

International Perspectives on
Early Childhood Education and Development 36

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen
Natallia Bahdanovich Hanssen
Christel Sundqvist *Editors*

Special Education in the Early Years

Perspectives on Policy and Practice in
the Nordic Countries

 Springer

International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

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Editors


Special Education in the Early Years


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Chapter 1

Introduction to Special Education in the Early Years—Policies and Practices Across the Nordic Countries



Heidi Harju-Luukkainen , Natallia B. Hanssen , and Christel Sundqvist 

Keywords Special education · Early years · Policies · Practices

Political and social attention to early childhood education and care (ECEC) has increased over the past decade, with many countries undertaking ongoing educational reforms (Garvis et al., 2018). Children’s access to preschool provision has been broadened across the world because policymakers have recognised the benefits of good-quality ECEC on children’s learning and development (OECD, 2012). International studies conducted in OECD-participating countries, have found that children attending ECEC are usually better prepared for primary school and can achieve higher education outcomes (OECD, 2019). Good quality early education, including a high-level special education (SE) support system, helps in school readiness by ensuring that the transition to school is a seamless experience. This seamless experience exists only if quality early education and care are implemented by achieving targets around quality goals and regulations for delivering early education and care (OECD, 2015). Therefore, governments globally are increasingly recognising that good-quality ECEC with high-level special educational supports is critical in developing their country’s social and economic potentials in the future.

This study highlights questions around SE in the early years, synergising the leading SE academics from across the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway,

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and Denmark) to explore questions around policies and practices in SE in the early years and highlighting shared enablers and barriers across them. All the authors focus on SE. Here, in this book, we have chosen to use the word SE, but we also acknowledge that it is not a term without its difficulties. Other terms, such as inclusive education, emphasise approaches to education. Meaning that it modifies teaching and educational organisations better to accommodate differences. This debate can be compressed into how we position disability within special needs. Do we see it as being caused by individual limitations or as a special need caused by the limitations of the education systems? Therefore, it is important for the reader of this book to understand that the language in the chapters can be used in various ways, not only creating tensions but also bridging between the different chapters.

One of those terms, which are approached from different perspectives and, consequently, creating tensions across this book, is the notion of *inclusion*, along with the notion of *inclusive education*. These have emerged during the historic development of SE and are traceable to many documents, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), UNESCO's World Declaration on Education for All (1990), and The Salamanca Statement and the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality (1994). Since the expansion and evolution of these notions, the movement towards inclusion and inclusive education has been a major concern in many countries (Ainscow, 2020). Stakeholders and researchers globally have tried to define and understand the notions of inclusion and inclusive education. However, the inclusion movement, as it is appearing today, tends to offer finished solutions instead of unfinished ones, thereby minimising the power of change (Hausstätter, 2014). Furthermore, many researchers claim that these notions still remain contentious; they lack a tight conceptual focus, which may have contributed to ambivalence and confused practices (Hanssen & Khitruk, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Throughout the literature on inclusion, it refers to several models or practices. Sebba and Ainscow (1996) provided an understanding of the concept as a *process* by which educational systems can reconsider their professional organisation and dissemination by responding to all students' need, in *broad perspective*. Based on the broad perspective of inclusion, inclusive education can be defined as '*education that fits*' or education as a general guiding principle towards building upon this vision of inclusion (Mitchell, 2005; Hanssen & Khitruk, 2021). In this, inclusive education becomes essential in achieving social equity and is a constituent element of an equitable lifelong learning experience for all learners (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2021). Also, the debate on the concept of inclusion and inclusive education is tied to SE—called the *narrow perspective* of inclusion (Haug, 2017). Importantly, here, inclusion is not SE, but this narrow perspective impacts the SE field on political, theoretical, and practical levels (Hausstätter & Vik, 2021). Many critical voices claim that SE is linked to mechanisms of control and selection, to maintaining order in the society through isolation, and to segregating and even eliminating individuals not considered capable and useful for the development of inclusion and inclusive education (Haug, 2017; Ström & Linnanmäki, 2017). Also, SE aims to help and support students with SEN (Hanssen & Khitruk, 2021). This tension is a reality in many countries and, as Sundqvist (2021) claimed, this complexity

is important to consider, and the question of whether there is a need for SE moving towards inclusion should be replaced by the question of how SE can be used inclusively.

