

Early Childhood Research and Education:
An Inter-theoretical Focus 1

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen
Jonna Kangas
Susanne Garvis *Editors*

Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care

A Multi-theoretical perspective on
research and practice

 Springer

Early Childhood Research and Education: An Inter-theoretical Focus

Volume 1

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Susanne Garvis
Editors

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and practice

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Early Childhood Education System's Policies and Practices in Finland



Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Jonna Kangas , and Susanne Garvis

Abstract The political and social attention on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has increased over the past decade, with many countries undertaking educational reforms that are still ongoing. In Finland ECEC is seen as an investment into the future. The ECEC system of the country is one of the most equal in the world and understood through its holistic and multi-theoretical foundation combining education and care through EduCare approach. ECEC in Finland is a unique combination of international influences and local intents to put each child and family into the centre of the services. In this chapter we will give our readers an overall understanding of the Finnish policies as well as practices of the early childhood education system. After that we will move on in describing the content of this book closer.

1.1 Introduction

The political and social attention on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has increased over the past decade, with many countries undertaking educational reforms that are still ongoing (see closer 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 early childhood education and care on children's learning and development (OECD, 2012). However, still after these

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reforms according to Unicef (2019) only half of all pre-primary-age children around the world are enrolled in preschool, teachers lack good quality training and there is a worldwide shortage of ECEC teachers. Good quality early education including high-level special education support helps with 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 of delivering early education and care (OECD, 2015). Governments globally are therefore increasingly recognising that good quality ECEC plays a crucial role in developing their country's social and economic potential in the future.

In Finland ECEC is seen as an investment into the future. The ECEC system of the country is one of the most equal in the world and understood through its holistic and multi-theoretical foundation combining education and care through EduCare approach. ECEC in Finland is a unique combination of international influences and local intents to put each child and family into the centre of the services. The systematic and goal oriented ECEC consists of upbringing, education and care where pedagogy is emphasised in order to produce excellence for the future. ECEC is based on wide selection of scientific understandings about education through developmental psychology, sociology, democratic theories, sustainable development, inclusion, pedagogy, management, organisational psychology, and wellbeing. National curriculum and laws for early education have gone through significant reforms during the last decade, where the quality, practices and teachers' competences are defined in order to support children's future learning skills. The early childhood teacher training lies on a multi-theoretical foundation, where each teacher has to find their own personal theoretical approach to teaching: Teachers organise their everyday interaction, teaching, and care actions based on wide understanding of the development, learning, agency, and wellbeing of children. It is also seen as important that this high-quality education would be available in both private and public sectors. ECEC in Finland is a unique combination of international influences and local intents to put each child and family into the centre of the services. It's a systematic and goal oriented ECEC consists of upbringing, education and care where pedagogy is emphasised in order to produce excellence for the future. It's overall planning, guidance and monitoring system is one of a kind.

In the next section we will give our readers an overall understanding of the Finnish policies as well as practices of the early childhood education system. After that we will move on in describing the content of our book closer.

1.2 Finnish ECE Is Based on International and National Policy Documents

In Finland there are several policy documents steering the ECE provision. At the national level, ECE is a responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the national expert agency for ECE is the Finnish National Agency of Education.

The Ministry of Education designs the acts and the Finnish National Agency of Education develops tools to put them into practice. There are also international, national, and local policy documents governing ECE in Finland. On the international level, the guiding documents come from European Commission (1996), the United Nations (1989, 2006), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1994). Further, the content of ECE is guided by the national curriculum for ECE (Finnish Agency of Education, 2018) and the national curriculum for preschool education. Further, the law of early childhood education (Finnish law of early childhood education 540/2018) declares the child-teacher ratios and a maximum number of children per class (12 toddlers or 21 3 to 5 years old). Further, also other Acts and policy documents are guiding the work in ECE settings but with a smaller impact regarding the everyday pedagogical work. The Finnish ECE working teams are multi-professional, consisting of professionals with a varying combination of qualifications. The teams consist of at least one teacher with an academic bachelor's degree and two assistant teachers with lower educational degrees.

