

# The Early Advantage

International Case Studies of Early Childhood Education and Care Systems



Respecting Children and Families

# Finland

# Respecting Children and Families

A Case Study of the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care System

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## Executive Summary

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This case study of early childhood system provision—*Respecting Children and Families: A Case Study of the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care System*—is part of an international comparative analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in six countries/jurisdictions (Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, and Singapore). Groundbreaking in intent, scope, and findings, the overall study tells the story of each country, probing the nature of services provided to young children and their families from the prenatal period through age 8, as well as the country's unique approaches to the burgeoning field of ECEC. In doing so, it reveals each country's contributions to the global understanding of promising and innovative policy, practice, and service delivery.

This international study is framed by systems theory that recognizes the need for systems analyses in understanding the holistic nature of early development. Accordingly, this country case study focuses on the ECEC policies, services, and infrastructure in Finland, and the way these interact to produce systemic outputs. In particular, this case study seeks to identify what current understandings of the Finnish ECEC system exist, how the Finnish ECEC system has evolved and why it functions as it does, how it is structured, and how it produces its intended outcomes. In addressing these issues, this work aims to increase current understanding about the nature and contribution of the Finnish ECEC system to high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient service provision for young children and their families.

Finland's ECEC system is rooted in its history and based on a welfare model that values universalism, social rights, and equality and equity. At its core is a powerful narrative predicated on a principled, personalized, and child-centric ECEC system drawn from the nation's commitment to citizens' universal rights to education, health, and welfare. The state's responsibility to provide and promote education, health, welfare, and security is written into the Finnish Constitution, and citizens are guaranteed the right to income and care.



These values are also reflected in the nation's embrace of a collective responsibility for young children, which has evoked a range of policies over time. For instance, legislation passed in 1938 provided dedicated maternity boxes to every Finnish newborn; eight years later, a formal child benefit scheme was put in place. In 1973, local authorities were given a statutory obligation to provide day care for children under school age, and child care leave policies (1989), day care and home care allowances (1990), and private day care allowances (1997) soon followed. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a sustained commitment to young children, with free preschool education provided to all 6-year-olds as of 2001, and paternal leave raised to 54 working days in 2013. Today, universal and integrated ECEC services ensure that children and their families, wherever they live and whatever their social, economic, ethnic, or cultural background, have access to nationally defined ECEC services.

There is a wide array of ECEC services for children and their families in Finland, almost all of which are publicly subsidized, and many of which are publicly provided; however, there has also been an increase in private provision of ECEC services. Center-based ECEC is the most common form of ECEC, but children may also attend family-based ECEC or more informal "open" care services. All center-based ECEC and all pre-primary schools must follow the national core curricula for ECEC and pre-primary, which are then tailored at both the municipality and the center levels. A cornerstone in the delivery of ECEC services is the provision of a plethora of care and education options based on parental choice. However, there is regional variation in the ECEC services across Finland, with some municipalities able to offer more services or a wider array of services.

Finnish ECEC pedagogy underscores the intrinsic value of childhood and child-centered pedagogy. The curricula do not specify standardized learning or performance goals for children. Instead, each child's learning and development is monitored in accordance with their Individual Education Plan (IEP), crafted at the beginning of the school year through collaboration between the teacher, parents, and child.

National legislation obligates the municipalities to evaluate the quality of ECEC programs and ensure compliance with the nationally defined minimum program standards. Rather than a strict national monitoring apparatus, the Finnish system relies heavily on the proficiency of ECEC teachers and other personnel, with limited program evaluation or inspection occurring. Parents are also viewed as important and knowledgeable “overseers” of ECEC programs, and are seen as capable of filing complaints if they perceive violations of legal program standards such as student-teacher ratios or classroom safety.

Generally, ECEC services for children aged 0-6 are funded jointly by the state (i.e., the central government), municipality, and parents. Importantly, the state’s funding to municipalities is not earmarked to ECEC but covers all public services that the municipality is legally required to deliver, allowing the municipalities flexibility in the expenditure of state funds. Though there is some local variation in fees charged families for ECEC services, the state enforces a maximum fee, which, at present, is about \$340 USD per month for full-day provision. Parents’ fees are typically means-tested depending on the size and income of the family, although some municipalities charge less than the maximum or nothing at all. In broad terms, parents’ fees for municipality-organized ECEC services cover around 13 percent of the total spending on ECEC, with the rest coming from state/municipality budgets. In the private sector, ECEC fees are set by providers, and are typically higher. Families who choose to place their children in private ECEC provision are eligible for a private day care allowance and income-adjusted care supplement.

The teaching profession, including ECEC teaching, is highly valued in Finland, and teacher education programs offered by universities are highly competitive. The average statutory salaries of ECEC teachers in Finland are below the OECD average. However, given Finland’s broad social supports for its citizenry, ECEC teaching is still considered to be an attractive occupation. Though there are no national requirements regarding in-

service training, Finnish ECEC teachers consider it to be a privilege and therefore participate actively when given the opportunity.

The Finnish government has enacted significant reforms in the ECEC system in the past few years. One of the most significant changes took place in January 2013, when the overall responsibility for early childhood education and care was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. Notably, because pre-primary education for 6-year-olds was already under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, this brought greater structural alignment to ECEC and pre-primary administration.

A second major policy change took place in 2015-16. A law enacted that year made pre-primary education compulsory for all 6-year-old children (although enrollment rates had previously been high). Furthermore, and quite significantly, the new law removed children's long-held universal right to municipality-subsidized ECEC regardless of their parents' employment status. Now, municipalities can limit children to 20 hours per week of subsidized ECEC unless the child's parents work or study full time.

In addition, the Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH)—the “implementation arm” of the Ministry of Education that had previously overseen the pre-primary and primary education curricula—was made responsible for the ECEC curriculum as well. With that new authority, it published the first mandatory national core curriculum for ECEC, which is aligned with the national core curricula for pre-primary and primary. This has been implemented nationwide since August 2017. Finally, structural program requirements were changed; for instance, the child-staff ratio for children over the age of 3 in all center-based ECEC was increased from one staff member for every seven children to one staff member for every eight children. These reforms need to be evaluated, so that policymakers and parents understand their effects on children and families.

Overall, the conditions of young children in Finland are excellent, as youngsters are provided ample opportunities to live, learn, and develop. Despite this grounding, Finland, like all countries, faces significant 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges as it seeks to adapt to global trends and conditions. In recent years, growing immigration has brought increased ethnic, cultural, and language diversity to the country. Compounding these demographic changes are troubling economic trends, including rising child poverty rates, growing inequalities between the rich and poor, regional differentiation, and national budget shortfalls. For the Finnish ECEC system, these shifting dynamics raise important questions, including how to best maintain and foster quality services across the country, how to attend to increasingly diverse family structures and needs, and how to promote the development and effective use of research and data.



# Part 1

## Introduction

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## Chapter 1: Study Overview

This case study of early childhood system provision— *Respecting Children and Families: A Case Study of the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care System* —is part of an international comparative analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in six countries/jurisdictions (Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore). Groundbreaking in intent, scope, and findings, the overall study tells the story of each country, probing the nature of services provided to young children and their families from the prenatal period through age 8, as well as the country's unique approaches to the burgeoning field of ECEC. In so doing, it reveals each country's contributions to the global understanding of promising and innovative ECEC policy, practice, and service delivery.

### Rationale and Goals

#### *Rationale*

The Finnish education system has received a great deal of international attention after its continued success on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) over the course of several consecutive years. It has been suggested by some that such success can be explained by Finland's school system, which focuses on professionalizing teachers' work, developing instructional leadership in schools, and enhancing trust in teachers and schools rather than relying on competition, school choice, and external testing of students (Sahlberg, 2011). Although this may indeed be true, it is clear that in order to have a full understanding of the mechanisms that promote children's academic learning and healthy development, the wider sociocultural context of the society in which children grow and develop must be taken into account. Furthermore, close attention needs to be directed to the conditions and services made available to children and their families prior to formal school entry, in the birth through primary years.

To date, fairly little attention has been directed at creating a comprehensive understanding of the ECEC system in Finland. Whereas Finland has participated in several OECD- and World Bank-initiated research and data collection efforts and consequent publications around ECEC, full systems analyses that seek to fully explore the holistic nature of early development in the cultural context of Finland are rare. This country case study remedies this gap in knowledge by focusing on not only the ECEC services, but also the ECEC policies, ECEC infrastructure, and sociocultural context of Finland, and the way these interact to produce systemic outputs.

### *Gaps and Goals*

With all this attention accorded to young children, it is somewhat surprising that only limited comparative analyses of ECEC services and their outcomes have been carried out. When conducted, such studies tend to: (i) provide league-table overviews of available services; (ii) focus on program evaluations that provide a glimpse into specific aspects of ECEC (e.g., parenting education); or (iii) examine specific aspects of children's performance in certain contexts. It is noteworthy that fewer than 10 studies, many conducted fairly recently, seek to understand ECEC from a comprehensive systems perspective, with many of these relying on data from a single source. Few tell complete country stories that explicate why and how exemplary services come to be, how they change and mature, and how they seek to alter the quality, equitable distribution, sustainability, and efficiency of services for young children. Few acknowledge the intimate roles that culture and context play in contouring the nature, amount, and quality of services for young children. Few adopt a systems and/or a systems-change approach to considerations of early childhood services, embracing the disciplines of education, health, and social welfare as they affect children from the prenatal period through the early years of formal schooling. And few use a systematic methodology that permits this kind of detailed analysis. These are the contributions of this study generally, and the intention of this narrative is to present how Finland has created a high-quality ECEC system based on principles of equity and sustainability.

### *Considerations*

Two important considerations contour this narrative. First, and unlike other studies, this analysis does not make causal claims regarding the potency of ECEC as a panacea for improving child outcomes, nor does it intend to endorse any one mode or strategy associated with ECEC. Stated simply, this study considers why, how, and with what effects ECEC systems have emerged in six high-performing jurisdictions, Finland among them.

The second consideration relates to the focus on high-performing countries, coming at a time when so much attention is both lodged in, and aims to advance, ECEC in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Pertinent questions regarding the transportability of lessons across contexts should and do prevail, as do equally potent questions surrounding the construct of “high-performing,” notably who defines it, and what it is. Fueled by concerns regarding the comparatively low performance of American students on international benchmarking assessments, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), the study’s funder, is interested in understanding elements of jurisdictional policies, practices, and reforms in countries that score well on PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment). The goal is to discern variables that may account for discrepant country performances on PISA, with the intent of elevating the somewhat lackluster performance of the United States and other nations. Given that ECEC has been one of the most prominent educational reforms globally of the last two decades and is convincingly associated with producing significant long-term gains in students’ academic and life performance, NCEE was interested in supporting the development of a comparative study to discern the nature, scope, and promising practices associated with ECEC systems implementation in countries that perform well on PISA. Precisely how high-performing is defined and how participating countries were selected for the study is discussed below.



### Study Architecture

ECEC systems work is complicated, yet inescapable. A scholarly commitment to unmasking this complex territory using a systems lens distinguishes this study from others and provides the groundwork for its contributions. Those who understand ECEC readily acknowledge that it must be examined in its totality (Bruner, Wright, Gebhard, & Hibbard, 2004; Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004; Kagan & Cohen, 1996; Sugarman, 1991; Vargas-Barón, 2013). No one program or intervention can be a proxy for ECEC. No single approach to pedagogy can begin to explicate the complicated and fascinating panoply of policies that converge to create services for young children. But understanding the totality of ECEC is difficult because no country consolidates all the pre-primary services accorded to young children in a single ministry or at a single level of government. In addition to organizational chaos, ECEC policies face temporal changes; they often emerge during one year, only to disappear in the next, typically with changes in political leadership. Service access varies dramatically among countries (OECD, 2012), as does children's well-being (UNICEF, 2013), even in rich countries. With ECEC not yet deemed a right in most countries, inconsistent and sporadic practices and policies are gamed on ideological playgrounds amidst changing rules, funds, and governance structures. To make sense of systems, both in general and ECEC in particular, conceptual or analytic frameworks are necessary, as is a set of clearly delineated research questions.

### Conceptual Framework

There are an emerging number of conceptual frameworks, building blocks, organizational theories, and explanatory tools available to ease the challenge of untangling complex, highly-interactive phenomena. NCEE's *9 Building Blocks for a World-Class State Education System* (NCEE, 2015) is one extremely helpful tool, as is the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), and its early childhood iteration, SABER-ECE (Neuman & Devercelli, 2013). These and other

frameworks underscore the salience of systems thinking, including the importance of policy goals and levers, human variables (e.g., leadership, professional development), and accountability factors (e.g., standards, data, compliance).