For instance, the cultural, historical background, financial resources, and social demands have induced different paths in inclusion practices globally (Ferreira et al., 2018) and, therefore, in the Nordic countries also. Although the interpretation of the notion of inclusive education differs between countries, the main idea remains similar. In recent years, the focus and definition of inclusive education in the Nordic countries have switched from the specific focus on children with special educational needs towards a broad definition focusing on all children's right to receive education according to their individual needs together with other children in a community (Haug, 2017). Thus, this common framework, children in need of inclusive education, is sometimes overlooked in both policies and practices, as evidenced by many of the chapters of this book. Furthermore, when one's access to an inclusive education context is limited, it leads further in life to reduced possibilities in participating fully in the society.

Another bridging theme of this book is the Nordic perspective on families and children. The Nordic countries have established a welfare model, often referred to as the 'Nordic model'. It includes policies and practices that promote equality for all in the society. This strive for equality, also in educational question, has meant multiple reforms that support families, such as child allowances, parental leave and provision of preschool for all children. In ECEC, the 'Nordic model' is thus grounded in the idea that society can reduce differences between children by supporting their learning and development. All Nordic countries have found their own ways to build up their support systems regarding families and children. However, notably, the Nordic countries have also imported ideas and philosophies from their neighbouring countries and from other countries, and therefore, we would prefer to take on the suggestion of Garvis and Ødegaard (2017, p.1) of a Nordic dialogue for this book, where '*Nordic perspectives are closely linked to national and global economies and transnational cultural ideas and ideals on families and children*' rather than talking about a 'Nordic model'.

There are many similarities between countries regarding ECEC. The universal access to early learning is among the crucial elements of equal education services in each of these countries. In all Nordic countries, universal access to early learning is available. In Sweden, Iceland, and Norway, children can attend ECEC from one year of age. In Finland, children can start even a bit earlier, at the age of eight months, and in Denmark, already from the age of six months. Regarding SE services in ECEC, there are only some differences to be found, sometimes even nuances, between the countries regarding, for instance, how the practices are defined in the national core curriculums. For instance, in Norway and Finland, we can find differences in how the practices are described. In Norway, the focus is on inclusive practices, adjustments, and informing the parents. According to the framework plan for kindergartens (NDET, 2019, p. 40) in Norway, kindergartens should adapt their general pedagogical practices to suit the children's needs and circumstances, including children who may require additional support for shorter or longer periods. The

kindergartens must also quickly make the necessary social, pedagogical, and/or physical adjustments to ensure that children requiring additional support can benefit from inclusive and equal provision. Inclusion in kindergarten also includes facilitating social participation. Furthermore, kindergarten must inform parents of their right to request an expert assessment. In Finland, the focus is on recognising the child's needs and strengths, appropriate inclusive practices, and collaborating with parents and in multi-professional networks. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) (2017, p. 86–87), early childhood education and care is developed following inclusion principles. The child's need for support should be recognised, and appropriate support should be arranged as the need arises. Sufficiently early and correctly targeted support may promote a child's development, learning, and well-being. Simultaneously, the support may be used to prevent problems from emerging. The organisation of support is based on each child's strengths and needs regarding learning and development. Cooperation with children, their guardians, kindergarten teachers, special kindergarten teachers, and other ECEC personnel is needed to identify the children's need for support and to plan and implement support measures. The starting point in organising SE during the early years in Sweden differs from the above two mentioned countries. The Swedish national core curriculum for ECEC (Skolverket, 2019, p. 2) does not mention inclusive practices at all. However, it states, '*The preschool must pay special attention to children who for various reasons need more guidance and stimulation or special support. All children should receive an education that is designed and adapted so that they can develop as far as possible. Children who temporarily or permanently need more support and stimulation should have this designed based on their own needs and conditions*'. Furthermore, it stipulates that education must be equal regardless of where in the country it is organised. It must consider children's different conditions and needs and be adapted to all children in preschool. This means that education cannot be uniformly designed everywhere and that the preschool's resources should therefore not be distributed equally. However, the Nordic model is, according to several researchers, threatened by forces of marketisation and competition, challenging the traditional welfare values of equality (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Olsen, 2021; Ström & Sundqvist, 2021). For example, Barow and Berhanu (2021) highlighted that some municipalities in Sweden tend to run a segregating education policy, regardless of the Education Act, which conveys inclusive values. Ström and Sundqvist (2021) stressed that the Nordic welfare model in Finland exposes tendencies of educational values with neo-liberal overtones, characterised by market efficiency, individualism, and competition. Furthermore, Olsen (2021) claimed that the space for diversity seems to be shrinking in Norway. From this example, it is clear that inclusive education and SE are viewed from slightly different perspectives across Nordic countries. This is also something that the readers of this book need to consider: the policies form the practices around children with SE needs, but the policies are developed in slightly different contexts. Therefore, there is a dialogue in SE policies and practices between the countries, not an identical 'model' ranging across them.

