed as the central component of their wellbeing. Asylum seekers live in an environment in which their agency is restricted, therefore it is important to examine their views on the activities, and whether they found these activities empowering. In the following chapter some of the definitions and discussions of empowerment are presented. In order to get a deeper understanding of empowerment, the concepts of power and participation are also examined, as they are closely related to empowerment. Having a basic understanding of power is needed to understand why empowering practice is important, whereas participation is considered as one of the most common ways to reach empowerment.

3.1 The concept of empowerment

The origins of the word 'power' come from the Latin verb 'potere' which means 'to be able to'. So having power can be seen as having potential or being able to reach one's goals. (Thompson, 2004, p.14.) One reason why the concept of empowerment has been used in a variety of ways is that power itself is a complex term and it can be examined in various ways. Authors analyzing the concept (Thompson, 2007; Adams, 2008; Luttrell, et al., 2009), instead of giving one clear definition, usually refer to a variety of dimensions and levels of power. Adams (2008, p.58) argues that though the theories of power may

differ, there is a general view amongst authors in social sciences that power is not shared equally and in an ideal case it would be shared more equally.

According to Adams (2008, p.4), it has not been possible to form a definition of empowerment that would suit all professionals. It is argued that the concept of empowerment would be best defined by vulnerable and excluded service users themselves, who have experienced empowerment, and the definition should be constantly updated by both professionals and service users. However, after examining various authors' views on empowerment, Adams would define empowerment as:

[...] the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. (Adams, 2008, p. 17)

Räsänen (2006, p.102) has a similar view on empowerment. He defines empowerment as a personal, social and spiritual process that includes an internal feeling of power in consciously taking control of one's own development and goal-setting, and a belief in achieving those. He also writes that the experience of empowerment is created in participation in everyday surroundings.

There are different domains of empowerment that are equally important. Instead of seeing them separately, Adams argues that they are all connected and interact with each other. The five domains of empowerment are: self and individual, group, organization, political system and community. Empowerment can take place in any of these domains and it can happen in more than one domain at the same time. (Adams, 2008 p.75.)

Adams (2008, p.29) explains that participation and empowerment are connecting concepts. In his view a person can participate because he/she is empowered or he/she can become empowered by participating. Also Räsänen (2006, p.81) tells that the most important programs that have enhanced empowerment have increased the participation of the people involved, for example by involving them in planning and organizing action. To clarify the exact meaning of participation, Adams (2008, pp.30-31) distinguishes between the concepts of involvement and participation highlighting that though the two concepts are similar, they do not mean the same thing. Involvement can be used to simply describe that a person in some way takes part in a process. The person can be involved either actively or passively. Participation on the other hand only refers to the active dimension of involvement, where people are able to use their power and make decisions.

Räsänen (2006, p.11) would start a process of empowerment by asking two major questions: 'How do I want to live my life? What resources do I need?' He claims that empowerment requires two things: awakening to the present reality, and "valtaistaminen". "Valtaistaminen" refers to other people giving power or social support to individuals or communities to increase their empowerment and resources. (2006, pp.77-80) Empowerment cannot be given directly to anybody as it needs to arise from people themselves, but safe and permissive environments are positively influential. (2006, p.99)

Empowerment is vital in social work, but it is also problematic. It may enable discriminated groups of people to challenge the injustice they are facing, but it may also be used by professionals merely as a framework without an inclusion of any real change. Professionals work under rules and legislations of their profession, and may not be able to add to service users' power (Adams 2008, pp.5;61). In addition, as Parsloe (1996, cited in Adams, 2008, p.5) writes, the primary interest of professionals working with vulnerable people may have to be protecting them rather than empowering them.

3.2 Empowerment and asylum seekers

Amongst the writings discussing empowering practice, there are several ones that focus especially on the ways how asylum seekers' empowerment can be supported. Between 2004 and 2007 national organizations in France, Hungary and the United Kingdom formed development partnerships in their countries and then came together to work trans-nationally under the European Social Fund Community Initiative program (EQUAL). The focus of this cooperation was to discuss and ideate good practice that increases asylum seekers' social and vocational integration. The purpose was to increase both asylum seekers' and the organizations' empowerment in the nations. The organizations' learning was summarized into a publication, *Empowering Asylum Seekers to Integrate in Europe*, which summed up language training, employment and capacity building as key factors in reaching asylum seekers' empowerment. It was pointed out in the publication that there are at least two approaches to viewing empowerment. According to the first approach, empowerment is an outcome where an individual's capacities, skills and confidence are improved. The second approach views empowerment as a process in which the participants are involved in organizing action in their current context, for example designing and managing activities in a project. This approach has the benefit

of modifying the service at hand to be more client-oriented and accessible. (Cimade, 2007, p.22)

In the book *Empowering Asylum Seekers: Developing Good Practice*, Enoranta writes that asylum seekers are in a place of uncertainty where they lack access to major decisions taken upon their future. Understandably, this can cultivate passivity and depression. Some asylum seekers need help remaining in an active role in their life, gaining skills and coming together with each other and the surrounding society. Empowerment can occur even though all needs in one's life would not be fulfilled. It can be assumed that asylum seekers have faced difficulties and gained life experience from them, and this is the starting point for building new skills. Enoranta writes also that the experience of using existing skills and developing new ones can raise self-confidence, support becoming active and can lead to empowerment. (2007, pp. 8-9.) Outsiders can act as facilitators to asylum seekers' empowerment process by helping them to define their life situation, goals and aspirations (Enoranta, 2007, p.47).