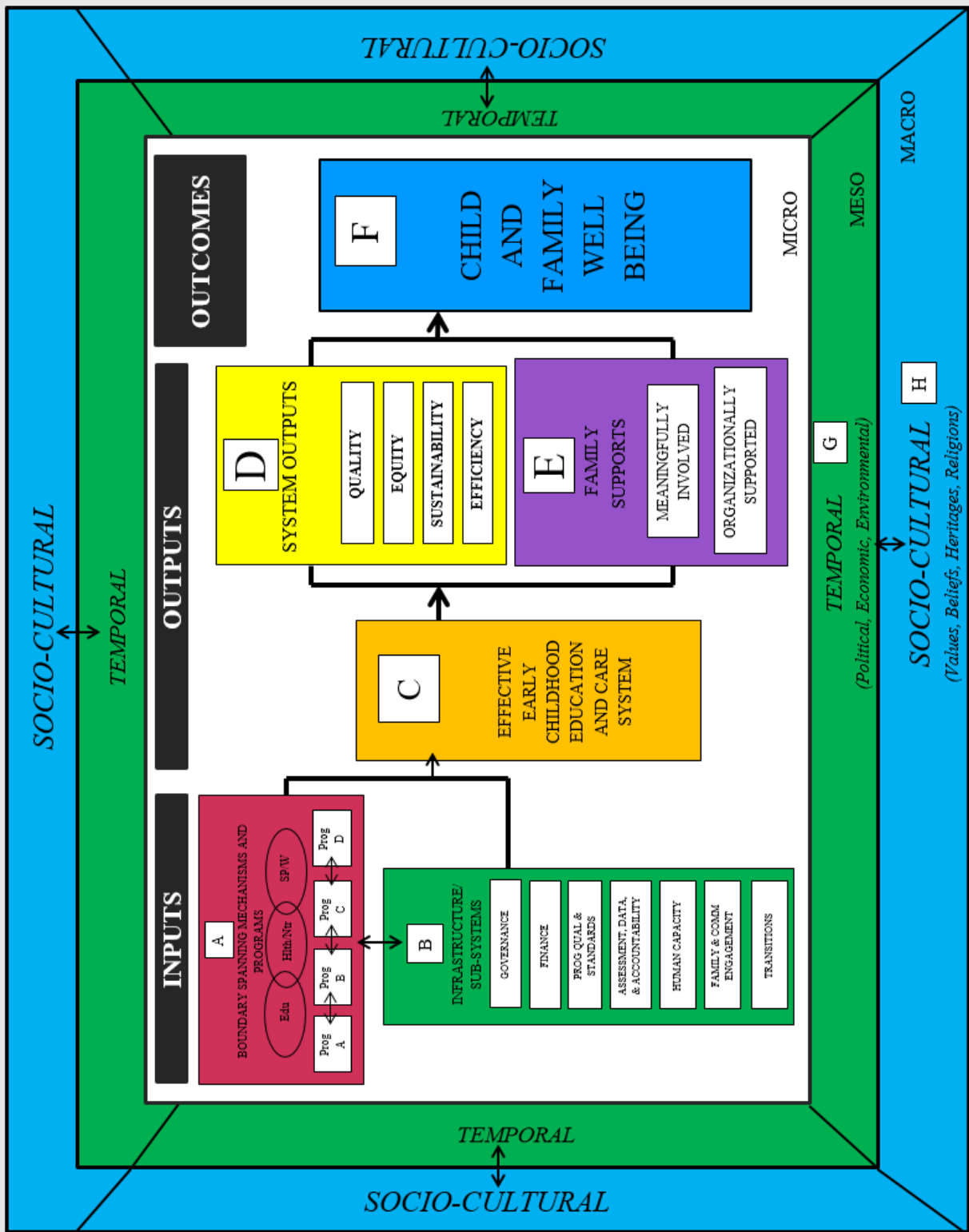
Considering the holistic nature of early development, the modal lack of consistent and durable ECEC policies, and the need for systems analyses, this study builds on prior conceptual grounding (Kagan, Araujo, Jaimovich, & Aguayo, 2016). The analysis provisionally suggests that positive child and family well-being (F)<sup>1</sup> are predicated on systemic (high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient services) (D) and family goals (E), which are achieved only in the presence of an effective system (C). Such a system is based on a clearly delineated infrastructure (B) that supports diverse programs (A), sometimes linked by a boundary-spanning mechanisms (BSM) that integrate programs and services across ministerial boundaries. All malleable, these factors are encased in both temporal (political, economic, environmental) (G) and socio-cultural (values, beliefs, heritages, religions) contexts (H).

With the goal of understanding each element of the analytic framework, the proposed analysis will focus on the programs/services (A), the infrastructure (B), and the way these conspire to yield an integrated system (C) that is capable of producing systemic outputs, within temporal (G) and socio-cultural (H) contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Letters correspond to diagram below.

Figure 1.1 Theory of Change



### *Research Questions*

Using the framework above, this analysis addressed a series of research questions that describe, compare, and analyze ECEC systems in the six study jurisdictions. Guided by an effectiveness standard that privileges high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient services, three sets of research questions were posed. Largely descriptive, the first set seeks to discern *what* understandings about each country's ECEC system actually exist, as well as the current status of the ECEC system. Comparative in nature, the second set of research questions seeks to understand *how* differences in ECEC systems have evolved, are structured, and produce their intended outcomes. Analytic in nature, the final set of research questions seeks to explain or conjecture *why* the systems have evolved and function as they do. All of the research questions are designed to understand the nature and contributions of ECEC systems to high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient service provision. Sample research questions are provided below; the full set of research questions is provided in the volume *The Early Advantage: Early Childhood Systems that Lead by Example*.

### *Descriptive Questions—The What*

- What does the country perceive its commitment to young children to be, and what contextual variables evoked this stance?
- What are the major ECEC policies, frameworks, programs, and services in place (e.g., parental leave, perinatal services, home visiting, child care, preschool, transition, health and mental health services, and services for developmentally and economically at-risk children)?
- What does the country perceive as the need for, and elements of, an ECEC system, and to what extent are coordinating mechanisms (e.g., boundary-spanning mechanisms, coordinating bodies, mediating structures) and elements of the infrastructure (e.g., standards and monitoring, durable and sufficient financing, data systems, governance mechanisms, family and

public engagement, pre- and in-service professional and leadership development) in place?

### *Comparative Questions—The How*

- How does the country value or “hold” young children, and how do these values frame policies and practices? Are there certain values that more heavily contour policies and practices, and how have they become instantiated in policy and practice?
- How do country policies vary over time as a result of changes in economic, political, and governmental (centralized / decentralized) conditions and structures? How do these changes affect patterns of implementation, and in the evolution of the ECEC system?
- How effective is the country in terms of the effectiveness of its ECEC system, as measured by its quality, equitable distribution, sustainability, and efficiency?

### *Explanatory Questions—The Why*

- Why, and for what reasons, does the evolving ECEC system reflect durable country values and more transient country economics and politics? Why, and under what conditions, do ECEC systems evolve?
- Why, and under what conditions, can mediating structures have more potency, without centralizing government engagement?
- Why, and under what conditions, can a country focus on outcomes to improve services to young children? Can, and under what conditions, the contemporary support for young children be mobilized to yield greater effectiveness in quality, equitable distribution, sustainability, and efficiency?

### Methodology

**Country Selection** Comprehensive comparative efforts always force tough decision-making regarding participant selection, be it at the geographic level (e.g., country, region, district, city, school), the individual level (e.g., governor, mayor, high-, mid-, or low-level bureaucrats, parents representing which children), or the analytic level (e.g., systems, program, school, or classroom). Different theoretical frameworks guide such selections, with policy-borrowing frameworks encouraging global south-north analyses (Chisholm & Steiner-Khamsi, 2009). Other selections are guided by funding source(s), which may have interest in a particular region (Berlinski & Schady, 2015). Still others are interested in improving systems and developing appropriate metrics for that analysis (Mourshed, Chijoke, & Barber, 2010).

In this study, two diverse constructs guided the jurisdictional selection: (i) PISA performance rankings for mathematics and (ii) high-quality rankings on measures of ECEC quality. For the purposes of this analysis, the top 30 PISA 2012 countries were broken into three groups (high, 1-10; medium, 11-20; and lower, 21-30), ranked according to their mathematics results. Three corresponding vertical columns were created: countries ranking 1-10 were grouped in the far left vertical column; countries ranking 11-20 were placed in the middle column; and countries performing 21-30 were placed in the far right column. To discern the quality of ECEC programs, the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) report for the same year was used to rank the countries' ECEC efforts. Looking at countries from around the world, the report examined four criteria: (i) social context; (ii) availability; (iii) affordability; and (iv) quality. Using a composite score based on these four criteria, this analysis divided the top 30 countries into three groups (high, 1-10; medium, 11-20; and lower, 21-30), similar to the groupings used for the PISA rankings. Three corresponding horizontal rows were created for the Economist results: countries ranking 1-10 were grouped in the top horizontal row; countries ranking 11-20 were placed in the middle horizontal row; and countries performing 21-30 were placed in the bottom horizontal row. Next, the two grids were

combined to create nine cells (three by three). For each cell, the overlapping countries were listed, as reflected in Table 1 below.

Two countries (Netherlands and South Korea) performed in the highest third on both PISA and the Economist ranking, whereas five countries (Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, UK, and France) performed in the lower third on PISA and the upper third on the Economist rankings. Given these different performance profiles, and given that only five to six countries could be involved in this study due to fiscal and temporal constraints, one country from each cell of the three PISA high-performing countries (the left column) and one country from each cell of the three Economist high-performing countries (the top row) was selected. These countries are highlighted in yellow. This approach yielded five jurisdictions: South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, and the UK<sup>2</sup>. One additional country, Australia, was added for three reasons: first, it represented a totally different profile (medium PISA and low Economist rankings); second, unprecedented quality work is being undertaken in the country; and third, its mixed market and highly differentiated state approaches to early childhood remarkably parallel the United States.

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2. Ultimately, it was decided to study England as it is the largest of the countries in the UK.

**Table 1 Selected Countries**

	PISA HIGH	PISA MEDIUM	PISA LOWER
ECONOMIST HIGH	Netherlands <b>South Korea</b>	<b>Finland</b> Belgium	Denmark New Zealand Norway <b>UK - England</b> France
ECONOMIST MEDIUM	<b>Hong Kong</b> Switzerland	Germany Austria	Czech Republic
ECONOMIST LOWER	Japan <b>Singapore</b> Taiwan	Canada <b>Australia</b>	

*Data Sources*

The conceptual framework and the research questions presented above guided two distinct, yet related, reviews of the literature. The first is an analysis of multi-country studies that have been conducted on ECEC systems and the second is a review of Finnish-specific research, as well as pertinent policies and documents. Taken together, the two bodies of research represent the most recent data on ECEC systems available. In addition, interviews were conducted with key informants within the country.

*Literature Reviews*

**Multi-Country Studies.** The purpose of the multi-country study analysis (later converted into a Compendium) was to identify key lessons from previous studies and analyses of ECEC systems around the world to inform the study of Finnish ECEC. By reviewing and analyzing multi-country studies focused on ECEC systems, which include significant attention to one or more elements of the infrastructure, the



Compendium contributed to both the development of this country analysis and to the scholarship on comparative ECEC policy more generally. This is the first attempt to collate and synthesize global ECEC research using a systems lens. The review focused on discerning diverse methodologies, tools, and results of the limited number of similar studies that exist. Data from this review were helpful in reconsidering the provisional research questions and the methodological approach to this study. Information was gleaned from 16 research studies, most of which were conducted after 2010, and represent all regions of the world. These data have been analyzed and compiled into a compendium (Neuman, Roth, & Kagan, 2017).

*Finland-specific Documents.* To obtain a detailed overview of the evolution and contemporary status of ECEC in Finland, numerous documents were reviewed. These included Finnish legal and policy documents and statistical data gathered from key sources such as the Official Statistics of Finland and Vipunen Education Statistics Finland. Furthermore, the authors consulted reports from the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA) and OECD. The ECEC research work of many leading Finnish academics has also been carefully reviewed to address the goals of this country case study.

### *Key Informants*

In order to garner the most recent information regarding the status of the ECEC system in Finland, data were collected from key informants in addition to a review of existing literature. Given that this analysis is the first comprehensive examination of the full ECEC system in Finland, it needed to include a diverse set of key informants. Guiding the sample selection was a commitment to including diverse voices so that even a comparatively small sample could deliberately capture contrasting perspectives and, in some cases, disconfirming evidence. For all countries involved, the sampling frame included individuals from the government, heads of services of organizations relevant to ECEC services, influential community members, and the academic community.

Altogether, 21 key informants were identified for the Finnish case study. Data from the key informants were collected by means of face-to-face interviews or communication via email, phone, and/or via group meetings. The key informants' communication in newspapers, television, and/or social media on issues around Finnish ECEC were also taken into account. Altogether, the key informants of the Finnish case study represented the government and ministry-level officers and members of Parliament who deal with ECEC policies. Informants also included municipal officers representing the local government, trade union representatives, academics from the ECEC field, ECEC directors and teachers, parents, and private-sector (for-profit) actors.

### **Data Collection, Analysis, and Validation**

#### *Data Collection*

Document review preceded data collection from the key informants and served as the basis for the development of interview and data analysis protocols. Each document was reviewed for its salience to the research questions and key data from each document were summarized. The data from the key informants were collected over an eight-month period during the years of 2016-17.

#### *Data Analysis*

With the goal of producing an accurate and revealing story, a systematic process was used to analyze the whole country case study data. Since the data are both quantitative and qualitative in nature, different strategies were used to analyze each dataset. The quantitative data were reported as they were extracted from primary sources; all quantitative data are attributed. The qualitative data were summarized into field notes that were then reviewed for policy and practice trends, concrete examples, and major areas of agreement and conflict. Data were integrated to discern key convergent and divergent themes that were expanded as the analysis was written. Primary source documents were consulted as the report was written. Once key themes were identified

and substantiated, a draft document was prepared and reviewed by the internal Finland team.

### *Data Validation*

Committed to the highest standard of research, this analysis was validated at several points in its evolution. First, lead investigators from each of the six jurisdictions and the study's principal investigator (the international team) co-developed the data collection instruments. Developed for a prior study, these instruments were adapted for use in the present analysis and piloted in some of the counties to assure their validity for the current study. Second, the selection of the key informants in each country was reviewed and confirmed by the international team with the goal of fostering a breadth of diverse, yet informed, informants. Agreed upon by the full team, also the interviewee categories were content validated. Third, the final draft of each of the six case studies was subjected to an internal review by a knowledgeable Finnish ECEC expert who was not affiliated with the study. Finally, the study was reviewed by external experts from the staff and board of the National Center on Education and the Economy.

### *Limitations*

Three major limitations characterize this study. First, the ECEC system in Finland is in a state of flux. Recent changes affecting the ECEC system in Finland are reflected at many levels of the system, with consequences yet to be seen. In 2013, ministerial authority in matters related to ECEC was changed from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Educational and Culture. This was followed by a major policy change in 2015-16, with renewal of the legislation (The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care) and national core curricula for ECEC and pre-primary education. The legal implications of this new act are multifold, and, for instance, can have implications for children's enrollment in ECEC programs. Notably, the act removed children's (aged 3 to 6 years old) universal right to full time municipality-subsidized ECEC regardless of

their parents' employment status. It also made mandatory for the first time the national core curriculum for ECEC, which is aligned with the mandatory national core curricula for pre-primary and primary. Finally, structural program requirements were changed, with a slight increase in the child-staff ratio for children over the age of 3 in all center-based ECEC from one staff member for every seven children to one staff member for every eight children. The government is also currently preparing a new law for defining ECEC workforce competence requirements.

Beyond these policy-level changes and future developments, Finland is characterized by increasing demographic diversity and regional differences, changes in family structures, and changing economic conditions. In the realm of ECEC, increased privatization of services is raising questions that challenge the traditional Finnish welfare model. Thus, the field of ECEC, however embryonic, is rapidly changing, and this study must be understood within its dynamic contextual realities.

Second, as is the case for any qualitative research, the positionality of the lead investigator influences the interpretation of the data. While efforts have been made to validate the accuracy of the information provided, some of the content of this analysis is subjected to the interpretation of the author, a research scholar. Such positionality is somewhat mitigated by the reality that the author has conducted cross-national work and by the fact that numerous international and external reviewers have examined the content of this study.