Nevertheless, the findings of the chapters in this book provide an important insight into the Nordic country educational systems and offer readers a chance to understand relevant issues facing the Nordic countries' policy and practice connected to SE in the early years. In this book, all the 19 chapters present unique research and give the readers a possibility, for instance, to understand how special educational services during the early years are defined and implemented. Each chapter in this book highlights research from a *policy* and/or *practice* perspective on the SE field in the early years and critically discusses possible developmental objectives.

This book's chapters are divided into two parts, each highlighting SE policy or practice perspectives. The first part of the book includes seven chapters, each with a focus in policy perspectives. The first research chapter's author comes from Finland. Chapter 2, authored by *Päivi Pihlaja*, starts by describing Finnish early childhood SE and how it has evolved in Finland. The author explores a topic rarely studied in the country. In this chapter, Pihlaja takes a broad approach and gives readers both a historic and a current perspective of the topic. This chapter discusses how the government has guided and how municipalities have implemented ECSE. The data of the study comprises policy-level documents, such as legislation, circulars or guidelines, and research literature. In the next chapter (Chap. 3), *Mona Holmqvist*, presents a theoretical discussion based on purposeful sampling to synthesise research regarding young children with ASD. This study's results reveal the need to change the norm of the country instead of the expectations regarding the child's behaviour. This is to make the environment more inclusive and to give all children the best possible opportunities to develop. The situation of gifted children is the topic of Chap. 4. The authors, *Valerie Margrain* and *Jorryt van Bommel*, discuss why these children should be recognised in policy documents and practice and offer support in the early years. The chapter informs the reader about how the needs of gifted children can be met in an inclusive early childhood education context. A specific framework titled SPARK for engaging with gifted education in the early years is illustrated and discussed by using a case study in which a three-year-old boy is the focus. In Chap. 5, *Charlotte Ringsmose* discusses quality and un(equality) in early childhood education in Denmark. She takes the adoption of earlier Danish research, indicating gaps in the education for children of different backgrounds. The importance of high qualitative early childhood education practices that can create more equal opportunities for children, eliminate the gaps in children's development, and prevent learning disabilities is discussed. Chapter 6 turns our attention towards the Swedish context and autism. Here, the authors, *Amanda Webster*, *Susanne Garvis*, and *Gunilla Westman Andersson*, summarise current Swedish literature and educational policies around autism and young children's preschool and schooling. The chapter highlights that children on the autism spectrum experience many difficulties in preschools/schools and often need support to overcome the potential problems of preschool/school environments. The chapter reveals that teachers in Sweden are struggling to meet the needs of children with ASD. Furthermore, the authors identified several gaps in policy and practice regarding their topic. They highlight the types of practices that could be utilised for early intervention and the lack of research

on children in the early years in Sweden. In Chap. 7, **Susanne Garvis**, **Liisa Uusimäki**, and **Umesh Sharma** discuss Swedish early childhood pre-service teachers and inclusive education through a case study. This chapter reports on how inclusive education is taught and enacted in Swedish early childhood teacher education. A specific focus is made on local legislation documents as precursor for actions. A case study is shared from a study of Swedish early childhood pre-service teachers' beliefs to include all the children in Swedish classrooms to show current understandings. At the end of the chapter, the authors highlight future teacher education policies and practices.