Mervi Kaukko also examines how empowering practice can be established with asylum seekers. As her PhD, Kaukko conducted a participatory action research (PAR) regarding minor unaccompanied asylum seeker girls' participation and empowerment. The purpose of the study was to develop activities from the participants' viewpoint in the reception centers of under-aged that were involved in the research. The results showed that participation and empowerment could be promoted in the reception centers by letting and encouraging the children to participate in planning activities and to make choices regarding their daily lives. The girls proposed for instance cooking or baking as meaningful activities, as they could make use of their skills in them. (Kaukko, 2013, pp. 201;215)

Kaukko examined the empowerment of asylum seekers with Kabeer's theory of first and second order choices. Kabeer (2001, p.19) refers to power as an ability to choose, and empowerment as a process of coming from a place of not being able to choose to be able to. She talks about first order and second order choices, which are differentiated by their significance. First order choices are such as choosing where to live or work and who to have relationships with. Second order choices focus on the quality of one's life outside first-order choices. As Kaukko explains it, most first order choices are out of reach for people living in reception centers, so the second order choices, which could be

described as affecting the current everyday circumstances, become more important. (Kaukko, 2013, p.209.)

In other words, asylum seekers' unusual life circumstances increases the significance of everyday activities for them. It can be concluded, that it is desirable to reflect the activities' potential to increase the participants' ability to make choices and to influence. Such practice can facilitate the empowerment of the participants, and improve the effectiveness and quality of the activity or service.

4 Implementation of the Study

In this chapter the process of conducting the study is described, and the different research methods which were used are presented. The data was collected by semi-structured individual and group interviews, and analyzed with thematic analysis. It is described how ethical principles were taken into consideration throughout the implementation of study, and how the data collection and data analysis succeeded.

4.1 Qualitative research method

This study is of qualitative nature. Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative research method in the following way:

'Qualitative research is a multimethod focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.' (1998, p.3)

Qualitative method was most suitable for the purposes of this study, because it enabled the exploration of the subjective experiences and views of the parents who were seeking asylum. The goal was to attain a deeper understanding of their experiences of empowerment in the reception center they were staying at. It was examined how empowerment was present in their everyday life, what support they received in taking own initiative, and how empowering the organized activities were at the center. This is how the research question was phrased:

How asylum seeker families' empowerment is supported in the reception centers of Helsinki?

4.2 Individual and group interviews

Data was collected in this study by both individual and group interviews. In Marshall's and Rossman's (2006, pp. 101-102) view, together with observation, interviews can provide a way for the researchers to find out the meaning that daily activities have for people. One of the advantages of using interviews is that it is possible to ask for clarifications or to use follow-ups. Furthermore, using interviews enables the researcher to gather a large amount of data quickly. By interviewing groups more diverse data can be collected though this may result in collecting less detailed information.

It was challenging to find enough participants for the interviews who speak fluently a common language with us, so we needed to use interpreters in some of the interviews. Because of this we decided to carry out group interviews, as it is a more cost-effective method when using interpreters. We also thought that this method could encourage the participants to discuss more openly. In the end we arranged three group interviews of two to three participants. In addition, we interviewed two participants individually because we were unable to reach enough participants to make more group interviews.

Fontana and Frey (1998, pp.53-55) claim that group interview is not to replace individual interview, but it may provide a view to a research problem that could not be otherwise attained. Group interview has the benefits of being less expensive, producing a lot of data, and being stimulating and encouraging to the participants beyond individual level. However, as downsides, group dynamics may negatively affect the expression of an individual, and it may be impossible to discuss sensitive topics in a group situation. Also, group interviewing requires greater interviewing skills from the researcher: balancing the level of activity among the participants in a way that nobody would dominate the discussion entirely or be left outside.

4.3 Semi-structured questions

As we were preparing to interview people from different cultures and who speak different languages, we decided to use semi-structured interviews. This method gave us the possibility to rephrase or explain questions if they were not understood by the interviewees.

At the same time it also helped us to stay focused on our research question, which would have been more difficult in an unstructured interview.

In semi-structured interviews, the interviewers have some predetermined questions and topics that they want to cover, but they also have a degree of freedom to alter the process of the interview. The interviewers can decide to focus more on certain topics, to change the phrasing or the order of the questions, or to spend more time discussing one question than another. Semi-structured interviews can differ in their style depending on how much freedom the interviewers have. This is the reason why the level of freedom should always be clarified in the research document. (Robson: 2011, p. 285.)

Questions are typically categorized in two main types: open and closed. Open questions are such that they cannot be answered with a simple yes/no answer, and consequently they encourage more subjective, personal and informative answers. Typical open questions start with words like 'how', 'what' or 'why'. Closed questions instead anticipate yes/no answers and they are often used to clarify specific issues. (Allen and Langford, 2008, pp.112-115.)

The questions were in a numbered order, and both open and closed questions were used. Most of the closed questions were followed by a clarifying question in which the respondent was asked to explain their views. Sometimes in the interviews the order of the questions or their wording were changed because the participants had already started to discuss the topics we were prepared to bring up. Also, sometimes additional questions were asked in order to create a better understanding of what the respondent was talking about.

Interviewing asylum seekers can bring up sensitive topics and it can be challenging to word the questions in a way that people from different cultures understand them as well. For these reasons we consulted our supervising teacher about the questions and we also carried out a test interview. The test interview was carried out with a woman who used to stay with her family in Metsälä reception center. A representative of the working life partner also attended the test interview. After the test interview both the representative and the interviewee were asked for feedback and suggestions for development, and consequently one question was added to the original questions.