Finally, this study captures the nature and evolutionary process associated with the development of an ECEC system in Finland. As such, it is based on a conceptual framework that specifies the outputs of systemic work in four areas: quality, equitable distribution, sustainability, and efficiency of services. The efficacy of the systems is, therefore, predicated on achievements in these outputs. Unlike many other ECEC studies, this study cannot and does not make any attributional claims or suggest correlations with, much less causality for, specific *child* outcomes, either in the short- or

long-term. In this analysis, however, the four areas are conjectured to be both an output of the system and, along with families, as an input to child outcomes. Although this lack of direct focus on child outcomes may be regarded as a limitation of the study, the authors see the study as a groundbreaking contribution to discerning key systemic variables that may help account for the accomplishment, or lack, of such outcomes.

### Definitions and Abbreviations

AVI	Regional State Administrative Agency
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECTS	European Credits Transfer System
FINEEC	National Evaluation Center
IEP	Individual Education Plan
KELA	Social Insurance Institution of Finland
NHI	National Health Insurance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPH	Finnish National Agency for Education
SRC	Strategic Research Council [at the Academy of Finland]
THL	National Institute for Health and Welfare

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document. In the process, I have learned a great deal about my home country and the Finnish ECEC system.



## Part 2 General Country Context

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## Chapter 2: Country Background

This chapter presents the Finnish context and distinguishing characteristics that have significant influence on the way the country functions, including the social, economic, and political history, as well as the nature of the country's social commitments. The chapter sets the scene for readers to appreciate the Finnish characteristics that influence young children and impact the services they receive.

### Key Points

- Finland is a parliamentary republic with a population of just over 5.5 million people.
- Finland gained independence in 1917 from Russian rule, and ultimately joined the European Union in 1995.
- The framing values of the Finnish society rest on a Nordic welfare model. These welfare model principles began to develop during the period when Finland was part of Sweden, from the Middle Ages through the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- A deeply shared commitment to democracy and equality has enabled Finland to develop a world-class welfare and education system.

### Values and Vision

Finland's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system is rooted in its history and based on a welfare model that values universalism, social rights, and equality and equity. At its core is a powerful narrative predicated on a principled, personalized, and child-centric ECEC system drawn from the nation's commitment to citizens' universal rights to education, health, and welfare.



### Cultural-Historical Context

The Finnish welfare model emerged over three key periods in the nation's history. From the Middle Ages to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Finland was part of Sweden, which led to Swedish legal and social systems taking root. This era came to an end in 1809, when Finland was ceded to Russian rule and became an autonomous grand duchy. Finnish language, culture, and economy continued to develop under the Russian rule, although in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russia began to restrict Finnish autonomy. As a consequence, a budding nationalist movement emerged. Finland ultimately secured independence during the final phases of World War I, when, on December 6, 1917, the nascent nation's declaration of independence was formally approved by the Parliament of Finland. In 1995, Finland became a member of the European Union (EU). It adopted the common EU currency, the euro, in 2002, thereby relinquishing its own currency and following the EU policies.

Today, Finland is a parliamentary republic with a population of just over 5.5 million people, about 20 percent of whom are under the age of 18 (Vipunen Education Statistics Finland, 2017). Although 2016 marked the sixth consecutive year of declining birth rates, the country's population is on the rise due to immigration (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017a).

The majority of the population (about 89 percent) speak Finnish as their mother tongue; Swedish and Sami, the other two official languages of Finland, account for 5.3 percent and 0.1 percent of the population, respectively. Foreign languages spoken in the country include Russian, Estonian, Arabic, Somali, and English (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b).

The largest religious community is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, comprising 72 percent of the population. About a quarter of Finns (1.3 million people) in Finland are not registered with any religious group (Hytönen, Salminen, Sohlberg, & Sorsa, 2016).

### Socioeconomic Context

In the annual Fragile States Index of the Fund for Peace (The Fund for Peace, 2016), Finland is the only country in the world to achieve the rank of “Very Sustainable.” This index assesses levels of stability based on 12 primary social, economic and political indicators, including: economic equality, economic performance, human rights, rule of law, access to public services, prevalence of refugees, demographic pressures, and brain drain.

Finland's GDP per capita is among the highest in the world, allowing the country to offer a high living standard to its citizens. According to Statistics Finland, the gross domestic product in Finland was \$276 billion (€224 billion) in 2017 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018a). The distribution of wealth is relatively equitable, although social inequalities have risen in recent years. With regards to income inequality, Finland's GINI coefficient (a measure of inequality) was 27.3 in 2015, which is among the lowest in the world. However, income inequality in Finland has risen over the last decades, and is a growing concern (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a).

In February 2018, the number of employed persons in Finland was 2,269,000, accounting for 68.4 percent of those aged 15 to 64. Men and women have similar levels of employment; in 2016, the employment rate for men was 70.5 percent, and for women, 69.2 percent (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018b).

Altogether, a deeply shared commitment to democracy and equality—including access to ECEC—has enabled Finland to develop a world-class welfare and education system (Castells & Himanen, 2002; Miettinen, 2013). The growing research body evidencing the value of high-quality early experiences for educational equity, social cohesion, and socioeconomic prosperity further contribute to the rationale for the Finnish commitment to ECEC (Heckman 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Heckman, Pinto & Savelyev 2013; Morabito, Vandenbroeck ja Roose 2013).

## Chapter 3: Conditions of Young Children

This chapter reports the overall conditions of Finnish young children (birth to the age of formal school entry) and their families, including information on general well-being irrespective of the services children receive. The conditions of Finnish children today are affected by the country's context, values, and capacity to serve children in diverse circumstances and locations.

### Key Points

- The average number of children in families is decreasing in Finland, while the average age of first-time mothers is on the rise.
- The employment rate of mothers with children under 6 years of age is lower than the EU average.
- The Finnish language is the dominant language spoken in families with children.
- In 6 percent of all families, at least one of the parents or the only parent is a foreign citizen.
- The share of the population in Finland living in remote rural regions is decreasing, in contrast to growth in urban areas. This demographic change has led to new challenges in efficient, cost-effective service provision for young children and their families.
- In part driven by increasing unemployment rates among the young and relatively higher unemployment rates among immigrants, income inequality in Finland is on the rise. However, the nation's generous social welfare system has helped keep the child poverty rate low nonetheless.

### Demographic Data

#### *Regional Diversity*

Finland covers an area of 338,000 square kilometers, and has a relatively low average population density of 18 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. The population is concentrated in the south of the country, particularly in the capital area. Between 2000 and 2014, Finland saw a decreasing share of the population living in remote rural regions (OECD, 2016). In general, there is a relatively high proportion of young people living in the urban areas, while older people have traditionally lived in peripheral and rural areas.

The statistics also indicate that those children and their families with foreign backgrounds tend to live in the capital area. Altogether, 7.9 percent of the under-school-age population (aged 0 to 6) had foreign backgrounds in Finland in 2015, but in greater Helsinki, this number rises to one in five (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016b).

*Language Diversity* The three official languages of Finland are Finnish, Swedish, and Sami. In the large majority of families (86 percent), the only parent or both parents are Finnish-speaking. An additional 4 percent of families are entirely Swedish-speaking, and families in which one spouse is Swedish-speaking and the other Finnish-speaking account for another 3 percent of all families. Families in which both of the spouses or the only parent are foreign-language speakers number 59,200, or 4 percent of all families (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016c). The largest foreign-language group in Finland is Russian speakers. At the end of 2015, there were 14,800 such Russian-speaking families (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016c).

#### *Economic Diversity*

Despite the fact that poverty in Finland has been declining for the past 20 years, research shows that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. According to Statistics Finland's income distribution data, 17.3 percent of Finnish households are at

risk of poverty or social exclusion (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016d). This is in part due to rising unemployment, particularly among those aged 18 to 25. Further, the continued growth of Finland's immigrant population, particularly as a result of humanitarian migration, has had significant implications for inequality. On average, foreign-born Finns experience higher rates of relative poverty and lower rates of employment, with immigrants experiencing nearly double the rate of unemployment of native-born Finns. This difference is particularly acute for immigrant women, whose employment rate is over 10 percentage points below that of native-born women (OECD and EU, 2015).

### *Percentages of Children who are:*

#### *Orphaned and Adopted*

Due to the mid-century wars from 1939 to 1945, about 55,000 children were left orphaned (Sotaorpoysty, 2018). Following this period, however, the number of orphaned children in Finland has been very small.

#### *Abused*

Although the number of children who are abused physically or sexually in Finland is small, physical assault offences directed at children under age 18 increased by 17.9 percent from 2014 to 2015. The number of child victims of assault offences in 2015 was 5,900, 3,800 (63.8 percent) of whom were boys and 2,100 (36.2 percent) of whom were girls. Of these, the largest proportion (37.2 percent) were under age 10; 32.9 percent were aged 10 to 14 and 29.9 percent were aged 15 to 17. In 2011, a legislative amendment made petty assaults on minors or close relatives officially prosecutable. Since this reform, there has been a considerable increase in the number of recorded assault offences. Furthermore, 1,100 children were the victims of sexual abuse, 87.4 percent of whom were girls and 12.6 percent, boys (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016e).

### *Identified with Disabilities*

Children's developmental delays and learning difficulties are carefully tracked in the Finnish education and health care systems. Services to address these conditions are free for all families and their children, and in 2015, 16 percent of children aged 6-16 years old received intensified or special support as part of their comprehensive school education. Boys were the primary recipients of both kinds of support, constituting 65 percent of those receiving intensified support and 70 percent of those receiving special support (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016f).

### *Not Speaking Dominant Language of the Country*

Through the Finnish education system, all children learn to speak the dominant language of the country, typically in addition to their mother language(s).

### **Family Structures**

The number of families with children aged 0-18 is decreasing in Finland, and has been falling slowly over the past ten years. In 2015, 40 percent of the population belonged to a family with children. Of these families, the most common family type (60 percent) is a married couple with children. Nineteen percent were families of cohabiting couples, with almost equally as many (18 percent) comprised of just a mother and children. In contrast, the number of families with just a father and children is very low, at 3 percent. In 600 families with children, the parents were a registered same-sex couple (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016g).

### *Family Size*

In 2015, 43 percent of families with children had one child, 39 percent had two children, 13 percent had three, and the remaining 5 percent had four or more children. The average number of children in the family was 1.84. Reconstituted families, or those in

which at least one spouse has a child from a different partner, had a slightly higher average number of children (Official Statistics of Finland, 2015).

### *Number of Births*

For nearly half a century, since 1969, Finland's birth rate has been below the population regeneration rate of 2.1 children per woman. 2015 marked the fifth consecutive year of declining births; with the 2015 birth rate, a woman would give birth to an average of 1.65 children. According to Statistics Finland's data, the nation's birthrate is declining at an accelerating rate. In 2015, 55,472 children were born, which was 1,760 fewer than in the year before. This decrease is nearly double that between 2014 and 2015. The statistics also show that mothers are now older when they give birth to their first child compared to past years. In 2015, women who gave birth to their first child were, on average, 28.8 years of age (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016h).

### *Percentages of Children Living in/with:*

#### *Poverty*

Child poverty in Finland is among the lowest in the world (EC Europa, 2017), at around 5-6 percent. Finland is also among the few OECD countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Korea, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) where children are less likely to live in economic poverty than the general population. Finnish child poverty rates are more than two percentage points lower than the poverty rate for the general population (OECD, 2016e). Yet despite these positive international comparisons, the child poverty rate in Finland is increasing, particularly in households characterized by unemployment or single parenthood. For a Finnish child, living in a single parent family often is associated with lower-than-average living standards (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016d).

### *Single-Parent Families*

Over the past 10 years, the percentage of children under 3 years old living with both parents has declined two percentage points, down to 89 percent. Of these families, about 32 percent were cohabitating parents while 57 percent were married. Meanwhile, the share of children living in one-parent families has grown by one percentage point overall. Of all babies under 1 year of age, 91 percent live with two parents and 9 percent with their mother only. The share of children living in single-parent families seems to grow with age; by age 17, one-fifth of children live with their mother only. Another 4 percent live with only their father (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016i).

### *Foster Care*

Foster care placement typically occurs to safeguard the child's well-being or to address behavioral problems. In 2014, there were a total of 17,958 children and young people under 18 years of age who were placed outside the home in foster care or other appropriate care. Of these children, 53 percent were boys and 47 percent were girls. Since the 1990s, the number of boys placed outside the home has consistently been higher than the number of girls (Kuoppala & Säkkinen, 2015).

### *Working Mothers and Fathers*

The main source of income in Finnish families is income from work, with large percentages of women gainfully engaged in the workforce. At 67.6 percent in 2016, the overall female employment rate was above the EU average of 61.4 percent. However, the female part-time employment rate of 20.2 percent was notably lower than the EU average of 31.9 percent (EC Europa, 2017).

Finland's employment rate of mothers with children under 6 years of age is slightly lower than the EU average (60.1 percent, compared to 61.4 percent). While the overall employment rate of men in Finland in 2016 was close to the EU average of 71.9 percent,



fathers of young children have a much higher employment rate than men overall, reaching 89.8 percent, which was also slightly above the corresponding EU average (88.2 percent) (EC Europa, 2017).

## Chapter 4: Policies Related to Young Children and Their Families

This chapter provides information regarding the laws, acts, and policies that impact the aims, nature, orientation, and amount of services received by young Finnish children and their families.

### Key Points

- The state's responsibility to promote the welfare, health, and security of all citizens is rooted in the Constitution of Finland.
- The aim of Finland's ECEC and family policy is to create a safe environment for children to grow up in, and to provide parents with the material and psychological means to have and raise children.
- Government support for families consists of three elements: financial support, direct services, and family leave.
- Overall governmental responsibility for ECEC was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in January 2013. General health and welfare services, however, are provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

### Legal Documents That Frame Service Delivery

The state's responsibility to promote welfare, health, and security is rooted in the Finnish Constitution, which enshrines the right of every citizen to income and care, as well as to education and culture, such as library services. Public authorities must secure equal opportunities for every resident to receive education, including “post-compulsory” education, and to develop themselves irrespective of their financial standing. All immigrants of compulsory school age (6-17) permanently residing in Finland have the right to receive the same basic education as Finns. Immigrants of all ages are provided with instruction in the Finnish or Swedish language and typically

also with their mother tongue, with the objective of “functional bilingualism”—a command of Finnish or Swedish while maintaining the native language and culture.