The second part of this book includes 10 chapters regarding SE practices across the Nordic region. It starts with a chapter authored by Danish researchers. The authors of Chap. 8, **Charlotte Riis Jensen**, **Mette Molbæk**, **Maria Christina Secher Schmidt**, and **Janne Hedegaard**, analyse how collaboration within SE needs and inclusionary practices occurs in Danish early education and early care. The results indicate that collaborative processes do not solve the challenges of developing inclusive learning environments, but even risks inducing the exclusion of individual children rather than to inclusion. The authors argue for changing the understanding and practice of collaboration towards situations in which the professionals focus on identifying new ways of handling diversity rather than identifying ways of compensating for a child's special needs. In the next chapter (Chap. 9), **Merja Hautakangas**, **Lotta Uusitalo**, and **Kristiina Kumpulainen** describe how children in Finnish early childhood education learnt self-regulation skills after participating in an intervention programme called the Kids' Skills programme. Participating children, diagnosed as having difficulties in their self-regulation, described their learning as narratives and drawings. According to the results, the children learnt to regulate their behaviour, which helped them build friendship and become more accepted to participate in joint actions. The authors discuss the relevance of building early environments that enable children to learn self-regulation. In Chap. 10, **Heidi Harju-Luukkainen**, **Camilla Björklund**, **Erja Sandberg**, and **Laura Rhinehart** discuss mathematically high-achieving children. *In Finland, the national curriculums for early childhood education (2018) and basic education (2014) require teachers to cultivate these talents. This study's objective is to describe parent's perceptions of the types of support mathematically high-ability children received in preschool and school context in Finland. According to the results, parents were mostly unsatisfied with the support schools gave to their high-ability children in mathematics, although these children were recognised in their early years as high-ability children. The type/level of support children received to further develop their abilities seemed to be more dependent on their teacher or the teacher's view on the needed support in mathematics.* In the next chapter (Chap. 11), **Natallia B Hanssen** and **Kathrin Olsen** reflect on the results of a survey conducted with early childhood education teacher students in Norway. This chapter describes their knowledge regarding special needs education and further how the students are being prepared to support children with special needs in early childhood. The results indicate that, according to the students, the education received in Norway was insufficient to give them, as future teachers, the competence required to meet the heterogeneity of children in