4.4 Carrying out the interviews

We arranged altogether six interviews. In the beginning of the interviews we offered drinks to the participants. Allen and Langford suggest that offering refreshments and eliminating distractions are useful ways to create an environment that is welcoming and encouraging to communication. (2008, p.101) The interviews took place in the reception centers in rooms which were reserved only for the interviews, which provided us privacy.

The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to one hour. The length depended on how many interviewees were present and whether an interpreter was used. Three of the interviews were carried out with the help of an interpreter, and in the other three interviews English was used as the language of communication.

In the group interviews all of the participants were encouraged to answer all of the questions. In some of the group interviews some of the participants were less active than others, whereas in some situations the participants were supporting each other's answers. There were occasions when the participants engaged in a discussion about the topic at hand resulting in more detailed information.

4.5 Respondents

We reached and interviewed nine asylum seeker parents. Six of them were staying at Kaarlenkatu reception center, and three in Punavuori reception center. Unfortunately we did not manage to reach respondents from Metsälä reception center. Because of this we decided to use the data gained from the test interview for which we asked the permission of the test interviewee. The test interviewee gave us written permission to use her answers.

The ten interview respondents represented a variety of nationalities: Somalia, Nigeria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Iraq. Some of them were couples with children and some were single parents. There were four fathers and six mothers. Not every time both parents participated in the interview even if both of them were staying at the reception center. All the parents that were interviewed had one or two children, and altogether thirteen children were involved. The ages of the children varied between less than a year and seventeen.

It varied greatly how long had the families stayed in the reception centers at the time of the interviews. One family had only been nine days in Finland. The other families had been in the reception center 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks, 7 weeks, 3 months and 6 and a half months. Most of the families had come straight to the reception center when arriving to Finland. The test interviewee had stayed in reception center for one year and 2 months.

Interview	Family members	Nationality	Time in reception center
Test interview	Both parents and two children	Iraq	1 year and 2 months
Interview 1	Mother and two children	Somalia	3 months
Interview 1	Mother and one child	Somalia	3 months
Interview 2	Mother and one child	Somalia	9 days
Interview 3	Both parents and two children	Nigeria	6 months and 2 weeks
Interview 4	Both parents and one child	Ukraine	3 weeks
Interview 4	Father and two children	Afghanistan	4 weeks
Interview 5	Both parents and two children	Azerbaijan	2 weeks

Table 1. Information about respondents.

4.6 Thematic analysis

The gathered data was analysed thematically. In Robson's (2011) view thematic analysis is ideal for researchers with little or no experience as it is easy to apply, it can be used in most qualitative researches and the results are easy to understand even for people who are not experts in the topic. Robson's guideline was followed throughout the process of analysis.

After the interviews took place, the audio recordings were transcribed. The recordings were deleted after transcribing them to make sure that no outsiders could have access to them. The transcriptions together added up to 49 pages of data. First the transcribed data was read through several times to get familiar with it. This was followed by the coding of the text.

Codes were given to each part of the text which described what was discussed by the interviewee, such as: "Positive opinion about organized activities". Similar topics in each interview were marked with the same code to help identifying occurring themes in the answers. Then these codes were grouped into bigger categories to form themes which were then examined and reorganized to computer files. We made sure that all the codes were included in the themes that were created. Finally, we presented the findings and made conclusions regarding our research question.

4.7 Ethical considerations

In order to make interviews in reception centers, it was necessary to acquire a research permit from the city of Helsinki. The goal of our study, the ethical aspects of the data collection and the measures that we were going to take in order to protect the interviewees were clarified in the research permit application. The interview questions, a letter of consent and an information sheet that was used for explaining the conditions of the study to the participants were attached to the application. The city of Helsinki also required that the interpreters who worked with us signed a confidentiality agreement. It took approximately one month to receive the research permit.

The information sheet described the purpose of the study. It was explained in the sheet that participation in the interviews was completely voluntary, meaning that one could withdraw at any time, deny answering questions or deny the use of his/her answers. It was also explained that the interviews were recorded, that the recordings were accessible only to us and were to be deleted after data analysis. The information sheet contained our contact information in case the participants would have had question, comments or concerns later on.

As we did not have regular contact with the asylum seekers before the interviews, the employees of the reception centers helped to find participants. The participants were given the information sheet some days ahead the interviews in order to explain what they

were about. This way the participants could also consider in advance whether they wanted to participate in the interviews. In addition, we went through the content of the information sheet in the beginning of the interviews, and we gave out an extra copy to the participants if it was needed.

Informed consent was obtained from the participants by collecting their signatures. However, their names or any other personal information were not collected in order to protect their anonymity. At this point we also stressed the voluntary nature of the interviews and made sure they understood what had been said.

Another important ethical aspect was to not do any harm during the interviews. Special attention was paid when making the questions to avoid sensitive topics that could emotionally disturb the participants. The participants did not seem to be disturbed by any of the questions, and they did not decide to refuse answering any of the questions. At the end of the interviews the participants were provided a chance to share their thoughts and questions. In the end, some of the participants even thanked for the opportunity to speak about their current situation.

5 Results/findings

Six larger themes emerged from the data which was collected in the interviews. The first theme includes an overview of the everyday life of the respondents and of the activities they had taken part in. The second theme deals with the respondents' opinion about the activities which were organized by third parties, whereas the third theme gathers the respondents' suggestions for improving the activities. Next, in the fourth theme, the respondents' experiences of influencing the activities is examined, which is followed by a summary of the factors that influence the respondents' ability to lead an active life in the reception center. Finally, in the sixth theme some other thoughts from the respondents are gathered.