The following section lists those pieces of legislation that directly address the aims, nature, orientation, and amount of services received by children and their families in Finland. These are termed *acts of Parliament*, which are laws passed by the Finnish Parliament, and *decrees*, which generally specify or clarify acts (e.g., setting a specific monetary amount for a service guaranteed by an act). Together, these acts and associated decrees aim to ensure that children’s best interest is taken into account in every stage. They are intended to contribute to Finnish welfare system with basic characteristics of universalism, social rights, and equality.

### *Child Welfare and Support*

- The objective of the *Child Welfare Act* (417/2007) is to protect children’s rights to a safe growth environment, balanced and well-rounded development, and special protection. It obligates municipalities to provide preventive child welfare services and, to the extent there is a need, child- and family-specific child welfare services.
- Under the *Social Welfare Act* (1301/2014), municipalities are responsible for providing child guidance and family counseling when there is a need.
- The *Child Support Act* (704/1975) obligates both parents to support their child(ren) to best of their abilities.
- A child’s right to have a father and the determination and verification of paternity are regulated under the *Paternity Act* (11/2015). The Act is supervised by the Ministry of Justice.
- If the party responsible for providing child support fails to pay this support, the government shall pay a child maintenance allowance in accordance with the *Act on Child Maintenance Allowance* (580/2008).

- The *Act and Decree on Child Custody and Right of Access* stipulate how custody of a child shall be arranged if the parents do not live together, and moreover, how disputes are to be resolved. Provisions on decisions concerning child custody and rights of access are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice.
- Provisions on family care as a form of substitute child care are contained in the *Family Care Act* (312/1992).
- Family leaves are regulated under the *Employment Contracts Act* (55/2001). The Act contains provisions on the rights of parents to take leave for family reasons.
- The rights to maternity and child health clinic services, school and student health care, as well as preventive oral health care for children, are regulated under the *Act on Maternity and Child Health Clinic Services, School and Student Health Care, Preventive Oral Health Care for Children and Young People* (338/2008).
- The right to receive a parental allowance is regulated in the *Health Insurance Act* (1224/2004). The Act contains provisions on maternity, special maternity, paternity, and parental allowances. The Act also contains provisions on a home care allowance, which is paid to parents to compensate for any loss of earnings while caring for a sick child.

### *Early Childhood Education and Care*

- The *Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* (36/1973) regulates the provision of ECEC organized by any provider, be it a municipality, a consortium of municipalities, or another ECEC provider (public or private). The Act also states the goals for ECEC.
- The right of children to day care and the municipality's responsibility to provide day care are regulated under *Decree on Children's Day Care* (239/1973).
- The maximum amount of day care fees is determined in accordance with the *Act on Client Fees in Social Welfare and Health Care* (734/1992).
- Home care and private care allowances are regulated under the *Child Home Care and Private Care Allowance Act* (1128/1996).

### *Basic and Pre-Primary Education*

- The *Basic Education Act* (628/1998) provides for basic education, including pre-primary education; for voluntary additional basic education for those who have completed the basic education syllabus; for instruction preparing immigrants for basic education; and for before- and after-school activities.
- The *Basic Education Decree* (852/1998) prescribes a number of regulations, including working time, methods, instruction, groups, evaluation and assessment, and students' rights, which apply to basic education.
- Two national curricula, the use of which is mandatory by law, apply to ECEC settings: the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2016) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2016).
- Provisions on the right of the students in pre-primary school and basic education to student welfare are laid down in the *Act on Pupil and Student Welfare* (1287/2013).
- The *Teaching Qualifications Decree* (986/1998) prescribes the qualification requirements of educational staff.
- The *Act on Checking the Criminal Background of Persons Working with Children* (504/2002) requires that all persons working with children submit, at the employer's request, a criminal background check.
- The qualification requirements for personnel working in day care facilities is laid down in the *Decree on Social Welfare Professionals* (817/2015).

### *Children's Rights*

- The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN CRC, 59/1991 and 60/1991) covers all essential human rights concerning children: civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to rights regarding an adequate standard of

living. In Finland, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* came into force in 1991, and is considered part of the nation's legal system.

- The *Act on the Ombudsman for Children* (1221/2004) and the *Decree on the Ombudsman for Children* (274/2005) define the role of the Ombudsman for Children, who is tasked with ensuring that the situation and rights of children are taken account of in legislation and in societal decision-making.
- The *Non-discrimination Act* (1325/2014) is intended to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and enhance the protection provided by law to those who have been discriminated against. Under this Act, education providers are required to evaluate the realization of equality in their activities and take necessary measures to promote equality.
- The *Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients* (812/2000) supports social welfare clients' right to good social welfare. The Act lays down the key legal principles related to client participation, treatment, and legal protection in social welfare matters. It clarifies the implications of fundamental rights in social welfare and specifies the issues covered by data protection. It applies to social welfare provided by both the public and private sectors.
- The *Act on Equality between Women and Men* (609/1986) obligates employers, authorities, educational institutions, and other parties providing education and training to promote gender equality in a target-oriented and systematic manner. Furthermore, all employers and educational institutions are tasked with drafting a gender equality plan.

### *ECEC Policy Framework*

Finnish society and its policies are based on three core principles of the Nordic welfare model: *universalism* (i.e., social welfare programs for all citizens), *social rights* (i.e., citizenship as a basis of entitlement), and *equality* (i.e., equal access to services) (Miettinen, 2013). The state plays an important role in developing and managing welfare policies and services in Finland. The state's responsibility to provide and

promote education, health, welfare, and security is written into the Finnish Constitution, and citizens are guaranteed the right to income and care.

These values are also reflected in the nation's embrace of a collective responsibility for young children, which has evoked a range of policies over time. For instance, legislation passed in 1938 provided dedicated maternity boxes to every Finnish newborn; eight years later, a formal child benefit scheme was put in place. In 1973, local authorities were given a statutory obligation to provide day care for children under school age, and child care leave policies (1989), day care and home care allowances (1990), and private day care allowances (1997) soon followed. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a sustained commitment to young children, with free preschool education provided to all 6-year-olds as of 2001, and paternal leave raised to 54 working days in 2013. Today, universal and integrated ECEC services ensure that children and their families, wherever they live and whatever their social, economic, ethnic, or cultural background, have access to nationally defined ECEC services.

### *Major Policy Changes*

Major policy changes have recently reshaped the Finnish ECEC landscape. One of the most significant changes took place in January 2013, when the overall responsibility for early childhood education and care was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. Notably, because pre-primary education for 6-year-olds was already under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, this brought greater structural alignment to ECEC and pre-primary administration. This governmental restructuring involved many years of preparation and development. As expressed by a number of the case study interviewees, the aim of this change was to emphasize and further develop the educational side of ECEC by integrating it more strongly with the lifelong learning strategy steered by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

A second major policy change took place in 2015-16, with the August 2016 renewal of the legislation and national core curricula for ECEC and pre-primary education. The legislation is now titled *The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* (formerly the *Act on Children's Day Care*), and the implications of its renewal were numerous. First, it had legal implications for children's enrollment in ECEC and pre-primary programs. For the first time, pre-primary education was made compulsory for all 6-year-old children (although enrollment rates had previously been high). Furthermore, and quite significantly, the new law removed 3- to 6-year-old children's universal right to municipality-subsidized ECEC regardless of their parents' employment status. Now, municipalities can limit children to 20 hours per week of subsidized ECEC unless the child's parents work or study full time (EV 112/2015).

Second, the Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH)—the “implementation arm” of the Ministry of Education that had previously overseen the pre-primary and primary education curricula—was made responsible for the ECEC curriculum as well. With that new authority, it published the first mandatory national core curriculum for ECEC, which is aligned with the national core curricula for pre-primary and primary. This has been implemented nationwide since August 2017. Finally, structural program requirements were changed; for instance, the child-staff ratio for children over the age of 3 in all center-based ECEC was increased from one staff member for every seven children to one staff member for every eight children.

Third, the Finnish government is currently involved in a process of legislative reform that includes revisiting and defining the competence requirements for ECEC staff. This was deemed necessary as competence requirements are at the moment still defined by the Law on Qualification Requirements for Social Welfare Personnel (Onnismaa, 2017).





**Part 3**  
**Direct**  
**Services to**  
**Young**  
**Children**

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## Chapter 5: Nature of General Services Provided for Young Children

This chapter delineates the nature of general health and well-being services that are available to young children in Finland, providing information on engagement with and organization of these services.

### Key Points

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and Ministry of Education and Culture share responsibility for general services for young children and their families.
- The National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme is part of the Finnish social security system, providing free, public health care to all children.
- Prenatal and perinatal services in Finland are voluntary and free of charge for residents.
- Children under the age of 18 are entitled to free appointments with health center general practitioners.
- Children diagnosed with special needs and/or a disability are entitled to specialized services and assistance free of charge.

### Nature of General Services

There are six primary universal services and allowances available to all children under 18 and their families in Finland: prenatal and perinatal services, child health services, parental leave, home care allowance, the child benefit scheme (i.e., child allowance), and services for children with special needs.

### *Prenatal and Perinatal Services*

All children in Finland have the universal right to free, public, high-quality health care, which includes prenatal and perinatal services for children, mothers, and families. During pregnancy, health clinics monitor and promote the health and well-being of women and provide ultrasound studies and amniotic fluid fetal chromosome tests. Deliveries are generally managed by hospitals, which are equipped with the capacity to perform emergency C-sections and have facilities and resources for enhanced supervision of the mother and fetus. After the child is born, both the child's development and mother's and family's well-being are monitored at a health clinic via regular check-ups. Parenting and family counseling services are also provided, offering advice on breastfeeding, nutrition, and child development.

### *Child Health Services*

Regular, free check-ups at high-quality health clinics are conducted by qualified clinical staff who monitor and document children's health and development. These health services include monitoring a child's physical, physiological, mental, and social development based on nationally defined standards regulated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, as well as the provision of dental care. A national vaccination program is also offered to all children. During a child's health and well-being checks, parents are given information on breastfeeding, vitamins, and nutrition, and techniques to promote the child's healthy development at home. Written and digital materials on parenting and children's healthy development and well-being are also widely available. These services are used by nearly all children and families.

Typically, a child will be monitored weekly in their first month of life, and then monthly for the remaining 11 months of their first year. Thereafter, each child has annual health and development checks until the age of 7 at public health clinics. When a child enters primary school, in-house nurses and doctors continue to monitor the child's

healthy development and well-being on an annual basis. In addition, all children are entitled to free specialized health care or welfare services if needed.

### *Parental Leave*

There are several types of publicly funded family or parental leave. Pregnant women have the right to 105 paid working days of *maternity leave*. This leave enjoys wide popularity and is used by practically all pregnant women. Since early 2013, fathers have been able to take 54 working days of *paternity leave* after their child's birth, 18 of which may be used while the mother is on maternity leave. Following this, either the mother or father can take an additional *parental leave* of 158 working days after the maternity leave period ends, with an extension of 60 working days for each child in the case of multiple births (e.g., twins or triplets). This allowance is means-tested and based on the parents' income, with a minimum payment of about \$28 (€23.73) per working day covered by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA) for those with no or little income. For example, a parent with an annual income of \$71,000 (€60,000) would receive about \$136 (€115.66) per working day.

In Finland, women are more likely to take advantage of the various leaves available. In 2016, 90.5 percent of women used their parental leave (a leave with a maximum of 158 days that is available for either the mother or father after the maternity leave period), while only 9.5 percent of fathers were on parental leave. Also, only 1.7 percent of fathers took advantage of their paternity leave in full (KELA, 2018).

### *Home Care Allowance*

After the parental leave period ends, a parent has the right to take unpaid leave from work to care for a child until the child reaches the age of 3; they are supported by a *home care allowance* during this time. This flat-rate allowance is paid to a parent per eligible child by the KELA and is considered to be taxable income. For one child under the age of 3, or one adopted child over the age of 3, the allowance is about \$401 (€342.53) per

month. For each additional child under the age of 3, the allowance is approximately \$120 (€102.55), and for each additional child under school age, the allowance is about an additional \$77 (€65.89). Low-income families may also apply for an income-based child care supplement, which has a maximum value of about \$215 (€183.31) per month. According to statistics, 93 percent of people utilizing the home care allowance are women (KELA, 2018).

### *A Child-Benefit Scheme (Child Allowance)*

Finland's monthly tax-free child benefit scheme was established in 1948 as part of the Nordic welfare model. Also called a *child allowance*, it is provided by KELA to parents of all children under 17, regardless of income, with no restrictions on its use (KELA, 2017a). In 2017, the benefit for the first child was \$112 (€95.75) per month, the second about \$124 (€105.80), the third about \$158 (€135.01), the fourth about \$181 (€154.64), and the fifth or any additional child about \$204 (€174.27). In addition, single parents receive a supplement of about \$53 (€45.30) per month per child (KELA, 2017b). As an example, a family consisting of two adults and three children would altogether receive about \$394 (€336.56) per month, tax-free.

### *Services for Children with Special Needs*

Children diagnosed with special needs and/or a disability are entitled to special services and assistance free of charge. Depending on the child's particular needs, these may include transport services, access to a personal assistant, or facilities/devices to help the child engage more fully in day-to-day life. Typically, children with special needs and/or a disability are placed with other children in mainstream ECEC and provided with additional support, although ECEC services can also be arranged in special groups, depending on the child's needs. Children with severe disabilities are also entitled to medical rehabilitation organized by KELA.

To coordinate these services and assistance, relevant authorities from KELA, health, welfare, and/or education create a support plan with parents covering all the needs of the child. Typically, the child will also be assigned a contact person who will liaise between the family and various authorities to foster coordination among different agencies supporting the child and family. In addition, not-for-profit NGOs and the municipal ombudsman for social services are available to help support these children and their families. Parents of children with special needs are also eligible for financial benefits from KELA, including a disability allowance for children under the age of 16 and a special care allowance.

## Chapter 6: Nature of ECEC Services

This chapter delineates the range of services provided in the ECEC system, outlining enrollments and the organization of services.

### Key Points

- All children in Finland have a right to municipality-subsidized ECEC services, though under the recent 2016 legislative change, the number of subsidized hours they are entitled to varies based on their parents' employment status.
- Free, half-day pre-primary education is provided to all children at age 6, and attendance is compulsory.
- There is a wide array of ECEC services for children and their families in Finland, almost all of which are publicly subsidized, and many of which are publicly provided. Center-based ECEC is the most common form of ECEC, but children may also attend family-based ECEC or more informal "open" care services.
- All center-based ECEC and all pre-primary schools must follow the national core curricula for ECEC and pre-primary, which are then tailored at both the municipality and the center levels.
- A cornerstone in the delivery of ECEC services is the provision of a plethora of care and education options based on parental choice.
- There is regional variation in the ECEC services across Finland, with some municipalities able to offer more services or a wider array of services.
- There are significant differences in the rate of participation in early childhood education between children of different ages, with attendance rising as children get older.
- There is an increase in private provision of ECEC services in Finland.