ECEC. Chapter 12 is authored by *Jorun Buli-Holmberg*, *Elisabeth McGuire*, and *Mona Rønning Winsnes*. This chapter investigates how the implementation of KIDS (Quality in Day Care Institutions) helps to improve inclusive practices through observations and reflections on the quality of practice. The results show that the implementation of KIDS helps to improve the educational provision for all children, especially for children with special needs. In the conclusion, the authors state that KIDS is a useful tool to improve inclusive practices regarding relationships, physical environment and play and activities are suitable, and to raise the level of kindergarten staff's competence practicing inclusion. In Chap. 13, the authors, *Elisabeth Brekke Stangeland* and *Joakim Evensen Hansen*, explore and discuss possibilities and challenges in the language learning environment for children under three with low language skills. The chapter builds on data from two doctoral theses focusing on educational language practices, language development, play and social functioning in a Norwegian ECEC context. According to the results, there are variations in children's language development that explain their participation in play. Moreover, the results highlight that ECEC staff provide children with few language learning opportunities, which are assumed to promote language development. The authors ultimately highlight the importance of the quality of the language learning environment in securing progression and development for late talkers. Chapter 14 turns our attention towards the Swedish context. Here, the authors, *Camilla Björklund* and *Angelika Kullberg*, discuss a potential way of supporting the learning of basic numerical skills to pre-schoolers with limited knowledge of number concepts. The authors discuss one question: In what ways are the ideas of using finger patterns as a structuring tool to support numerical understanding reflected in the children's arithmetic problem solving? The results show that children are facilitated to see part-whole relations of the first ten numbers on their fingers, which seems to benefit children's learning of early arithmetic skills. The authors suggest that children who show deficits in mathematical domains at an early age need pedagogical interventions that will help them to develop their basic number concepts and strategies, so they can start formal mathematics education in primary school with sufficient basic knowledge of numbers, like most of their peers. Chapter 15, written by *Ann Nordberg*, describes how systematic language support from professionals working in Swedish preschools can be designed. The Communication Supporting Observation Tool was used to observe and identify the preschool staff's support for the children's language use and how it could be further developed. The results show that the children were offered many opportunities to actively use and process language inputs. The staff created many natural opportunities for language exposure and usage, and they had many reflections on how to go further. However, potentials for increasing the support of language learning were found, particularly, to increase interactions between child–teacher and child–child. The author, *Anna Katharina Jacobsson*, discusses in Chap. 16 how preschool staff collaborate and improve their professional skills to meet the curriculum objectives for children who need special support for communication. The analysis in this study used a narrative approach based on Wenger's theory of Community of Practice (CoP). The findings show that CoP can be a form of professional development tool that can help ECEC teachers

improve their skills and profession to teach and stimulate children with barriers in their communication. The results also indicate that CoP can be supplemented with other forms of professional development, such as collegial external study groups and coaching, to add more knowledge to enable professionalisation. In the next chapter (Chap. 17), *Eva Staffans* reports results from an investigation regarding teachers' perceptions of the prevalence and support that children with various language challenges receive when participating in three different language settings. The percentage of children needing support for language challenges is low in bilingual settings, and the causes are discussed. Teachers working in different language settings also perceived language challenges differently but still used similar support methods. The results suggest the importance of training all teachers on the appropriate assessment of and interventions for children with language challenges, especially focusing on the similarities and differences in language development between monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual children. The author of Chap. 18, *Marianna Heinonen*, provides findings from a Finnish study focusing on ECEC professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children needing socio-emotional support. Despite several perceived challenges, the findings show that the professionals' perceptions concerning individual children were more positive than their general beliefs regarding children with socio-emotional difficulties. The author discusses the results regarding labelling and individual-centred views of children needing socio-emotional support.

The last chapter of this book (Chap. 19), authored by *Heidi Harju-Luukkainen*, *Natalia B Hanssen*, and *Christel Sundqvist*, gives the readers a summary and outlook, describing the similarities and differences across the Nordic countries regarding special educational policies and practices. Here, different enablers and challenges across the different countries are presented, and the developmental object identified by the authors across this book.

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Part I
Policy Perspectives

Chapter 2

Early Childhood Special Education in Finland



Päivi Pihlaja

Abstract This paper examines Finnish early childhood special education (ECSE) and how it has been evolving in Finland. The Finnish early childhood education (ECE) provides the context for ECSE. The aim is to study ECSE at the policy, macro-and meso levels; in this case, educational practices in child groups are excluded. The aim is to discuss how the state has guided and how municipalities have implemented ECSE. The material in this study comprises policy-level documents, such as legislation, circulars, or guidelines. This paper overviews a subject concerning which studies are almost non-existent in Finland. The method relies on qualitative content and document analyses. Results are discussed together with ideas on how to further develop this area in Finnish early education.

Keywords Finland · Special education · Early childhood · History

Introduction

This paper examines Finnish early childhood special education (ECSE) and how it has been evolving in Finland. ECSE concerns children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) in daycare/early childhood education institutions. Finnish Early Childhood Education (ECE) provides the context for the ECSE, its policy, and implementation. ECE mainly comprises municipal or outsourced services provided by municipalities in ECE institutions, while municipal family daycare is only marginal. Also, vouchers and private care allowance are available. While ECE is mostly public, currently, there are an increasing number of private providers, part of which are for profit organisations. In 2019, about 77% of 1–6-year-old children were in ECE (THL, 2019).