In Finland children have a subjective right to ECE as well as basic education. The main principle is that all people must have equal access to high-quality education and training. Education is free of charge at all levels from pre-primary to higher education. For ECE for 0–5-year olds, parents pay little according to their incomes and very low-income families have free service in ECE (Kangas et al., 2015). Practically this means that when a child needs early childhood education the municipality needs to organise these services and allocate a place in an ECEC facility. Even though this seems like a particularly easy system from the parent's perspective, it is not necessarily so. For instance, in Finland children participate less in ECEC, compared to the other Nordic countries with similar systems (see further Garvis et al., 2019).

1.3 High Quality as the Basis of Finnish ECEC Practices

All practitioners in the Finnish ECEC have to follow the national quality indicators. These indicators lay a foundation for consistent practices and principles on the national level. These indicators are described in the FINEEC (2018; 2019) guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education. According to this document there are two factors of quality; structural and process related. Structural factors of quality are related to the conditions of organising ECEC. They include the curriculum that is the steering document, personnel training, working time structures, the structure and size of child groups and the physical facilities where the early childhood and education is organised. Process-related factors of quality describe the unit's pedagogical and operating culture. This is in its turn then linked with other outcomes like children's experiences. The process-related factors are leadership, planning, implementation, evaluation and development of pedagogy as well as different person's experiences about the ECEC (see

closer FINEEC 2019, 7). Further these quality factors (structural and process-related) and the three levels where they exist (national, local and pedagogical activity level) are linked to the impact of ECEC.

In other words, the process-related factors describe how the objectives and content specified for early childhood education are realised in practice. Here the focus can be for instance on following topics:

- On positive, caring, encouraging and gentle interaction.
- On reciprocal interaction between professionals and children and is it done in a manner compatible with the children's developmental, interests and learning capabilities.
- On sensitive staff, taking notice of the children's initiatives and responding to them in a manner that supports the children's participation and agency.

Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development in early childhood education and care lay the foundation for the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care. Pedagogical interaction, activities and knowhow are essential aspects of the quality behind the Finnish ECE (Kangas et al., 2019). Pedagogically well-planned, diverse, and creative operating methods and learning environment challenge and inspire children to learn. Pedagogical documentation of early childhood education and care is a process through which the activities are made visible and can be evaluated together with the staff and children as following:

- ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn.
- The staff and the children carry out versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts and cultural heritage that offer positive learning experiences for the children.
- The activities promote the achievement of objectives set for different areas of learning and transversal competence.
- The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express.
- The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interests, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn.

Further, in Finland the teachers have a great responsibility and decision-making power over the class-based curriculum, pedagogical activities and assessment and documentation practices in everyday education. Teachers' tasks as well as their responsibilities of the everyday pedagogical activities as well as holistic and systematic delivery of education have been redefined during the reform of Finnish ECE (see Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, [forthcoming](#)). The teachers' pedagogical role is also described in the process-oriented factors closer. The teachers need to pay attention to following aspects:

- At the level of pedagogical activities, an ECEC teacher is responsible for classroom pedagogy: its planning, goal-oriented implementation and evaluation.
- The staff observe and document the children's daily experiences systematically in order to understand the child's perspectives and views.
- Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of the activities

In the next section we will describe the content of this book closer. In this book, each of the chapters are connected with the above described policies and practices of ECEC of Finland (see closer OECD, 2018).

1.4 Description of the Content of this Book

We hope that the chapters of this book will be appealing to an international audience as they showcase the breadth and depth of contemporary issues of the Finnish model within the field of ECEC. The chapters of this book are divided into three sections. The content of chapters in the first part is connected with teacher training and professional approach, chapters in the second part are connected with children and families in ECEC and in the third part the focus will be turned towards Finnish pedagogy. All of the chapters in this book are a balance of multiple theoretical perspectives and empirical data. Each of the book chapters highlight following aspects,

- research on the field of Early Childhood Education in Finland
- country's policies and/or practices connected to this area of research
- theory and empirical data connected to this area of research
- critical perspectives and possible developmental objects are highlighted.