5.1 Activities

Before starting to examine how empowerment was present in the interview families' life, we needed to ask questions about how they spent their days at the reception center. The answers gave us valuable information because there was not one general schedule that

all the families followed, so they spent their time in different ways. Their daily activities could be categorized in three themes: routines, self-initiated activities and organized activities.

5.1.1 Routines

One of the themes that arose from the participants' description of their everyday life was routines. By routines we refer to regular daily activities, such as answering to physical, social or spiritual needs. These included taking care of the children, going to eat at the reception center and hanging around in their room or in the common areas. A Somali mother described her average day as follows:

Well my days are really simple, I take time with my daughter, I change her diaper, play with her and then we go to eat, I pray because I'm Muslim, that's about it. Sometimes I talk to other people.

Sometimes the routines included attending appointments or shopping groceries or supplies for children. Generally the families gave an impression that their days did not consist of much. When asked to describe an average day, one father answered that his family spends it mostly in bed.

5.1.2 Self-initiated activities

Outside everyday routines, many families took initiative to keep themselves busy and do something which was meaningful to them. We call this self-initiated activity to separate it from the activities that were organized for the families by third parties. For instance, many families mentioned going to the park or walking around the city in order to familiarize with their new surroundings. Some used their free time to improve their language skills in Finnish and English, aiming to enhance socializing and integration. All reception centers in Helsinki have some kind of playrooms or areas for children, and some families had taken those into use. A few families mentioned doing sports like running or playing basketball at a nearby school yard. One of the respondents told about a self-organized regular meeting with others to play ball games in a football field. Most of the time the families mentioned doing these activities alone as a family, but they also described occasions when they came together with other families to do something, for example to use the playroom.

5.1.3 Organized activities

The families listed a variety of activities that were organized especially for the children, and of which the families were aware of. These activities included music or dance groups, exercise, handicrafts, drawing, and playing with the children generally. According to the families' description these activities were organized once or twice a week. The parents were allowed to participate in activities designated for children, and usually they also participated three times a week in a Finnish language course that was organized by the reception center. The two children of one father went to school on weekdays, and two children from another family were given the permission to start school in the following August. No children attended daycare. Some families also mentioned activities that were organized for the family as a whole, such as a "family café" and a family camp. Apart from one, all of the families said they participated in the organized activities when they had the chance.

[...] there are quite some activities they organize for families especially. Uhm... On Tuesdays we go for the family café. That's Annankatu. Then in the evening some group come to play with the kids, like they have activities for the kids in the evening. On Wednesdays we used to have one other family stuff(?)... That one said they couldn't...again so that one was cancelled so I guess... In the evening on Wednesdays they come for the kids to as well.

5.2 The respondents' opinion about the organized activities

Most of the families found the organized activities useful, and according to the parents' view their children had enjoyed the activities as well. They described the activities as useful because they provided the children something to spend their energy on. By participating the children could learn new things and step outside their everyday life. One father described how his children were always enthusiastic to participate in activities when there was an opportunity. Two of the families also mentioned that the activities helped their children to learn Finnish language.

First of all, it's something to occupy your free time and it helps the parents as well. Then it's a good place for children to be in company, because it is always very stressful to be on your own, alone with your own thoughts. And then it's mostly in Finnish so children who usually learn fast they learn quite naturally, they learn naturally. And then it's something to spend your energy.

The family with children attending school were in a somewhat different position. The father of the family described the children as very satisfied:

My son loves the school here. The school that he goes to now, and my daughter has been enjoying her school as well. They both love it here.

Two of the parents were not completely satisfied with the activities, but they thought that the activities were anyway better than having nothing to do. For instance, one father thought that the activities were not significant for the development of his children, but the children enjoyed them nevertheless. One mother did not find value in some of the activities that she participated in with her child. She explained that the activities were not suitable for her child because he needed more physical activities, preferably outside the reception centre:

It would be much better if they had outdoors activities for us maybe once a week or something but the main thing is when he is two he is full of energy and he should sit two- three hours or five hours and draw something that's not like possible.

5.3 Suggestions to improve organized activities

Most families thought there should be more activities. In all of the interviews the participants gave useful suggestions for new activities or for improvement in current activities. One mother said she hoped the children could go to day care, and she also suggested that there would be an everyday program for children at the reception centre.

[...] from morning to evening we don't have any programs that we could follow so it's like being animals locked inside so that's something that could be changed. [...] A lady who could come in the mornings and take the kids and try to have program for them during the day, that would be much better than just, you know, waking up, eating, going back to sleep.

Many parents wished for educational program and activities that would support integration for both parents and children. They suggested activities for learning Finnish language and culture.

I would go from the things that support me and my daughter that could influence our lives. For example the Finnish culture or the learning system and things like that that could support our life.

In addition, some of them thought that it would be beneficial if the activities included more guidance regarding life in Helsinki. One mother wished guidance on how to communicate with the locals, whilst another one would have wanted more practical information on getting around the city and on cheap possibilities to buy groceries:

Yeah, we need more activities like, to speak about Helsinki and how we can umh enjoy in this life in Helsinki and how we can go to park or how we can go to museum and this is activity for families... Because we need to know more about Helsinki. [...] In the first of, in the first week I live in Metsälä, I, I buy too much things from S shop, S market, because I didn't know about Lidl and we finished 300 € just for food and we doesn't know where is some shops less money. [...] This is so bad, because you stay all the month without, without anything, without money.