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Children's special needs are on the media almost weekly nowadays. Children's bullying and behavioural problems in early education and compulsory education have provoked public discussion. The cause of these problems is seen either in families or in educational institutions. The Finnish Minister of Education, Li Andersson, has also commented actively on these matters. Wider discussion and studies concerning SE (special education) are needed, and this article makes one contribution to the need.

The administrative branch of ECE is currently in educational sector. While the Ministry of Education and Culture implements national policy and prepares legislation and decisions, it handles matters concerning budget fund utilisation (see www.minedu.fi/en/fronpage). SE is and has been integrated into ECE in Finland, so it is therefore justifiable to start with a short description of ECE development.

From Daycare to Early Childhood Education

In Finland, daycare was originally meant for children whose parents were at work or were studying when the Day Care Act (Law, 36/1973) came into effect. Daycare has, in Finnish society, a long tradition of adult-centred justification for society-needed women in the labour markets (Kinos, 2002; Välimäki, 1998). Although daycare as a service system was justified by labour markets and adult-centred reasons, there is still a strong pedagogical orientation and strong pedagogical roots in Fröbel's pedagogical orientation.

The basis for goal-oriented pedagogical work and early education was laid with the change in legislation in the beginning of the 1980s and behind these changes was the work done by the Day Care Committee (Kom, 1980). A new clause entered into legislation that defined new aims of daycare (Law, 304/1983, 2a§). The aim of daycare was to support families with their upbringing tasks and, together with parents, to promote the balanced development of the child's personality. Daycare was supposed to offer continuous, secure, and warm relationships and activities that diversely support the child's development. Daycare should also promote the physical, social, and emotional development of the child while supporting the child's aesthetical, cognitive, ethical, and religious education.

Daycare has belonged to the sector of social care for decades. One focal element in the concept of education at the national level was the Government Resolution about the Guidelines for ECE (not care) in 2002. This resolution stated that 'ECE ... means children's educational interaction in different settings to fostering the child's healthy growth, development, and learning'. The primary right and responsibility for nurturing and educating children lies with parents, with public ECE services merely supporting the work performed by parents in the home (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2003, 9). However, a slow movement towards educational orientation at the administrative level succeeded this.

Municipalities were permitted to transfer daycare from the social sector to education in 2003 when the Social Welfare Act (Law, 155/2003) authorised

municipalities to choose the administrative sector of daycare. This opportunity launched a process whereby most of the municipalities transferred daycare from the social sector to education (Harju et al., 2007). The process ended when daycare was transferred from the Ministry for Social and Health Affairs to the Ministry of Culture and Education in 2013. The new ministry prepared new daycare legislation, and in 2015, the name of the law was changed to the ‘Early childhood Education Law’ (Law, 36/1973). In 2015, the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) became the national development agency responsible also for ECEC. The legislative reform ended with a completely new law in 2018 (Law, 540/2018). This administrative and ideological debate (education vs. social care) that has been part of Finnish ECE for decades has also been the context for early childhood SE. The administration sector was for decades ‘social care’, which also affected the orientation towards children with SEN. In the last decade, Finnish ECE has faced major changes along with the change in administrative branch, a whole new legislation, and also an increase in private providers.

Aims and Method of This Study

This study examines ECSE in Finland and how it has developed in recent history, and to develop an understanding of its relevance and its place in Finnish society. It explores ECSE at the policy, macro, and meso levels. The study data comprise documents and studies. The education in child groups is outlined and other services for children (e.g. therapies, rehabilitation, child health care) or families (e.g. family counselling). With the following questions, the aim is to uncover the meaning of the ECSE in Finland. The main questions are as follows:

1. How has early childhood special education been developed in Finland?
2. What are the characteristics of early childhood SE in Finland?