### Nature of ECEC Services Provided

In Finland, all children between the ages of 0 and 6 have a universal right to subsidized ECEC services, though only the final year, pre-primary, is compulsory for children to attend. Pre-primary education is free for all children aged 6, followed by primary education beginning the year they turn 7. Though both are compulsory, pre-primary education is considered part of ECEC, whereas primary education is part of so-called basic education, which extends through secondary education. As pre-primary education is half-day, most 6-year-old children in Finland also use other ECEC services during the year they attend the pre-primary school. A key principle of Finnish ECEC services is parental choice: because ECEC fees are subsidized based on parent income, it is intended that additional parent fees should not constitute a significant burden for families, and that they should be able to choose freely from the wide array of ECEC services available.

### *Center-Based ECEC*

In Finland, the most common form of ECEC service for children under primary school age is center-based ECEC. Centers typically operate from 6:15 am to 5:30 pm on weekdays, although some centers provide evening, 24-hour, and/or seven-day care (known as round-the-clock care). In center-based ECEC, children are generally organized into age groups of 0-3 years old and 3-5 years old. Most pre-primary education programs for 6-year-olds also take place in centers; however, 6-year-olds may also use additional part-time ECEC services, as pre-primary education is half-day (about four hours per day).

Center-based ECEC is most commonly offered by municipalities and municipality-outsourced ECEC providers (i.e., centers where slots for children are purchased by the municipality but whose staff members are not municipality employees, or centers that the municipality purchases but whose staff members are not municipality employees). However, center-based ECEC is also available from private providers. Private ECEC



service providers are almost always for-profit, and may specialize in particular activities, such as languages, arts, or sports, or advance a specific pedagogical approach, such as Montessori or Reggio Emilia. Though municipality subsidies may still be used at private centers, parent fees may be higher in these settings than in public centers.

All ECEC service providers, both public and private, must meet national legal requirements for the provision of ECEC. This includes quality measures, such as the mandatory use of national core curriculum, adult-child ratios, professional qualifications, and staffing patterns and structures, which are regulated by law and pertain to all center-based services. In this way, the government ensures that a standard of quality is held across all ECEC settings. However, there is no national program monitoring system. Instead, the municipality and Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) are jointly responsible for overseeing and monitoring the provision of private ECEC in their area.

### *Family-Based ECEC*

Another publicly available service is family-based ECEC, which is offered to children aged 0-6 in small groups in a home-like environment. Such in-home care is typically organized at the ECEC caregiver's home or at the child's home, and may be offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, or private ECEC providers. The opening hours of family-based ECEC are typically defined by the needs of the child or family, although the total length of daily service is usually eight to nine hours. The number of family-based ECEC offerings has decreased gradually over the past ten years and in 2013, the share of family-based ECEC was 15 percent, compared to 74 percent for center-based ECEC (Kumpulainen, 2015).

### *Open ECEC Services*

There are various types of open ECEC services offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, or private ECEC providers. Open services are

distinguished from center-based services in that they are comparatively informal (i.e., offered on a “drop in” basis), are generally offered for fewer hours per week, and vary among municipalities. For example, in the city of Helsinki, where the offerings are among the most diverse, open ECEC services include playground clubs, family houses, and “park auntie” activities, as described below.

### *Playgroup Club Activities*

Playgroup club activities are intended for children in home care from age 2 to the beginning of pre-primary education, and are offered throughout the country in nearly all municipalities. They are supervised by a playground center employee of the city (i.e., ECEC caregiver). Activities are free of charge and are organized for about 3 hours per day, usually from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm, up to 4 days in a week. Typical supervised activities include play, singing, and physical exercise; there may also be mother/father and child activities, language courses for migrant parents, sleep guidance, baby massages, infant family activities, and outdoor recreational and sports activities.

### *Private Playgroup Clubs*

Some cities, notably Helsinki, also subsidize playgroup club activities organized by private service providers with service vouchers, which were worth about \$120 per month in 2017. Children aged 0-5 can participate in 36 to 60 hours of playgroup club activities per month.

### *Family Houses*

Family houses organized by the city offer many services for families with small children, such as drop-in services, resident-oriented activities, and various courses and group meetings for parents, children, and those who work with local families with small children. Family houses also distribute information on child care and child

development. Both parks and family houses offer families the opportunity to meet other families and share experiences of everyday life.

### *Park Auntie Activities*

Park auntie activities offer short-term care in the mornings for children under the age of 6, typically for free. The activities include singing, playing, and physical exercise, supervised by playground supervisors, or park aunts employed by the city (i.e., ECEC caregivers). Depending on the park, the activities may also include puppet theatre, ball and water games, drawing, and painting. In the park, the children are free to play as they wish although the park auntie may assist or participate.

### *Other Activities*

In addition to municipality- or city-organized ECEC services, local churches, NGOs, and cultural institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, science centers, community groups, religious communities) provide ECEC services for young children and their families. Municipalities and private bodies also offer various forms of physical and sports activities. Some of the activities are fee-based, such as many sport clubs, although supervised activities are also offered with no charge.

## **Participation in ECEC Services for Children Aged 0-5**

Although there is extensive access to ECEC services in Finland, there are significant differences in the participation rates among children of different ages. Children are more likely to participate as they grow older, with rates rising from 0.8 percent for those under the age of 1 to 29 percent for 1-year-olds, 52 percent for 2-year-olds, 59 percent for 3-year-olds, and 75 percent for 4- to 6-year-olds (Kumpulainen, 2015). These statistics reflect the reality that robust support mechanisms and incentives are available for parents to take care of their children at home before the child turns 3 (Sipilä, Rantalaiho, Repo, & Rissanen, 2012). The home care allowance is particularly popular

among parents with low levels of education and income and immigrant families (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016; Repo 2009, 2010). Currently, there are proposals to change ECEC subsidies for parents, the child home care allowance, and the child care leave length in order to increase under-3-year-olds' participation in ECEC (Karila, Kosunen, & Järvenkallas, 2017). These potential changes challenge the basic principle of parental choice and potentially signal that children of unemployed, low-income, and/or immigrant families are "at risk" and require institutional ECEC services.

### Pre-Primary Education

Pre-primary education typically begins in the autumn of the year a child turns 6 and is designed to support a child's learning, development, well-being, and smooth transition to school. Since autumn 2015, pre-primary education has been compulsory for all children, although prior to this, attendance rates hovered above 98 percent (Kumpulainen, 2015). Despite its compulsory nature, pre-primary education is considered part of the ECEC system, rather than the basic education system.

Pre-primary education is organized for 700 hours per academic year, equating to roughly four hours per day (OPH, 2017a). Fully paid for by the state, it is free of charge for all children, including all materials and meals. In addition, children who live over five kilometers from their pre-primary setting, or where the route is dangerous, are entitled to free transport (OPH, 2017a). All Finnish pre-primary education follows the national core curriculum and local curriculum; individualized education plans are also created for each child. Of the children who participate in pre-primary education, approximately 80 percent are in services organized by ECEC centers (public or private), with the remaining in pre-primary education organized in primary schools (Kumpulainen, 2015). Notably, though pre-primary education can be offered in private centers (both for-profit and non-profit), private providers must follow the national core curriculum and meet all legal requirements and standards.

## Recent Trends and Changes in ECEC Provision

### *Increasing For-Profit ECEC Provision*

Traditionally, ECEC services have been part of the universal services organized by municipalities, and funded by a combination of public support from the state and municipalities and parents' fees. Although the for-profit ECEC sector in Finland is still small (about 10 percent) (Lahtinen, 2017), it continues to grow (Ruutiainen, 2016). In addition, larger municipalities are increasingly outsourcing some of their services to for-profit ECEC providers to reduce costs, and to promote diversity and parent choice. Particularly when faced with rapid demographic change, it is often considered more efficient and cost-effective for a municipality to outsource services, rather than open its own centers. Currently, the for-profit ECEC sector is dominated by three large providers, who are able to benefit from economies of scale and reduced overhead costs (Lahtinen, 2017).

Despite the higher fees typically associated with private ECEC providers, parents may choose them due to the availability of specialist interest areas (e.g., language and music), desired philosophical orientation (e.g., Montessori), convenience of location, and greater voice in center activities. Notwithstanding some of these benefits of diverse ECEC provision, however, criticisms remain regarding the increasing presence of for-profit ECEC providers, particularly due to the possible differentiation and creation of inequalities among children (Ruutiainen, 2016). There are concerns that greater private provision has the potential to increase segregation between wealthier children (whose parents may choose to pay the higher fees) and children who are less well-off. This in turn poses a threat to the long-held Finnish commitment to ECEC as an equal start for all children.

### *Legal Change*

As a result of recent economic challenges, the ECEC legislation that came into effect in August 2016 ended the principle of children's equal access to ECEC regardless of their family's economic position or engagement in the labor market. Now, children whose parents are not students or working full-time have only a 20-hour per week entitlement to subsidized ECEC, and have no right to subsidized part-time ECEC to supplement half-day pre-primary education. Previously, no such restrictions existed, and all children could participate in full-day, subsidized ECEC. Moreover, this law increased the adult-child ratio in 3- to 5-year-old ECEC groups to one adult for every eight children (from one adult to seven children). Driven by the need to reduce public expenditure, these changes have heightened public concern not least because they contradict research evidence and current efforts to increase children's participation in ECEC. Overall, the changes in the law appear to weaken children's equal rights for ECEC, particularly for children who come from more vulnerable families (Karila, Kosonen, & Järvenkallas, 2017). It remains to be seen how municipalities will follow this law, as they are entitled to decrease the adult:child ratio and offer universal ECEC services to all children (regardless of their parents' employment status) if they choose to do so. In this respect, the law gives flexibility to ECEC providers.

On the other hand, the new law also promoted quality by making implementation of the national core curriculum for ECEC mandatory for all ECEC centers. It also made pre-primary attendance compulsory, although given previously high rates of attendance, this legal change did not have significant on-the-ground impact.

### **Primary Education**

All children in Finland must begin attending primary school during the year they turn 7. Primary education, which covers ages 7 to 12, is part of the Finnish basic education system and is therefore free of charge, with no cost for materials, meals, and, when necessary, transport. It is typically organized by municipality-run schools, which all

must follow the national core curriculum for basic education, meeting minimum requirements for the organization of time and delivery of the curriculum. For example, every child attending grades 1 (7 years old) and 2 (8 years old) has the right to receive at least 19 hours of primary education a week, with the school day being no longer than five hours. As school days typically end earlier than parents' working hours, many children who attend grades 1 and 2 participate in after-school clubs (Kuntaliitto, 2017).

There are few private primary schools in Finland. Private primaries must acquire a license from the Finnish National Agency for Education; if granted, the school will receive government funding but, unlike private ECEC services, cannot make a profit. Fewer than 2 percent of children study in private schools (OPH, 2017b).



**Part 4**  
**Fostering**  
**Quality**  
**Services**

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## Chapter 7: Pedagogical Approaches and Curriculum

This chapter focuses on the pedagogical approaches and curriculum that characterize services for young children in Finland. It addresses the overall philosophical orientation of the curriculum and the reasons for that orientation.

### Key Points

- Finnish ECEC is framed by a holistic model where care is joined with education and teaching.
- Finnish ECEC follows the national core curricula, which are then locally defined by the municipalities to meet their localities' particular aims and needs, and are typically also defined further by the education provider to promote the highest possible level of individualization to meet children's needs and to promote successful implementation.
- Finnish ECEC pedagogy underscores the intrinsic value of childhood and child-centered pedagogy.
- Finnish ECEC curricula do not specify standardized learning or performance goals for children. Instead, each child's learning and development is monitored in accordance with their Individual Education Plan (IEP), crafted at the beginning of the school year through collaboration between the teacher, parents, and child.
- Finland's aim is to ensure that all education providers in the country provide equally high-quality ECEC services, a lofty goal that is not without its challenges.

### Curriculum Framework Overview

Finland's national curriculum framework for ECEC covers children between the ages of 0 and 5. Separate curricula exist for pre-primary (6-year-olds) and primary education; however, all three curricula promote quality, equity, and effectiveness and are thematically linked to support children's continuous learning. There is purposeful alignment between all three curricula, and since 2016, all three curricula are drafted and overseen by the same National Agency for Education.

*Theoretical Underpinning of the Curricula* The pedagogy of the Finnish ECEC and pre-primary curricula is underpinned by the intrinsic value of childhood and the importance of play for human development and learning (OPH, 2016a, 2016b). Drawing on socio-constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning and development, children's own cultures, previous experience, knowledge, skills, and personal interests are emphasized and regarded as important building blocks for their learning and development (OPH, 2016a, 2016b). Learning is considered a holistic process in which actions, emotions, sensory perceptions, and bodily experiences interact. As a result, the ECEC curriculum does not set specified learning or performance targets for children under 6 years old; instead, it promotes child-centered pedagogy and humanistic values, inspired by the Froebel approach from the late 19th century (Froebel, 1887), and reflecting an appreciation of children's agency and autonomy. Social interactions and relationships among children are highly valued and encouraged. In parallel, there is an emphasis on creating a sense of community among children, ECEC staff, families, and the local community (OPH, 2016a, 2016b).

### Content of the Curricula

The Finnish national core curricula for ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education are the responsibility of the Finnish National Agency for Education and are developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders—experts and citizens including educational policymakers, teachers and other ECEC professionals, families, trade unions,

professional organizations, and research communities. The three curricula are designed to align with one another in content and pedagogy. Each one is further individualized to fit context-specific needs through tailoring by both the municipality and the local provider.

The content of the Finnish ECEC curricula, including pre-primary education, is organized into five core entities (OPH, 2016a). These cover: *Diverse forms of expression*, including music, visual arts, crafts, and physical and verbal expression; *Rich world of the language*, including linguistic skills and competencies, and using language as a tool for thinking, expression, and interaction; *Me and our community*, which aims at helping children understand themselves and others, including diversity in society; *Exploring and interacting with my environment*, addressing the development of children's science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills; and *I grow and develop*, addressing physical activity, food and nutrition, and consumer skills, as well as health and safety issues.