Three of the families were hoping for more programs organized outside, whereas a couple of parents preferred inside activities because of the cold weather. Four families said that more possibilities for physical activities and sports would improve their children's wellbeing. A father described his wishes for his overweight son:

And if he could go to the pool, and if he could go to the fitness centre, it would really boost his health. [...]

5.4 Influencing the organized activities

As it was discussed previously in this paper, it is important to provide service users with a possibility to make decisions in everyday matters and in organizing activities alike. The workers can offer possibilities for the clients to express their views and the clients can take initiative as well in trying to influence the services offered for them. According to what was discussed in the interviews, the asylum seekers' views were seldom taken into consideration. Some respondents talked positively about the workers of the reception center, saying that they were always very supportive and helpful. However, only one of the group interview respondents told that their opinion was asked regarding the activities that were carried out at the center. The rest of the participants shared the view that nobody asked their opinion about for instance what kind of activities would be suitable for them, nor were they asked whether they liked the activities or not.

Nobody ask us like 'what would you like to do?' or after the activities just done if we were happy with it or if we would like to do it differently. They just come, they do what they have to do and then they leave and that's it.

The one participant who had had an experience of workers asking his opinion on the activities unfortunately could not tell whether his views were taken into consideration. This was the case because the workers told that they could change the activities for the next time but the participant was not able to participate in the following activity.

Well, they do ask the beginning, for example what we would like to have but then they say that what we have right now is that. So you can try that, you can see if your child likes it and then if you have other suggestions then next time we will arrange something different, but it will be a different activity all together...the thing is that we have things to go to. For example the doctor, legal aid and such. So the next time we'll come is actually not the next time something happens. It might have been already a few times that we have missed. So we don't really know.

Some participants had an opinion that they should not ask for anything more because they already receive more support than they could hope for. It resulted in a reduced amount of consideration for improving the circumstances, or the suggestions were not expressed.

...we are so grateful for everything that we get here that it is really unthinkable that we could ask for more, that we can demand more. All we think is: thanks.

5.5 Being active at the reception centre

At the reception centre, the residents can participate in activities that are organized by the reception centre's workers or by other organizations. In addition, to some extent, they can also organize programs by themselves. This subchapter examines what factors were supporting or restricting the interviewees in participating in organized activities or arranging activities by their own initiative at the reception centres.

5.5.1 Resources

Families staying at the reception centers had a chance to use some of the facilities and the surrounding areas of the reception center. Interviewees who had small children told that they usually took them to the playroom located at the center. Some of them mentioned going to the close by parks to play but they also thought that in the winter time it was too cold for the children to play there. In addition, some parents mentioned that the play areas were not large enough for the children to play.

I think this is too small space for small kids to play and what they have to play with is like you see today, so it's not much.

So whilst the premises of the reception center offered some place for playing inside, in the winter period the parents seemed to struggle in finding a way for their kids to have a big enough playing area.

We can't really go outside to the park because the time we came it's that cold. So it's really cold and we can't really utilize the outside park and everything.

In addition to the lack of space for small children, one father brought up a need for more computers. In his view, getting a chance to use computers is nowadays very important for the children:

Right now everything is about computers and children really need to be part of that network to exchange messages and such and here there are only just a couple of computers in use and that's way too few for them.

The money that the asylum seekers receive was often referred to as a too little amount for the needs of the families. After purchasing all basic necessities for the family, there was usually a little or no money left for leisure time costs, for example transportation tickets or entrance fees. A father who wanted his child to participate in sport events described the problem as follows:

Well, I'd like him to going to sports, but I cannot pay for that and so he stays at home and he plays there. You know he moves very little. [...] If our country was alright, if I could work, I could invest into my childrens' health but now I cannot really do anything. I have to sit and wait. And that's the problem.

5.5.2 Receiving information about activities

The level of received information about activities, and received support for staying active in Helsinki varied greatly amongst the respondents of the interviews. Three participants told that they were very satisfied with the assistance they received from the workers at the reception.

We receive such information at the reception every day. If there is anything then we are constantly informed of attractions, of events that have free entrance and that when there are parties for people like us, for refugees, for people living at reception centres [...]

Other respondents did not seem to be so well informed about organized activities but they told that they received information about places that they can go to if they wanted to do something:

When I want to go out or something like that, I just ask the reception: Do you have place for children, like park or something like that? I want to go out. They told me how I go and they give me maps. And they told me this is good place for children if you want to play with them or if you want to go like walk [...]

There were also respondents who were less satisfied with the way the center's activities were organized or informed about. For example, two mothers explained that in the first two months that they were staying at the center, there were no activities organized at all:

In the beginning we didn't have anything we just ate and went back to the room, ate and went back to the room... then we started now like 3-2 weeks ago or a month ago we started having these activities...

As an outsider it is hard to judge whether there were no activities at all or there were activities but the mothers did not receive information about them. In any case, their experience implies that the situation should be improved either by organizing more activities or by making sure that information concerning activities reaches all eligible participants at the center.

Finally, one respondent told that she had never thought of asking information about organized activities. The reason behind this was that in the country where she came from she was not used to organized activities.

I never ask about activities because I never have these activities in my country. It's really complicated.

She also explained that the lack of knowing the surroundings makes it impossible to organize activities oneself without assistance.

Because you didn't know the place, how you can make like organize something outside or... because you doesn't know the place very well. You need some help [laughs].

5.5.3 Mental resources for self-initiative

When discussing possibilities of organizing activities by the families' own initiative, one participant was of the opinion that the centre would provide sufficient support to the arrangements.