This study material comprises policy-level documents and studies that are related to municipal or national level ECSE. All documents and studies in this study are produced for external and public consumption; they are ‘social facts’ that have been generated, shared, and used socially (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Merriam and Tisdell (2015, 175) wrote that when using documents as sources, ‘data collection is guided by questions, educated hunches, and emerging findings’. This analysis relies on qualitative content and document analysis. The idea was to read various texts concerning the ECSE, especially texts linked to ECSE policy. The starting point is that the documents are standardised artefacts (Wolff, 2004, 284), which typically occur in particular formats, here considered legislation or state-level norms and guidelines. These official documents function as institutional traces of ECSE (Wolff, 2004, 284), and they represent an independent level of data (Hodder, 2000, 704–704; Wolff, 2004, 288), which enables their use as a source of information. The documents assist in tracking change and development, as stated by Bowen (2009), which is appropriate as the aim is also to examine the changes. The aim is to study what is

said about the ECSE, along with focusing on what is not said, the silences, the gaps, or omissions (Rapley, 2011). With studies showing how the national preference for ECSE has been implemented, it is also critical to reflect these official documents.

Studies conducted in Finland about ECSE mostly concern child groups, pedagogics, peer interaction, teachers, children, or parents (Koivula et al., 2020; Suhonen et al., 2014; Syrjämäki et al., 2018; Viitala, 2000). There is a gap in research concerning policy-level or macro-level studies.

This study starts by overviewing the studies, especially dissertations made in ECSE; after this, the recent history of ECSE is analysed, and the very essential contemporary education policy ideology of inclusion and its meaning for ECSE are also discussed. Present policy guidelines and discussion of the findings complete this study.

Research in the Area of ECSE

In Finland, SE and ECE have historically had their own roots and paths in research and also in education. The roots of ECSE are situated in the universities when special kindergarten teacher education started in Finland in the 1970s. Special teacher education is nowadays a 60-credit unit degree, either part of master-level teacher studies or after a few years of work as a competent teacher. SE research and special teacher education have origins where the studies in this area have been mainly focused on compulsory education. Also, (general) educational science has been and still is closely connected to teachers' training (Husa & Kinos, 2005).

In Finland, ECSE research is usually placed in the branch of SE, while in ECE, it plays a minor role (Alijoki & Pihlaja, 2011). Internationally, ECSE is a research area of its own with professorships and independent university master's degree (e.g. University of Oregon, Kansas, Florida). In Finland, the University of Jyväskylä offers a master's degree in SE focusing on ECSE teacher education, yet it is part of special teacher education, not an independent academic subject, with no professorships. This is unsurprising for the first full professorship in ECE was introduced in the 1990s (Husa & Kinos, 2005).

To examine the field of educational research, especially dissertations, focusing on ECSE is one way to examine what kind of research has been done, how much, and what kind of research is still needed. By examining dissertations¹ on ECSE conducted between 2000 and 2019, it can easily be noticed that these are mostly part of the branch of SE. Dissertations in ECSE began to emerge at the beginning of the 2000s, with themes varying from toddlers with special needs (Suhonen, 2009) to daycare personnel's expertise in ECSE (Korkalainen, 2009; Kovanen, 2004). Rantala (2002) examined multi-professional work, and in her study, daycare was

¹ With the following keywords in Finnish and English, the search was made in University of Turku Volter: ECSE, special daycare, special need AND day care/ECE, so it might be that some dissertations are excluded here.

one area. One dissertation examined the experiences of a mother with a disabled child and the meaning of partnership with daycare (Tonttila, 2006). Two dissertations examined ECSE more on a municipal level (Heinämäki, 2004; Pihlaja, 2003), and one examined SEN when children had social and emotional or language difficulties (Pihlaja, 2003). The work of Leena Tauriainen (2000) handled the overall quality of ECE in an integrated special group. From 2010 to 2020, there were altogether eight dissertations. The focus varied from the child's activity (From, 2010) to partnership with parents and professionals (Koivunen, 2012). Peer interaction (Madureita, 2018), pedagogics that enhance interaction in ECSE (Syrjämäki, 2019), and the need for support in the social-emotional area were also studied (Viitala, 2014). Nislin's (2016) work concentrated on work-related well-being, stress, and quality of pedagogical work among professionals. Heiskanen (2019) studied documentation and individual pedagogical plans. In sum, the themes are diverse and form a multilevel unity, but there are still relatively few dissertations, and only some focused on the macro-or meso-level, while no one focused on ECSE policy.