Each of these five areas is framed by the concept of “transversal competence”—the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and will that are designed to support personal growth, lifelong learning, working life, and civic activity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Unsurprisingly, these competencies are now promoted across the education system from ECEC until the end of compulsory schooling. They cover: thinking and learning skills; cultural competence, interaction and self-expression; taking care of oneself and managing daily life; multi-literacy; information and communication technology skills; and participation and involvement in civil society.

### *Adaptations to the Curriculum*

#### *Local Adaptations*

Each municipality is responsible for developing a local curriculum for each level of education, starting with ECEC, adapted from the national core curriculum (OPH, 2016a,

2016b, 2017b). These adapted local curricula specify the language(s) of instruction; structure, topics, form, and evaluation; strategies for family and community participation and communication; and plans to promote equity and equality. The curricula are then typically tailored further by each provider to address the needs of his/her children. The municipalities also develop a strategy for cooperation with other partners and stakeholders in the community, including other ECEC providers, basic education teachers, and the health care and social welfare sectors.

### *Adapting for Individual Children*

Every child attending ECEC, including pre-primary education, must have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (OPH, 2016a, 2016b). These plans set the basis for tailoring the national and local curricula for each child, supporting their learning, development, and well-being in culturally and contextually sensitive ways. The IEP states the goals and means for ECEC for each child, and lists any additional support required. Each plan is co-constructed by the ECEC teachers, parents, and the child, and may also involve other professionals from the social welfare sector. The plan is devised for each child every year and revisited with the parents and the child at least twice a year.

### **Transitions**

A central goal of pre-primary education is to help children transition smoothly into school. To support this, pre-primary providers are required to cooperate with children's former or future education providers and share relevant information about each child (OPH, 2016a, 2016b). During the pre-primary year, transition efforts are planned and evaluated by teachers, the child, and parents (Kumpulainen, et al., 2015), and may include in-person activities such as school visits, parent-child-teacher meetings, and parents' evenings. Additional transition efforts include setting specific targets for each child's school readiness in their IEPs, creating child-created portfolios that transfer information between pre-primary and primary education setting, having primary school children visit pre-primary classrooms to share their experiences, and nominating

older “siblings” from the primary school to support younger children’s first school year by meeting them and helping with school work. As children typically attend the local primary school nearest their home, they already know during their pre-primary year which school they will be attending next. Moreover, guided by the aligned national core curricula, children experience a continuity of content and pedagogy, which facilitates their transition and minimizes the challenges often associated with transition. In this way, Finland creates structural continuity for children through curricular and pedagogical alignment, while also underscoring the importance of transitions throughout purposeful activities and planning.

## Chapter 8: Children’s Development: Goals, Standards, Assessment, and Accountability

This chapter focuses on the goals for children’s development and the use of formative assessments in Finland. It also addresses Finland’s lack of national standards and national assessment system.

### Key Points

- There are no early learning performance requirements or outcome specifications for young children in Finnish ECEC.
- Formative assessments conducted in ECEC focus on the pedagogical quality of ECEC, with the goal of making sure all children’s learning and development needs are met.
- To provide health assessments, maternity and welfare clinics monitor and support child's health through counseling and medical examinations, and through other measures such as immunization. These public health care services—which are free of charge and within easy reach of community members—are voluntary but widely taken up.

### Early Learning and Development Standards

Although there are no early learning performance requirements or outcome specifications for children’s learning and development in ECEC, including pre-primary education, teachers are expected to systematically and consciously observe and document each child’s learning; moreover, teachers are required to factor these observations into individual children’s ongoing pedagogical work and activities. This formative assessment, typically orchestrated by the ECEC teachers in multimodal forms (e.g., print, pictures, videos), takes account of the general objectives established by the ECEC curriculum and the individual child’s objectives outlined in their Individual

Educational Plans (IEPs). Providers are also required to promote children's own capabilities for documenting and reflecting on their learning; in fact, the ability to self-assess by children is considered a core competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (OPH, 2016a). Throughout the year, parents are provided with regular feedback on their child's progress.

All children's physical development and well-being are monitored and supported during annual medical examinations. Infants under a year old are examined by a doctor in a health clinic two to three times and then every year until the child is 7 years old and comes under the school health care system. Health care professionals make observations of growth in height and weight; growth of head circumference; acuity of vision; signs of a squint; hearing; speech development; psychomotor skills; and blood pressure. Alongside a child's physical health condition, the emotional and social development of the child is examined, as is the nature of the interactions between the child and his or her parents. Other measures, such as immunizations, are also free of charge and enjoy wide public support (Wiss et al., 2014).

## Chapter 9: Program Quality: Standards, Inspection, and Improvement

This chapter focuses on the quality of Finnish ECEC programs by examining the nature and content of program standards, the external inspection (monitoring) process, and how these are enshrined in national law.

### Key Points

- Finnish ECEC services are evaluated locally, regionally, and nationally.
- National legislation obligates the municipalities to evaluate the quality of ECEC programs and ensure compliance with the nationally defined minimum program standards.
- Rather than a strict national monitoring apparatus, the Finnish system relies heavily on the proficiency of ECEC teachers and other personnel, with limited program evaluation or inspection occurring.
- Parents are also viewed as important and knowledgeable “overseers” of ECEC programs, and are seen as capable of filing complaints if they perceive violations of legal program standards such as student-teacher ratios or classroom safety.
- The self-evaluation tools used by municipalities and settings themselves are not standardized, and differ across Finland.
- Finnish ECEC pedagogy stresses the need to acknowledge children’s views when monitoring ECEC quality and teachers commonly make use of narrative assessments (e.g., storytelling instruments and portfolios) and observational tools (e.g., rubrics) to follow child development and well-being.



### Program Regulations

The national policy laid out in the *Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* (36/1973) and Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (OPH, 2016a, 2016b), as well as local policy definitions and plans, provide the basis for defining program quality in ECEC. The minimum regulatory standards cover areas including maximum permitted group sizes (i.e., 20 pre-primary children if two adults are present, or 13 if one is present) and staff qualifications (i.e., one-third of staff in ECEC centers must have a higher education degree in ECEC). Staff-child ratios are also strictly regulated. For instance, in center-based ECEC, one adult must be present for every four children aged 0-3, and for every eight children aged 3 to 5. Furthermore, it is legally required that a local curriculum and IEP for each child must be created by all ECEC providers, based on the national core curricula for ECEC.

The responsibility of monitoring ECEC program quality rests with municipalities and Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs). Because monitoring takes place at the local level, there are no shared criteria for program quality in ECEC in Finland (Karila, 2016). This lack of a national monitoring system, along with limited training on monitoring, poses a challenge. However, it is foreseen that program evaluations of ECEC services will become more systematic in the future, as the National Evaluation Center (FINEEC) was recently made responsible for formulating four-year plans for the execution of national evaluations on program quality in Finnish ECEC. These program evaluations are intended to constitute policy-relevant research, and do not involve the establishment of a national monitoring system.

## Chapter 10: Professional Preparation and Development

This chapter addresses the role that professionals play in fostering quality for young children. Information is included on the requirements for working with young children, pre-service professional development options, and available opportunities for ongoing professional development.

### Key Points

- The teaching profession, including ECEC teaching, is highly valued in Finland, and teacher education programs offered by universities are highly competitive.
- The average statutory salaries of ECEC teachers in Finland are below the OECD average (OECD, 2016). However, given Finland's broad social supports for its citizenry, ECEC teaching is still considered to be an attractive occupation.
- Though there are no national requirements regarding in-service training, Finnish ECEC teachers consider it to be a privilege and therefore participate actively when given the opportunity.
- There is no separate ECEC workforce evaluation in Finland. Evaluations address the system and its functioning.

### ECEC Workforce Requirements

Finnish ECEC is delivered by a range of ECEC professionals. Generally, center-based ECEC teams are comprised of at least three different types of staff: *educational staff* (ECEC teachers and special needs ECEC teachers) qualified at a tertiary level (bachelor or master's level in ECEC); *care staff*, with a minimum qualification at upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level in health and welfare; and *auxiliary staff*, who usually have a minimum qualification at upper secondary level (UNESCO Institute of

Statistics, 2012). Though there are not specific legal requirements for the qualifications of center directors, they are mostly ECEC teachers or health or welfare professionals with extensive work experience in the field. In family-based ECEC and open day care, the qualification requirements are lower than for center-based ECEC; however, there remains a requirement for at least post-secondary, non-tertiary level education in health and/or welfare.

Across the board, minimum requirements for ECEC staff are relatively high in Finland compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2016b). For example, at least one third of staff working with children aged 0 to 6 in center-based ECEC must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (i.e., be ECEC teachers), while the rest of the workforce is required to have at least upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level education in health and welfare. Given that ECEC teachers typically form the smallest group in center-based ECEC (with the majority being social workers or nurses with lower qualifications), initiatives are underway to increase the number of ECEC teachers with pedagogical expertise. This is particularly pressing given that the new mandatory national core curriculum for ECEC is intended to be implemented by a BA-qualified teacher, rather than care-focused professional staff (Karila, Kosonen, & Järvenkallas, 2017). Specifically, teachers have the primary responsibility for pedagogy and curriculum delivery in center-based ECEC, although other members of the workforce may assist. In reality, however, the roles and responsibilities between teachers and the rest of ECEC workforce are blurred within the classroom, which has led to calls for clarification on job descriptions and management/leadership structures at the workplace (Karila & Kinos 2010; Karila & Kupila, 2010; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, & Kalliala 2015).

### Pre-Service Teacher Education

Pre-service ECEC teacher education programs typically last between three and four years. The entire degree program for ECEC teachers accounts for 180 European Credit

Transfer System (ECTS), with an additional 60 ECTS in special needs education required for students who wish to become special needs ECEC teachers. The aims of the ECEC teacher education programs are ambitious and demanding, with an emphasis on both theory and practice in pedagogical studies. The education includes both practice in different ECEC programs, including pre-primary classrooms and the integration of research. This is aimed at teachers developing their own practical theory and adopting a research-oriented attitude towards their work. In Finland, all teacher education programs, including ECEC, primary and secondary teacher education programs are now situated in universities. Until September 2018, ECEC teachers could obtain bachelor's degrees from either universities or universities of applied sciences, with the university-based program more focused on education and pedagogy, while the university of applied sciences program concentrated on nursing and social care. Following the change, bachelor's degrees for ECEC teachers can only be obtained at universities.

Entrance into ECEC teacher education programs is highly competitive, as the university-level degree and nature of teacher's work attract many young people. The flexibility with pedagogical methods and materials also proves to be an attractive aspect of the work, as teachers are considered "co-designers" of children's learning, together with children, families, and the community. Interestingly, despite the profession's popularity, average salaries of ECEC teachers in Finland are below the OECD average (OECD, 2016b). This has thus far not proved to be a significant problem in attracting nor retaining teachers in the field, perhaps in large part due to the nature of the work and the generous social provisions afforded by the Finnish government to all citizens.

### **In-Service Teacher Education**

Responsibility for continuing professional development (CPD) for the ECEC workforce in Finland rests with the municipality. However, there are several providers of in-service professional development, which, in addition to municipalities, include regional

agencies; universities; research institutions; and private, for-profit providers. With no national legislation governing CPD, the nature and amount of CPD opportunities are negotiated locally by the municipalities. Some estimates put the amount at three to 10 days annually per ECEC staff member, the cost of which is met by the municipality or employer (Lastentarhanopettajaliitto, 2017).

Despite this locally driven approach, there are varied opportunities for the ECEC workforce in Finland to benefit from CPD that addresses national and local needs. The National Agency for Education co-ordinates a national network for developing ECEC, which includes a professional development ECEC task force within and across regions and municipalities. In this national development network, professional learning takes place via sharing of research knowledge and expertise, sharing of good practices, and peer-to-peer learning. Social media, such as professional Facebook groups, is also increasingly used to support ECEC workforce learning by connecting teachers across the nation, and allowing them to share their experiences.



## Part 5 Fostering Equitable and Efficient Services

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## Chapter 11: Governance

This chapter focuses on the role that governance plays in fostering equitably distributed and efficient services for young children. It presents information on the key ministries and their roles in the governance of services to young children, and delineates the ways that coordination among ministries takes place.

### Key Points

- The general planning, supervision, and control of ECEC, including pre-primary, is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Culture, while health services are the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.
- The National Agency for Education, which is considered the “implementation arm” of the Ministry of Education and Culture, holds responsibility for many aspects of ECEC, including development of the national core curricula and funding distribution.
- Most ECEC services are delivered by municipalities, and are primarily publicly funded through a combination of national and municipal funds.
- Although municipalities in Finland are granted significant self-governance and are responsible for distributing national funding as they see fit, highly specific national legislation and regulation requires that municipality-provided services (e.g., social welfare services, ECEC services) be held to nationally defined standards.
- The Regional State Administrative Agencies are responsible for ECEC supervision in their respective areas, and work to ensure regional equity.

### Authority

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Social Affairs and Health are responsible for services for young children and their families—the former is responsible for ECEC, whereas the latter is responsible for services that deal with children’s health and welfare. This dynamic was established in 2013, when, to emphasize the educational role of ECEC, the responsibility for ECEC was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. Although no formal inter-ministerial coordination agency exists, ministries and their officials collaborate, exchange knowledge, and form working groups when needed.

The National Agency for Education, which operates as the implementation arm of the Ministry of Education and Culture, is responsible for drawing up the national core curricula for early childhood education (since 2016), pre-primary, and basic education, and general and vocational upper secondary education. It coordinates information networks and services in the education sector, produces indicator data and information for anticipating educational needs, maintains the financing system for the education sector, and publishes training guides for teachers. It also provides support services for education, such as helping schools and centers to ensure they comply with national regulations. In the policy realm, it assists the Ministry of Education and Culture in the preparation of education policy decisions.

The governance of ECEC in Finland is divided between national and municipal levels. National-level governance by the Ministry of Education and Culture involves national policymaking, financing, minimum standard setting, curriculum development, and national monitoring, while municipal-level governance covers local financing, curriculum specification, and local monitoring. Local authorities (i.e., municipalities) have broad responsibility for the provision of basic services to citizens. At present, there are 311 self-governing municipalities in Finland; they have strong self-government based on local democracy and decision making, and hold the right to levy taxes. The



municipalities are responsible for organizing ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education at a local level, and are partly responsible for financing it as well. In addition to organizing education, each local authority is responsible for social welfare services for children and young people. These include free school meals, school health care, and dental care, as well as the services of student welfare officers and school psychologists.

Six Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) work in close collaboration with municipalities in order to ensure regional equality, such as universal access to basic public services including ECEC and health care. This is realized by AVIs carrying out executive, steering, and supervisory tasks laid down in the law.