I believe if a living person wanna do something and comes up with the idea and say this is the activity I would like to organize, I think they would support.

However, most of the participants told that they did not think of organizing activities themselves. Some were not sure whether they had the right to do so, whilst others told that their concern towards their future was limiting their interest in the matter.

At the moment like, my brains are occupied with how this is going to be. Am I gonna stay in this location, am I gonna be moving from here, will I get to stay permanently in Finland? Those are the things that I'm thinking about it at the moment so I'm not that into activities.

Well the questions that you ask are quite difficult for us to answer because they are meant for free people. Not for people like us who are not, who cannot really relax, even at 50 %, not speaking about 100%.

5.5.4 Other barriers to being active

Through the interviews some additional topics came up which might have had an effect on whether or not the families participated in activities or arranged things to do themselves. These topics were mentioned briefly but they might be important factors in examining the activeness of the asylum seeker families.

A mother stated that she would participate in any activities but only if it did not go against her religion. She implied that she would not be able to take part in some activities that were organized by a man.

Another respondent told that activities were sometimes organized in times when they have other programs to attend to. He also explained how children have individual preferences which can result in refusing participation in certain activities:

Sometimes the time is not right for us. For example have to go to see a doctor or something else is in the way. And well, when we can we go. But also it depends

on the child. For example there's been events for drawing and knitting and embroidering. And this is something that our child is not, our children not interested in.

The concept of stigma was mentioned as a barrier as well. This topic came up when some interviewees talked about why they had not wanted to use some sport center tickets that their reception center had offered to them:

[...] once you've shown that this is not you who have paid, who's paid for the ticket, once you have shown that you are on, you know, you are paid for here in this country, then not everyone is ready to accept that. For example: a training assistant at the center might not be quite happy with you coming there again and again. Or some other people. It's not my personal experience, but other people have been saying that and we are not ready to experience that ourselves, because, it's complicated.

[...] Maybe it would be best to create a fitness centre for the refugees. That would solve all our problems really.

Moreover, it was brought up by a father that in his view it is very difficult to organize activities together with other residents because people only stay at the center temporarily.

Well if I could then I'd organize an orchestra of a kind. But you know your questions are sometimes hard to apply for all of us because it's a transit center and people are here only a short while from a few weeks to a few months.

Finally, a language barrier was mentioned as the reason for why the families' children did not usually play together with other children, apart from the occasions when there were organized activities.

5.6 Other thoughts on the life circumstances at reception center

In the interviews some thoughts concerning life at a reception center arose. These thoughts were both positive and negative as well as some suggestions concerning the living circumstances at the reception centers. These topics are important to mention because they have an effect on the families' life and may influence their mental and physical resources at the reception centers, which are connected to their level of activeness.

The positive thoughts that arose were connected to feelings of gratefulness for many things the participants felt they had received. In three of the interviews the participants expressed gratefulness for the support, resources and safety they had.

Your government gives us safety for the life of my family. Because we arrived here as political refugees and that's why it's very important to be here under safety.

One mother described her and her daughter's daily needs to be covered, and that everything felt to be alright. One family said they understood that any negative aspects of the living conditions were temporary and that they could not ask for something more. The family also thought the services in Finland are of high quality, and they expressed their desire to integrate:

[...] we are here of our own volition and the situation is temporary. So you know we understand that the main thing is to be able to integrate into the society. This is the only thing that matters. And considering that everything in this country is top level. We can only be grateful. We are like ninety percent just grateful and the rest is temporary.

Another family talked about their will to integrate as well, and to contribute to the Finnish society by working.

I just wanted to give thanks to government but not sitting in one place and take money from government, it's not really good. As I said we want to work, she has a good profession, and also I have many specialities, and we want to combine with your people and make a result also, pay taxes and be... Just we want to work [...]

On the contrary, the biggest concern among the interviewees was the food that was being offered at the reception centres. Of the three reception centres in Helsinki, Metsälä is the only centre in which the asylum seekers may and must cook for themselves. Accordingly, in Kaarlenkatu and Punavuori units, meals are prepared and distributed by members of staff. In three of the interviews some of the participants brought up that their children had problems eating the food at the reception centre. It was said to be because the children did not like it or were not used to the kind of food that was offered. One family thought that the food was unsuitable for children:

For starters, it's really hard to use words like dissatisfied or something because we are of course grateful and we understand that resources are what they are for people who don't really pay anything so it's understandable. But the thing is that different diet is only offered to children from 0-3 years old and after that they have to eat what everyone else does. And there is very little liquid food and you know of course that liquid food is important for children. And the problem is so big that and the food is so difficult for them to digest that after four and to five days of eating what they have here, children start refusing eating all together here.

A few parents said they used their money to buy food instead, which was costly, and possibly unhealthy if the money was spent on junk food, like in the case of one family.

And the money that we get here, the allowance, we use to buy food, instead of paying our ticket, going somewhere, we use it to buy food for children, or instead of buying some extra shoes, we buy food. That's like that.

Some also described the food as too spicy, whereas others from a different cultural background found it to have too little taste. A family said that they would prefer being able to cook for themselves.

Two families brought up problems in living with people from different cultural backgrounds and manners. The families talked about situations that one tries to avoid at the centre. One mother was frustrated with some of the other asylum seekers' lack of respect for children, and described their inappropriate behaviour. She suggested that there would be a separate reception centre for families.

Yeah, we, we really have hard time there with single people. They make problem. [...] they should be separated from families, because sometimes they doesn't understand, this is reception centre, not outside. They, they behave with children like they are in street or something like that.