From Yesterday to Today in Early Childhood Special Education

The EC(S)E Policy and Its Implementation

In Finland, the official beginning of SE in daycare can be set in the 1950s when the first special groups in kindergartens² were established in Jyväskylä and Helsinki. These groups were meant for children with mental or physical disability. After this, in the 1960s, some municipalities were interested in how many 'special care children' there were and did surveys to get numbers (Kom, 1967, 24; Sosiaalihuolto, 1978). In a new Day Care Act (Law, 36/1973), a 'special kindergarten' was mentioned, and this kindergarten was entitled to a 10% rise in the state aid. 'Special kindergarten' was an institution where one or more groups were so-called special groups. The Day Care Decree (Law, 239/1973) specified that, in a child group where all the children needed 'special care and upbringing', the number of children could be only half of that of the general child group (6§). When admitting a child requiring 'special care and upbringing' into daycare, a statement from a specialist doctor or from a family-counselling centre was needed. Still in the 1970s, 'special daycare' was a minor element in daycare with a medical orientation shown by the statement on the child.

At the turn of the 1980s, interest in children with special needs was growing at the national level. There were two national official work groups, one evaluating the number of children with special needs and the other developing municipal special

²The name was originally kindergarten, and it was changed to daycare centre (later in this article ECE institution) by the new legislation in 1973. It is still very common to talk about 'kindergartens' in Finland.

daycare work groups and their tasks (Sosiaalhallitus, 1978; Särkkä, 1982). These national work groups were essential for future development since, according to their work, the National Board of Social Services (in Finnish Sosiaalhallitus) gave instructions concerning special daycare. These instructions were circulars. In the circulars (Sosiaalhallitus 1981, 1984), there were guidelines on the following themes:

- The daycare of children with special care and upbringing, to choose a daycare placement;
- Special arrangements in a general child group;
- Special daycare centre;
- A municipal special daycare work group or the person in charge.

Also, integrated special groups and special groups were defined. The aim was that, in every 500 daycare placements, there should be one itinerant special kindergarten teacher.

An important new clause was legislated in 1985: ‘when a child needs special care and upbringing, a rehabilitation plan must be made for the child to integrate the rehabilitation’ (Law, 1119/1985, 7a§). In 1988, according to the legislation, if, in a group, there was a child with ‘special needs and upbringing’, this should be considered in the number of children or the number of pedagogical personnel if the assistant for the child is lacking (Law, 486/1988). An assistant or fewer children were the only options municipalities used. This clause was meaningful when the number of children in the groups was limited. In the 1980s, municipalities founded special daycare work groups, new posts for special kindergarten teachers and new special and integrated special groups (Pihlaja, 1998). In the end of the 1980s, the administrative ideology changed nationally, and the National Board of Social Services sent no longer circulars to municipalities; instead, only information guidance came. In a new guide for daycare, the special daycare was condensed into one page of information but included the same concepts as earlier in circulars (Sosiaalhallitus, 1988).

At the national policy level, there was a shift to municipal autonomy at the end of the 1980s by reducing the state’s role in social and health care. The aim was to give more power to municipalities to create a service system that would ensure services to all in need and would also be economic and efficient while giving municipalities wider freedom to act and would also be administratively simple (HE, 216/1991, 9). The idea behind this change was to make the most of the resources in daycare and, for example, to prevent underutilisation of daycare placements (Memo of the Ministry of Social and Health Care, 1992). Then, the daycare legislation was revised, and it became more like a skeleton law after the changes in 1992. The number of children in a child group was no longer limited since there were enough adults in the group (ratio in all-daycare was 1:7 when children were over 5 h in daycare, and 1:13 under 5 h for 3–6 year-olds). This also impacted the position of children with SEN, as the number of children increased substantially in child groups (Kauppinen, 1995).