The chapters of this book comprise authors from different universities in Finland, from the Ministry of Education and Culture and municipalities in order to give a width in the perspectives of the system as well as of contemporary research issues. It also compares top-level researchers from abroad with a profound understanding of the Finnish ECEC, in order to give an external perspective on the policies, practices and contemporary research issues.

1.5 Part I: Multi-theoretical Teacher Training and Professional Approach

The part of this book starts with chapter number two, and it is authored by **Johanna Heikka, Katja Suhonen** and **Sanni Kahila**. This chapter investigates the pedagogical leadership of ECE teachers in Finland and introduces concepts like distributed pedagogical leadership and teacher leadership. The findings of this study will

promote the implementation of pedagogical leadership as well as support the preparation of teacher graduates as well as the continuing professional development of all ECE staff working on the field of ECE. The third chapter is authored by **Antti Rajala, Anna Pauliina Rainio, Lasse Lipponen, Jaakko Hilppö** and **Emma Kurenlahti**. In this chapter the authors discuss the critical compassion in Finnish ECE educators' responses to challenges of acting compassionately. The aim of this chapter is to advance a holistic conceptualisation for researching and promoting care and compassion as an aspect of early childhood educators' professional activity. In the chapter the authors build on a novel, cultural-historical approach in order to investigate compassion and care as well as offer and discuss a nuanced conceptualisation of compassion in ECEC settings that posits compassion as both constituted in and constitutive of social activity. In the fourth chapter **Alexandra Nordström, Heidi Sairanen, Jenny Byman, Jenny Renlund** and **Sara Sintonen** explore the concept of widening text worlds in the Finnish early childhood education. In this chapter the concept of multiliteracies refers to an understanding of multiple texts (both analogue and digital) in multiple platforms with multiple contexts. In this chapter, the following questions are explored: How can we find a good balance in widening text worlds? How can we decide what texts to use in an early childhood education context, and how can we develop a pedagogy of multiliteracies? At the end of this chapter some pedagogical principles that can be applied to early childhood education in order to support young children's multiliteracies thinking and practices will be presented. In the fifth chapter **Saila Poulter, Arniika Kuusisto** and **Silja Lamminmäki** presents a case of worldview education in Finnish ECEC. They investigate the relevance of praxis and practice-based learning processes as a part of professional knowledge formation through the case of worldview education in ECEC teacher education. The chapter suggests that the annexation of elements connected to practical wisdom cultivated as a more systematic part of professional knowledge construction in ECEC teacher training is, according to learner experience, valuable in supporting the development of ECEC teacher student professionalism. Furthermore, the findings designate an understanding of professional reflection as a shared meaning-making and understanding generating activity. In the sixth chapter we turn towards media education in the Finnish early childhood teacher education. This chapter is authored by **Saara Salomaa** and **Pekka Mertala**. By analysing all Finnish teacher education curricula they came to the conclusion that media education has been a marginal topic in Finnish ECEC teacher education programs. Media education and information and communications technology (ICT) were mostly taught separately, which seems peculiar in today's media culture. Among the general ECEC professional competencies, contextual and pedagogical ones were emphasised, whereas care competencies were neglected. Further, compulsory media education course literature was scarce and partly outdated. The findings raise a question if we at all can expect high-quality media competence from practitioners with little professional training on the topic. In Chap. 7 we turn our attention towards in-service and pre-service teachers' views on policy and practice in early childhood teacher education in Finland. This chapter ends our first section and it is authored by **Mari Saha** and **Henri Pesonen**. In this chapter the authors

describe the context of inclusive Finnish ECEC after the most recent change in policy and legislation in 2018. By summarising the research findings, the aim of the authors is to illustrate the challenges in- and pre-service teachers face in encountering children with diverse needs and backgrounds, as well as their views on how to improve the current teacher education. Further, they also discuss how teacher education programmes can respond to these challenges by providing suggestions for policy and practice.