6 Conclusion

As it was discussed in the chapter of theoretical framework, empowerment can be present in various dimensions. This study focused on how the reception centres and the organizations working with asylum seeker families provide their services in an empowering way. These factors were only examined from the asylum seeker parents' perspective and only on the individual and group dimensions of empowerment though as Adams states, these dimensions can have an effect on the other dimensions as well (Adams, 2008 p.75).

Living in a reception centre in Helsinki provides opportunities to live an active life to some degree at least. This study aimed to examine whether the support for asylum seekers staying in Helsinki is enough to use these resources around them – thus to exercise power. The findings of this study gave example of asylum seeker parents who had thoughts and actions that implied some degree of empowerment, but also parents who were seemingly passive, negative or disempowered. The passive role, that Enoranta suggested is caused by the lack of access to major decisions about one's future (Enoranta 2007, p.8-9), could be noticed amongst most of the participants. However there

were some respondents whose answers gave example of a high level of activeness despite the difficult circumstances.

Parents who expressed more negative thoughts concerning the circumstances altogether, and claimed having little support and things to do, did not actively pursue for improvement outside the easily accessible organized activities. Many families looked for simple things to do as a family on a daily basis, for example going to the park or taking walks around the city. However, the families rarely came together with other families to do something. Most families implied having a lot of free time which they were not able to fill up with anything.

On the other hand there were also some parents with a more positive outlook who seemed to show a higher level of activeness which started from their own initiative. They had more ideas regarding meaningful things to do and improvements to the circumstances. Finally they also pursued those ideas to the extent which was possible in their mental, material and legal situation.

The different levels of activeness amongst the respondents suggests that the participants needed or received a different degree of support. A lack of information and concern about one's future were factors that came up as barriers to leading an active life and to improving one's current life circumstances at the reception centre. The parent's mental resources were reduced by the instability of the living situation and some of the material resources were also experienced as insufficient. In addition, most families found it difficult to adjust to the weather in the winter period.

Next to gaining information on whether the support for the families is sufficient in order for them to maximize the quality of their lives, this study also examined the families' experiences about empowering practice through participation. Overall the majority of the families participated in the organized activities that they had received information about, and most had positive experiences with them. For instance, most families said the activities helped in giving the children something to do which they enjoyed. Some parents would have wished for more purposeful activities for their children though.

However, it was to be noticed that the asylum seekers' opinions were rarely sought for in the reception centres or during the activities. In fact, a major part of the respondents gave the impression that they had not even thought about the possibility of influencing

their living circumstances. Besides not being asked for their opinion, many parents did not know whether they had the right to organize activities at the centre and what resources they would be allowed to use for it. These experiences suggest that most of the activities carried out with the families do not support participants' empowerment the way Räsänen (2006, p.81) proposed they should do by providing chances to participate in the planning and organizing of activities.

In all of the interviews the participants had interesting insights and views on what would make their everyday life more meaningful. They had concrete ideas regarding the development of activities and also suggestions for general improvement at the reception centres. They suggested mostly activities that would support their integration in Finland, as well as more possibilities for participating in physical or musical activities.

Perhaps providing more opportunities for asylum seeking families to participate in the planning of activities can be problematic because of language issues or because the families might leave the reception centre, the city or the country at any moment. Nevertheless this study concludes that the parents do wish to be involved in the planning of services meant for them and not seeking their views on the decisions related to them leaves an opportunity to improve services and to support their empowerment unused.

7 Discussion

The results of this study show some of the issues regarding asylum seeker families' life at reception centers and the organizing of activities for them. In this chapter we present some ideas on how the families' situation could be improved. The reception centers and the NGOs that work with asylum-seekers have to address their activities to a much higher number of clients than before. The situation in both new and old reception centers in Helsinki are challenging and continuously changing. Sometimes the reception centers may be overcrowded and even the common areas may be used for accommodation, and premises for activities need to be sought elsewhere. However, despite the situation, the findings of this study provide useful information for the organizations. In our view any measure that can improve families' wellbeing for the time of waiting for a decision on asylum should be considered.

The parents that were involved in this study expressed some wishes for the contents for the activities. Among other things, they hoped mostly for more activities that support

integration and for activities related to sports. This information may be useful for any organization that focuses on providing services for reception centers. As we visited the reception centers and interviewed the parents, we realized that there should be more information about activities that are available. Some of the participants learned about certain activities from each other during the interview. This suggests that the current system for providing information is ineffective. It would be beneficial if the information would be more effectively distributed by both ads and word-to-mouth in the reception centers. Also, a simple method for informing asylum seekers about various kinds of free activities and opportunities, not only the NGO activities, would certainly be needed. Asylum seekers who do not know any Finnish or English are even less likely to receive information about activities. However, their lack of language skills may not be a barrier to participation in activities if the information about them is transmitted.

As discussed in the theoretical framework of this study, involving clients in the creation of services not only provides opportunity for empowerment but also improves the services for the particular client group. The results of this study suggest that currently asylum seeker families' voice is not at the focus of activities that are arranged. It is important to pay attention to how activities are arranged and to actively develop participant involvement for the benefit of all parties.

A mother that was interviewed for this study and who had lived in a reception center for a year thought that there should be a separate reception center only for families for the comfort of children. As we see it, a family reception center would provide a more peaceful environment for families and at the same time it would benefit other asylum seekers as well because the reception centers' playrooms would become possible to use for other activities. Such a center would make the organizing of activities much easier for all of the NGOs who wish to provide services for asylum seeking families as they would need to cooperate only with the family reception centers. Finally, in a separate reception center for families it could be easier to provide food that suits the needs of small children as suggested by the parents in this study. The opening of new reception centers in Finland provides possibilities for arranging separate units for families.