## Chapter 12: Finance

This chapter focuses on the role that finance plays in fostering equitably distributed and efficient services for young children in Finland.

### Key Points

- The national government allocates funding to municipalities, which are responsible for the provision of early childhood services as part of the array of public services provided to all citizens.
- Pre-primary and basic education in Finland are entirely publicly funded. Early childhood education and care for young children aged 0-6 is partially publicly subsidized, but families are generally expected to pay a fee as well, which is determined according to the income and size of the family.
- The future challenges of child policy and children's welfare in Finland are related to the economic crisis, increasing migration, and the need to implement austerity measures that affect benefits and services for children and families.

### Description of Key Funding

The share of GDP dedicated to ECEC services in Finland is higher than the OECD average (1.3 percent compared to 0.8 percent), and most spending on ECEC comes from public funding. This applies across the early years: Annual expenditure per child in ECEC for children under 3 is above the OECD average (about \$12,092 compared to \$8,070), as is annual expenditure for children over 3 (about \$10,477 compared to the OECD average of about \$8,704) (OECD, 2016b).

Generally, ECEC services for children aged 0-6 are funded jointly by the state (i.e., the central government), municipality, and parents. Importantly, the state's funding to

municipalities is not earmarked to ECEC but covers all public services that the municipality is legally required to deliver, allowing the municipalities flexibility in the expenditure of state funds. This state funding to municipalities is allocated according to a means-tested formula that takes several factors into account, including the number and age of residents, employment rates, and immigration rates and patterns.

Municipalities then co-finance and administer the state's funding for public services, including ECEC, taking parental contributions into consideration. Though there is some local variation in fees charged families for ECEC services, the state enforces a maximum fee, which, at present, is about \$340 USD per month for full-day provision (Kumpulainen, 2015). Parents' fees are typically means-tested depending on the size and income of the family, although some municipalities charge less than the maximum or nothing at all (Kuntaliitto, 2017). In broad terms, parents' fees for municipality-organized ECEC services cover around 13 percent of the total spending on ECEC, with the rest coming from state/municipality budgets (Lahtinen, 2017).

In the private sector, ECEC fees are set by providers, and are typically higher. Families who choose to place their children in private ECEC provision are eligible for a private day care allowance and income-adjusted care supplement, managed by KELA. In addition to the statutory private day care allowance, some municipalities or cities, such as Helsinki, may pay for additional private care support (City of Helsinki, 2017) due to a shortage of municipality-run ECEC centers in the face of growing demand.

Pre-primary and basic education are part of the municipal basic services but receive full public funding from the state. Public expenditure on education (excluding ECEC) is 6.8 percent of GDP in Finland, which is the second-highest among the EU member states after Sweden (7.1 percent) (Eurostat, 2017).

# The Early Advantage



## Part 6 Sustaining Services

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## Chapter 13: Family and Community Engagement

### Key Points

- Parental involvement in education is underscored in the Finnish ECEC system.
- Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), along with their associated twice-annual parent-teacher conferences, provide the main formal and required basis for actualizing the parent-teacher partnership in ECEC.
- The national core curriculum for pre-primary education stipulates that education providers are required to foster cooperation and coordination for the transfer of information, which enable a flexible and smooth transition of children from home or ECEC to pre-primary, and from there to primary school.

### Integrating Families

The Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC stresses cooperation between the child's home and early childhood education staff. Such perspectives are predicated on the belief that a foundation for constructive dialogue between everyone involved in a child's life enhances his or her development and well-being (OPH, 2016a). The co-construction of the IEP creates an important basis for parent-teacher partnerships, which are further strengthened by parent-staff conferences and parents' evenings.

In addition to a focus on parental engagement to support their children's development, parents are invited to participate in activities that contribute to the wider development of ECEC in the local context, including participating in parent/board associations, influencing the local curriculum, and participating in its evaluation. In fact, the new law on early childhood education reinforces the rights of parents and children when planning, executing, and evaluating ECEC. Importantly, a child's views are also taken

into account in any evaluation of ECEC (OPH, 2016a). Parents' and children's views are regarded pivotal for creating ECEC pedagogy that is responsive to the child's holistic needs.

### Community Outreach

With regard to community outreach, ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education providers are required to collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders, such as libraries, science centers, museums, cultural centers, and sports facilities/programs.

Collaboration is also supported by municipalities and the National Agency for Education via development grants and professional development programs to ensure alignment with national policies and to encourage links between cultural and educational institutions and communities. The main aim of this cooperation is to enrich a child's learning and development, and cultural awareness and appreciation (OPH, 2016a, 2016b).

One example of the efforts to integrate and increase children's interactions and learning in and with their communities is the so-called *Fiskars Model* (Tornberg, Mikkola, Rajala, & Kumpulainen, 2012). The definition of the learning environment in the Fiskars Model encompasses the whole village community in which a small primary school is situated (children aged 6 to 12). Artists and craftspeople from the village give workshops for the students on diverse topics, such as woodworking, fine arts, or glass blowing. Main pedagogical methods used in this model are learning-by-doing and active learning in authentic "real life" contexts. A local museum may also organize workshops on historical periods, in which the children dress according to the chosen period so as to feel as if they are "travelling" in time. Children can contribute to local cultural activities, like theater productions or exhibitions.

Another program, the *Kids, Museums, and Technology Programme*, is designed to provide technology experiences for young children aged between 6 and 8 years old. Funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the main educational goals of the program are to

familiarize children with technology through creative, “making” activities and to evoke children's curiosity towards science, technology, and museums. The entire program and its associated projects aim to create a new model for the co-design and co-making of child-centered exhibitions, workshops, and activities in museum settings and beyond, in which children provide input and are active participants in the creation, not just use, of exhibits.

For example, the *Magic Carpet of Technology Tales* project of the Kids, Museums and Technology Programme is grounded in three major activity phases: (i) children's exploration, visual documentation, and sense-making regarding technology in their life; (ii) children's co-creating an exhibition space for their creations with the support of museum curators and educators; and (iii) children's sense-making regarding technology in their co-created exhibition. As a pre-task, the children explore and initiate questions like “What is a museum? What is technology? How has it changed?” They are also encouraged to consider which technological object(s) from their life they would like to bring with them to the “Magic Carpet” in order to examine it in collaboration with others and consider it as a potential object for their own museum exhibition around technology (Kumpulainen, et al., 2014). The program takes place both in the museum and in the children's day care, as a collaboration between staff from the two settings.

Through an emphasis on both parental and community engagement, Finland fosters a deep societal embrace of ECEC and the early years, thus contributing to the sustainability of the system.

## Chapter 14: Research and Development

### Key Points

- The ECEC research enterprise is reasonably well-established in Finland, and is characterized by diversity and multi-disciplinarity.
- Finnish ECEC researchers are active in participating in EU-level and other international research projects.
- The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and its agencies offer grants to ECEC researchers on a competitive basis based on the government's key strategic areas and programs.
- National Agency of Education grants statutory state aid for development projects (i.e., pilots) that aim to produce scalable, broadly applicable models, methods, and tools for education. Typically in these projects, university researchers collaborate with ECEC providers and practitioners, hence integrating research into practice and practice into research.

### Research

Academic research on ECEC is fairly well established in Finland, with a growing body of work being focused on childhood and early childhood education and care. ECEC research, including pre-primary education, is multidisciplinary and encompasses the fields of education, psychology, sociology, social work, health and welfare, sport sciences, cultural studies, politics, and media studies, among others. In addition to universities and research institutions, there are several government-funded bodies and organizations, such as the Academy of Finland—an agency within the administrative branch of the Finnish Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture—that contribute to financing research on ECEC in Finland. No earmarked funding exists for ECEC only. Instead, the ECEC field is represented in one of the councils of the Academy of Finland,



the Research Council of Culture and Society. Funding will only be granted to projects that are of high scientific quality, based on a careful review process.

The Strategic Research Council (SRC) at the Academy of Finland provides funding for long-term and program-based research aimed at finding solutions to some of the major challenges facing Finnish society. The SRC presently funds a national research consortium on ECEC focusing on potential sources of inequality in Finnish ECEC policies and how they could be overcome locally and nationally ([www.jyu.fi/childcare](http://www.jyu.fi/childcare)). Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Culture funds research and development projects, such as work on promoting young children's multi-literacies in collaboration with university researchers, teacher educators, ECEC teachers, library and museum educators, and parents ([www.monilukutaito.com/en](http://www.monilukutaito.com/en)). As the implementation arm of the Ministry, the National Agency for Education also provides grants for research-based development projects that aim to create scalable, applicable models, methods, and tools for early years education. Furthermore, Finland takes an active part in international research, such as the European CARE project on the effects of ECEC on child development (Melhuish, et al., 2015).

The Ministries of Education and Culture and Social Affairs and Health and their agencies engage in research and development work relevant to the field, promote innovation, and put forward initiatives and proposals for developing ECEC, social welfare, and health care services for children and their families. They also function as statistical authorities, maintaining data files and registers. Their work also includes European and international cooperative studies.

The Finnish National Agency for Education engages in the collection of data related to the costs of education, the numbers of educational institutions, students and graduates. The agency is also involved in the exchange of international research information on education through European and international networks.

The National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) is a research and development institute under the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. THL seeks to serve the broader society in addition to the scientific community, embracing actors in the field and decision-makers in central government and municipalities. The aim is to promote health and welfare in Finland, including that of children. THL pursues its objectives by means of research, development activities, official tasks, steering through information as well as international co-operation. In its capacity as the statutory statistical authority for health and welfare, THL maintains and promotes the use of a strong knowledge base within the field.

The official producer of statistical data concerning ECEC is Statistics Finland. Statistics Finland produces nearly 200 different sets of statistics that address children and families to support decision-making, research and democratic social debate. A majority of the data for the statistics are derived from existing registers of general government. Statistics Finland also collects data with inquiries and interviews when the necessary data cannot be obtained elsewhere. Approximately 560 new releases are made from these statistics each year.

The Finnish Ombudsman for Children reports annually key research findings to the government on the welfare of children and youth and the implementation of their rights. The annual report covers the activities of the Ombudsman, the implementation of children's rights, the development of child welfare and shortcomings in legislation. In carrying out lobbying work, the Ombudsman assesses pending government projects from the perspective of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. An important task performed by the Ombudsman is to convey the opinions of young people to decision-makers. These are obtained through research such as surveys and reports and through personal meetings with children and youth.

In addition to the research and research-related activities described above, municipalities and regional agencies throughout Finland engage in practice-oriented

research and development activities as a means of improving the content, quality, and accessibility of local ECEC services, and enhancing ECEC staff's professional competencies. Collaboration with researchers and research groups representing universities and research institutes is typical in such development efforts. Although the work is typically locally funded, municipalities and education providers can also seek for government-funded developmental grants. The ECEC staff is active in participating in these projects, which contribute to the development of local and national ECEC services.

There are also societies such as the Finnish Society for Childhood Studies, a scientific, non-profit organization founded in 2008 whose mission is to promote multi- and interdisciplinary research on childhood and children, and enhance collaboration between researchers working in the area. The Society arranges conferences, seminars and other events for researchers, policymakers, professionals, and wider audiences. It also collaborates with other scientific organizations and institutes in the Nordic countries, Europe, and around the world.

# The Early Advantage



## Part 7 Country Analysis

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## Chapter 15: Systemic Outcomes

### A Principled ECEC System

The ideological orientation of the Finnish system sets ECEC deeply within a social welfare context. Finnish society and its public policies largely rest on a Nordic welfare model, with a national social contract providing universally available public services that aim to provide the highest quality education and care for children and their families on fair and equal grounds.

There are legislative, funding, and regulatory structures to support high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient ECEC services with a common set of values and national core curricula. The national policies and national curricula on ECEC, as well as local policy definitions and plans, provide the basis for quality in Finnish ECEC. Here, both structural and process mechanisms of ECEC frame the quality of the ECEC system, with stress on structural quality aspects, such as adult-child ratios and high professional competence of ECEC teachers, and process quality features, such as the availability of national core curricula for ECEC based on clear, holistic pedagogic goals, values, and approaches.

### A Trusting ECEC System

The Finnish ECEC system's basis in principles of equity and quality swaths it in a profound sense of trust: trust of and by government; and trust of and by families, teachers, and children. The citizenry assumes that the government will do its best to provide high-quality, equitable services. In turn, the government assumes that parents know and will do what is best for their children, and consequently provides an array of diverse services and supports for young families so they will have plentiful choices. From the time of a child's birth, the family leave system fosters flexibility for parents as they adapt to their changing life situation. Subsequently, while many forms of government-supported ECEC service arrangements exist, parents can also make use of

various allowances to stay at home with their child, or enroll their child in publicly or privately organized ECEC services. Across all ECEC settings, families and parents have respect for teachers as professionals, and reciprocally, teachers respect the privileged position of parents with regard to their children. Finally, there is ultimate and abundant respect for the feelings, voices, and expressions of young children. Manifest in the solicitation of children's opinions, the requirements that children participate in self-evaluation, and the premium placed on children valuing one another, the trust placed in young children echoes that which is placed in government, institutions, teachers, and parents.

### **A Personalized ECEC System**

The Finnish ECEC system is designed to meet the diverse needs of children and their families in various ways. Above all, the system trusts parents to make choices with regards to ECEC service options. While various forms of government-supported ECEC service arrangements exist, parents can also make use of various allowances to stay at home with their child or use publicly or privately organized ECEC services. The family leave system fosters flexibility so as to adapt to parents' life situations around the time of a child's birth. The national curriculum frameworks underscore personalized ECEC for each child with IEPs, co-constructed together by teachers, parents, and children, that take account of personalized learning and developmental goals.

### **A Child-Centric ECEC System**

Beyond the historic and deep-seated commitment to education and ECEC, and the principled approach to delivery structure and policy frameworks, Finland is also noted for its adherence to child-centered pedagogy and practice. Unlike many other countries that see ECEC primarily as a means to support working women or prepare children for formal school, Finland has traditionally focused on the intrinsic value of childhood and the positive development and well-being of children and families (Paananen, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2015). Moreover, Finnish ECEC pedagogy emphasizes

children's agency and the sociocultural nature of learning and development, with a focus on children's active interaction with peers, teachers, adults, community members and the local environment. This emphasis on children's agency also means that they are invited to participate in planning, creating, and evaluating their own activities and learning environments (Alasuutari & Karila, 2014; Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Rainio, 2016; Sairanen, & Kumpulainen, 2014). Enhancing children's trust in their own abilities and strengths as learners is valued; with positive emotional experiences, opportunities for child-directed play, inquiry, and imagination regarded as essential aspects of children's learning, development, and well-being (Kumpulainen et al., 2013).