Our main goal with this thesis was to provide information to the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelter and to their project *Asylum seeker families with babies*, as well as to other organizations that work with asylum seekers. The project workers have al-

ready received a copy of the thesis and they have given their comments on it. The workers found the thesis useful for creating their final report of the project and for planning the future of it. Also, they plan to use the thesis as an education material for volunteers who wish to provide activities for asylum seekers. The workers said the thesis supported their beliefs about the situation in reception centers, but also brought new insight. For example, they received ideas for what their volunteers could begin to focus on. In addition, the thesis will be uploaded to the webpage of the project and given out to their cooperation partners.

7.1 Validity and reliability

There were some issues which affected the interview situations, and accordingly, the results. Unfortunately at times there were distractions that we could not affect. For example, some of the respondents had to bring their children with them in the interview. In two of the interviews the children played so loudly that it occasionally distracted the parents. Although the parents then asked for a repetition of what was said or they were asked to repeat their sentences, it is possible that they were distracted anyway. Their children's noises were naturally saved on the recordings and caused difficulties in transcribing in some parts.

We could not judge whether some of the participants that attended the group interviews felt uncomfortable answering questions in the presence of other participants. Also, when using interpreters, there was no notice of their presence affecting the interview situation in restrictive ways. In the cases where an interpreter was not present, there were sometimes difficulties in understanding each other. One participant spoke English fluently, but his accent was difficult to understand. In two other interviews the participants lacked vocabulary in English. Because of this some of the interview questions had to be re-explained in different words.

We made two recordings of each interview to avoid data loss. However, poorly articulated speech, background noises made by the children in the room, and the traffic noises coming from outside made the recordings occasionally unclear. Because of this certain parts of the recordings could not be understood which resulted in losing a small amount of the data.

The interviewees were invited to attend the study by the help of reception center workers who had been contacted by us. It is thus impossible for us to evaluate their motivations for participating in the study, and accordingly how their motivations may have affected their answers. However, we can take into consideration their life situation, which may have had an influence in their responses; anyhow we did not come across any unusual or outstanding behavior.

As the participants were reached by the workers of the reception center, there is a chance that they could only reach people who they had a common language to communicate with. This is important to note as the people who have a common language to communicate with the workers of the reception center might have very different experiences regarding activities than those who do not.

Moreover, in the course of making her research concerning asylum seekers, Kaukko (2013, pp. 209-210) cited Boyden (2001) who suggested that asylum seekers may avoid bringing up their opinions or suggestions for improvement for the services surrounding them. That is because they may fear any sort of attention that could weaken their chances to receive an asylum. Some of the parents who participated in the study showed high politeness, and left us wondering whether they had shared their real opinion in all of the discussed matters.

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Interview questions

1. What is your country of origin?
2. How long have you been in Finland?
3. How long have you stayed in this reception center?
4. Have you stayed in other reception centers?
5. Who do you stay with here in the reception center?
6. Can you describe what do you do on an average day in the reception center?
7. Do you know what activities are organized here in the reception center?
 - 7.1. If not, would you like to know about the activities and participate in them?
 - 7.2. If yes, do you or any of your family members participate in the activities?
 - 7.2.1. If yes, what activities you or your family members participate in?
 - 7.2.2. If not, why don't you participate in the activities?
8. Do you or your family members find the activities that you participate in useful?
 - 8.1. If yes, how?
 - 8.2. If not, why not?
9. Do you find that the activities help you and your family?
 - 9.1. If yes, how?
 - 9.2. If not, why not?
10. Do your children like the activities?
 - 10.1. If yes, what do they like in them-/ why do they like them?
 - 10.2. If not, why not?
11. Do the people who organize the activities ask your opinion about the activities?
 - 11.1. If yes, how?
12. Do the people who organize the activities ask you how you would like the activities to be changed?
 - 12.1. If yes, do they change the activities according to your suggestion?

13. Do you have a chance to influence what kinds of activities are organized?

13.1. If yes, how?

13.2. If not, would you like to influence them?

14. Can you think of activities that aren't organized but you and your family would like to participate in?

14.1. If yes, can you describe what kind of activities would you or your family like to participate in?

15. Are you able to organize activities yourself in the reception center?

15.1. If yes, what?

16. Would you like to organize activities yourself in the reception center?

16.1. If yes, what kind of activities would you like to organize yourself in the reception center?

16.2. If no, why not?

17. What else helps you or your family during your stay in the reception center?

Information sheet

Information about the Study

Thank you for participating in this interview. We are students of Social Services in Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. As the final project of our studies we are writing a Bachelor's Thesis concerning families in the reception centres of Helsinki. This study is made in cooperation with the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. The purpose of this study is to support organizations to develop their services in the reception centres.

We would like to ask some questions about your everyday life in reception centre. We are interested in your ideas, opinions and experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers. If you do not understand a question you may ask for clarification.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. You have the right to interrupt, deny answering questions or stop participating in the interview at any time. We will not use your answers without your consent. Your responses will be treated in strictest confidence and we will make sure any individuals cannot be recognized in our Bachelor's thesis.

In order to remember everything you answered, we record the interviews. The recordings and all other material will be accessible only to us. After analysing the material we will delete it.

If you have further questions or doubts, please contact us.

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