## Chapter 16: Analysis and Recommendations

Overall, the conditions of young children in Finland are excellent, as youngsters are provided ample opportunities to live, learn, and develop. Despite this grounding, Finland, like all countries, faces significant 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges as it seeks to adapt to global trends and conditions. In recent years, growing immigration has brought increased ethnic, cultural, and language diversity to the country (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). Compounding these demographic changes are troubling economic trends, including rising child poverty rates, growing inequalities between the rich and poor, regional differentiation, and national budget shortfalls (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016j; Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). For the Finnish ECEC system, these shifting dynamics raise important questions, including how to best maintain and foster quality services across the country, how to attend to increasingly diverse family structures and needs, and how to promote the development and effective use of research and data. Each will be addressed below.

### Fostering Quality Services

Though ECEC services in Finland are generally of high quality, a number of questions merit further attention. At the forefront, changes in national law (e.g., raising adult:child ratios and removing children's [aged 3-6 years old] equal right to ECEC independent of their parents' work status) need to be taken seriously and more systematic follow-up needs to be conducted so as to collect data-based evidence on the effects of the new law on children and their families. At present, little is known regarding how the municipalities are implementing this new law. For instance, there is no systematic knowledge as to whether center-based ECEC education providers have in reality increased adult:child ratios for children aged 3 to 6, or if they have actually limited children's rights to full-time care regardless of their parents' employment status; nor do we know the consequences of these changes to children, families, and the ECEC workforce. Beyond this, the following subsections address further questions regarding



regional differences, a national quality framework, workforce enhancements, and role clarification within ECEC centers.

### *Addressing Regional Differences in ECEC Services*

Changes in the economic conditions, mobility patterns, and family demographics that characterize Finnish society challenge the provision of high-quality ECEC services across the country. Finland is experiencing a rapid decline in the number of people living in remote, rural regions, with the majority of people now concentrated in the south, particularly in the Helsinki capital area (OECD, 2016d). This decreasing population density across Finland's vast geography puts pressure on the state's ability to fund and support public services across the country on fair and equal grounds. In particular, in rural areas where child populations are decreasing and are more spread out, providing services is far less cost-efficient than in urban areas, and as a result, parents may be left with fewer choices or with lower-quality choices. With growing variation in the availability of ECEC services between and within municipalities (Karila et al., 2017), the government will need to develop innovative strategies to ensure that children across the nation have equal access to high-quality services that respond to their needs.

One strategy to realize this could be to pay more attention to the local design and delivery of these services, such as enhancing the role of parents and the wider community in co-designing their ECEC services that respond to local needs. By working together, municipal officials and the community could ultimately prioritize services that are in the highest demand, and could consider alternate delivery models for ECEC that might be more cost-efficient, yet still desirable to families.

### *Defining a Quality Framework*

Municipalities in Finland monitor the quality of ECEC services, and teachers and children document ECEC practices and learning processes, but there is an absence of a

dedicated national quality framework that outlines a national monitoring system of ECEC program quality. Although the national curriculum for ECEC is important in enhancing the quality of ECEC programs, it is too broad to be used for monitoring ECEC quality (Karila, 2016). The proposed development of a national quality framework for monitoring ECEC could help ensure strategic and systematic monitoring of ECEC program quality across Finland, and subsequently help guide the implementation and further development of ECEC program quality. The Finnish Education Evaluation Center is currently preparing such a framework, intended to further support Finland's goal of ensuring equally high-quality ECEC programming nationwide. It remains to be seen how this framework will be realized, and whether and how it contradicts the traditional values of the Finnish ECEC system.

### *Supporting Workforce Enhancements*

Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, and an increasingly digitalized society, challenge the professional expertise of ECEC teachers and staff. Therefore, initial teacher education programs and student admissions need to foster the development of responsive skills and expertise among the ECEC teaching profession and workforce in general. One strategy for workforce enhancement is to develop the curricular content of both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to better respond to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity and the needs of children and their families. Developmental areas might include addressing teachers' expertise in dealing with cultural/ethnic diversity as well as children's learning, development, and well-being in an increasingly diverse and digitalized society.

Another strategy is to attract more culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people into the ECEC profession by modifying entrance requirements. In addition, an increase in the proportion of ECEC teachers in center-based education and care (relative to care and auxiliary staff members) would help better meet the educational expectations and cultural competence requirements established by the new ECEC and

pre-primary education curricula, as teachers are better trained than other staff members to meet such expectations and requirements. As a response to these needs, the Finnish government is currently preparing a new legal reform that will address the competence requirements for the whole ECEC workforce (Onnismaa, 2017).

In addition, continuous attention is needed to attract and retain a competent and motivated ECEC workforce. One strategy is to develop career and CPD possibilities for all ECEC staff through the systematic use of personal professional development plans. Another strategy is to increase the salaries of ECEC teachers—which are currently below the OECD average—to maintain and motivate a competent ECEC workforce.

Last but not least, although teachers in Finland, including ECEC teachers, generally stay on the job and are satisfied with their work (Paronen & Lappi, 2018), the workforce is worryingly aging. It is thus important that attention is directed to attracting young people into the ECEC profession, and that the intake of future students in ECEC programs are carefully and strategically planned as to ensure a sufficient and competent workforce for the future.

### *Role Clarification*

At present, there are concerns in Finland that the roles of ECEC staff are blurred and undefined, resulting in the pedagogical leadership and expertise of ECEC teachers being underused (Onnismaa, Kalliala, & Tahkokallio, 2015). While creating a balanced team of ECEC staff (i.e., teachers, care staff, nurses, auxiliary staff) with different experience and qualifications may be an effective and financially sustainable approach to producing quality in ECEC, organizing the use of each staff member's different skills, knowledge, and competencies requires particular attention. Therefore, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all ECEC staff requires attention at different policy, practical, and administrative levels both locally and nationally. This is clearly also an issue that warrants attention in order to support ECEC teachers as they take on

increasing leadership responsibility in meeting the requirements of the ECEC national core curricula. Importantly, ECEC professional education programs should increase their focus on issues around pedagogical leadership and pedagogical expertise overall. These issues will be addressed in the government's current preparations for a new law that will revisit and specify the competence requirements for ECEC personnel (Onnismaa, 2017).

### Supporting Families

*Reconciling Work and Family Life* Although Finland performs well in international rankings regarding women's participation in working life (75.9 percent) compared to the OECD average (71.3 percent) (OECD, 2017a), there is evidence that the Finnish model for combining work and family still has a gender skew (i.e., more mothers taking leave than fathers) and remains inflexible, resulting in an inequitable amount of the child-rearing burden falling to women (Kosunen, 2014). Therefore, in the spirit of the Nordic values, the policies for families set forth by the government, trade unions, and industry should more vigorously seek to reconcile paid employment and family life, strengthening fatherhood to ensure an adequate level of income for families with children, a healthy work-life balance in families, and support for women's participation in out-of-home work life. Strategies for such efforts include creating more flexibility for working hours and telecommuting, as well as combating gendered thinking on parenting and working life in public discourses.

### *Communication Strategy*

Increasing cultural and ethnic diversity in Finland draws attention to the need to support all parents' understanding and decision-making of different ECEC service options in the best interests of their child. One solution to address this need is to develop communication strategies that reach diverse parents and support increasing their awareness of various ECEC services available. The role of child health care and welfare clinics and community centers in disseminating knowledge on ECEC services,

as well as creating a space for diverse families to share their needs and concerns around ECEC, should be promoted. The need for these efforts is underscored by research evidence that indicates that children who come from more vulnerable families (i.e., from low-income and/or immigrant background) start to utilize ECEC services such as center-based care later than children from more affluent families (Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas, 2017)

### **Effective Use of Research and Data: Enhancing Data-Driven Policy**

Despite Finland's growing body of academic research on early childhood pedagogy and development, far less research has focused on systemic issues related to ECEC services. For instance, the effectiveness of various organizational schemes, funding mechanisms (such as the home care allowance system), and women's workforce promotion strategies have received comparatively little research attention (Karila, Kosunen, & Järvenkallas, 2017). This may stem in part from a misalignment between university researchers' areas of interest and the policy aims of the state. A nationally defined research agenda or framework for ECEC, resourced and steered by the government, may help address these gaps and encourage research projects with direct relevance to policy objectives and practice in the field.

For instance, a national research agenda could promote program evaluations that examine how different types of ECEC services, such as in-home and family care options, meet the government's aim to provide quality education and care to all Finnish children. As the home care allowance is particularly popular among parents with low levels of education and/or income and immigrant families (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016; Repo 2009, 2010), there is a need to further research the quality of lives of families who currently take advantage of this allowance. Data from these studies could be used at both the local and national levels to support and substantiate decision-making concerning ECEC policies and service provision.

A national research agenda or framework could also help streamline the process by which research can be disseminated and translated into policy and practice. For example, a wider, more systemic, and more strategic publication of research findings could enhance the knowledge base of best practice in ECEC policy, service development, and delivery. The existence of national program monitoring system could also increase public access to service monitoring data, which is currently limited, thus hindering its use in local and national decision-making and policymaking.

### **Understanding the Effects of Increased Privatization of ECEC Services**

Given the recent growth of the private ECEC sector in the face of the long tradition of public provision, more research is needed to understand the effects of privatization on quality, equality, opportunity, and sustainability of ECEC for children, their families, and society more generally. Data should also be collected on potential unintended consequences of the move toward privatization on increased fees and decreased ECEC staff wages. Findings from this research will be critical for the future development and delivery of ECEC services that are attuned to Finnish values of providing ECEC to every child, regardless of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and/or linguistic background.

## Chapter 17: Conclusions

Finland performs well in many indicators of development, such as efficiency in education (OECD, 2016e), high levels of literacy (Miller & McCenna, 2016), and low mortality rates in childbirth (OECD, 2016b). A deeply shared commitment to democracy and equality has enabled Finland to develop a world-class welfare and education system (Castells & Himanen, 2002; Miettinen, 2013). The nation's commitment to early childhood has been a core element of Finnish society for decades. Driven in part by a small population size, Finland's policymakers have shown a dedication to investment in human capital and development, and hence in mainstream education, health, and welfare services, which has been critical to ensuring the success of the information economy and the overall national survival and prosperity.

The principled, personalized, trusting, and child-centered Finnish ECEC system is characterized by comprehensive and adaptive ECEC services available to all children and families, backed by a professional ECEC workforce. A quality ECEC program, guided by national core curricula, promotes local adaptation so as to be responsive to each child's learning and development in culturally and contextually sensitive ways. The unique features of the Finnish education system, including the intrinsic value it places on childhood and play, its "whole child"-centered approach to ECEC, and the trust it places in teachers' and institutions' self-accountability instead of externally controlled, high-stakes testing and inspections, continue to attract international interest.

Nonetheless, Finland's ECEC policies and services are in a state of flux and face challenges from major societal, cultural and economic changes. For example, growing immigration has brought increased ethnic, cultural, and language diversity in the country (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). Meanwhile, the proportion of working-age people is expected to decline and by 2040, about a quarter of the population will be over 65 years, leading to shortages in the labor force (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). Finland has also experienced a rapid decrease in people living in remote rural

regions, with the majority of people now concentrated in the south, particularly in the Helsinki capital area (OECD, 2016f). Decreasing population density across Finland's vast geography makes equal access to a wide array of educational and social services challenging in rural areas. Taken together, these changes and challenges put pressure on the state's ability to fund and support public services.

In addition, some aspects of demographic diversity pose new challenges for ECEC in Finland. For example, although the dominant family type remains a married couple with two children, the growth of non-married cohabitation, family instability (e.g., divorces and changing family structures), and lone parenthood has important implications for children's healthy and balanced development. Additionally, the age of reproduction and family formation is being postponed to later in life. Statistics also show that, despite decreasing poverty over the past 20 years, the gap between the rich and poor is widening (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016). Worryingly, these statistics show that the child poverty rate is also increasing, particularly in unemployed or single-parent households. It is clear, therefore, that these changing conditions require an adaptive ECEC system and family policies that respond appropriately to dynamic changes in society and children's lives through the strategic use of available research data for social improvement.

This new context is encouraging changes in both policy and practice. For instance, Finland is currently involved in social and health care reforms that aim to unify all public services of social welfare and health care, introduce freedom of choice between public and private health care, and abolish the present multi-channel funding in health care. The main objectives of the reforms are to reduce social and geographical inequalities in access and encourage efficiencies. In parallel, global reform movements are introducing new trends and principles to the Finnish ECEC system emphasizing increased accountability, standardization, and privatization (Paananen, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2015).



A similar trend of privatization can be seen in the organization of ECEC services, as a growing number of municipalities have begun to outsource their services to for-profit ECEC providers. It is unclear how these trends, which pose challenges to many Nordic values, will materialize and be integrated into the sociocultural context of Finland. Consequently, the present story of a principled, trusting, personalized, and child-centric ECEC system of Finland must be read in its dynamic contextual reality.

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## Appendix: Key Informants

Name	Position	Organization
Sanni Grahn-Laasonen	Minister of Education	Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture
Annika Saarikko	Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services	Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
Alila Kirsi	Counsellor of Education	Ministry of Education and Culture
Aulis Pitkänen	Director General (former)	Finnish National Agency for Education
Anneli Rautiainen	Counsellor of Education	Finnish National Agency for Education
Satu Järvenkallas	Head of Early Childhood Education	City of Helsinki
Jarkko Lahtinen	Expert Advisor	The Association of Finnish Local and Regional
Sari Sarkomaa	MP	
Maarit Alasuutari	Professor, Research Director of CHILDCARE	University of Jyväskylä
Kirsti Karila	Professor, Head of the Research Team of CHILDCARE	University of Tampere
Lasse Lipponen	Professor in early childhood education	University of Helsinki
Marjatta Kalliala	University lecturer in early childhood education	University of Helsinki



Name	Position	Organization
Eeva-Leena Onnismaa	University lecturer in early childhood education	University of Helsinki
Maiju Paananen	Postdoc researcher in CHILDCARE	University of Tampere
Tiina Marjoniemi	Head of Franzenia ECEC center	City of Helsinki
Heidi Sairanen	Head (former) of a private ECEC center	
Saara Salmi	Teacher in a municipality run ECEC center	
Ritva Semi	Expert advisor	Teacher's Union
Anna Rotkirch	Director	The Family Federation of Finland
Minna Salmi	Research director	National Institute for Health and Welfare, THL
Tuomas Kurttila	Ombudsman for Children	Office of the Ombudsman for Children