1.6 Part II: Children and Families around ECEC

The second part of this book concentrates on topics around children and families in ECEC in Finland. It starts with chapter number eight and is authored by **Marina Lundqvist**. The topic of the chapter is teachers' understanding of children's right to participation in Finnish ECEC. This study examines in detail the views of 10 early childhood education teachers on important aspects of children's right to participation in early learning environments in Finland. The data used in this chapter is based on interviews with early childhood education teachers in ECEC. With the help of content analysis key themes in teachers' understanding of children's rights to participation in ECEC was identified. The results indicate that teachers are aware of the importance of the curriculum and the idea of children's participation, but that the concept of rights generally needs to be deepened in pedagogical activities. Chapter 9 takes a closer look at five arts pedagogical case studies and how participatory learning and creative thinking is promoted in Finnish ECE. This chapter is authored by **Inkeri Ruokonen**. This chapter presents research-based arts pedagogical learning projects. It also discusses the challenges and future recommendations of early childhood education and care arts pedagogy regarding the core curriculum learning area of diverse forms and expression. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the perceived challenges concerning the early childhood arts pedagogy and to make recommendations based on a reflective review of five case studies. Chapter 10 discusses North Sámi language nests in Northern Finland. This chapter is authored by **Rauni Äärelä-Vihriälä** and **Tuija Turunen**. This study is framed by an indigenous research paradigm, which focuses on the community as well as entails a strong awareness of context and respect for traditional knowledge. The purpose of this article is to introduce the special characteristics of Sámi language immersion through a language nest approach in early childhood education and care in northern Finland, the Sámi home district. It aims to develop Sámi language immersion as Sámi languages spoken in Finland are endangered and require urgent recovery measures. The concept of a language nest pedagogy provides insight into Sámi language pedagogical practices. Further, the results imply that language nests not only provide language education but also strengthen the Sámi culture and way of life. Chapter 11 is authored by **Anna-Leena Lastikka** and **Liisa Karlsson**. This chapter describes participation through storycrafting in early childhood education and care. According to the ECEC legislation and the Core Curriculum, children's initiatives

and interests need to be considered. However, children's potential to affect decision-making and pedagogical processes is scarce. Therefore, according to the authors, there is a need to develop reciprocal listening and participation in ECEC. The objective for this study is to explore the benefits of the Storycrafting Method, a Finnish narrative method, for children and ECEC personnel. In the next chapter, Chap. 12, the focus is on reading sessions in early childhood. This chapter is authored by **Jyrki Reunamo**. Reading sessions are a part of the 'rich world of language' learning topics in the Finnish ECEC curriculum. This paper describes the situation in reading sessions in early childhood education in Finland. The research method is observation and the data has been systematically sampled ($n = 49,645$). According to results of this chapter, children attend reading sessions on average 24 min a day. According to the author it is important that the teacher welcomes children's ideas when children can learn that their ideas are valued and that their ideas can be used for the benefit of the whole group. Reading sessions can be processes, where children and adults can create and share their ideas. Children can learn to develop these ideas further together with others. In Chap. 13, authored by **Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Kari Nissinen** and **Jouni Vettentranta**, they take a closer look at early skills as predictors for later educational outcome. As data they use TIMSS data sets from Finland and Sweden. The authors point out that family-related factors, like parent's educational level, expectations and socio-economic variables have a significant impact on students' educational outcomes. The aim of the study is to examine how parental attitudes and the socioeconomic status of a student's family are related to student's early literacy and numeracy skills and, further, to student's performance in mathematics and science in the TIMSS assessment. The results of this study highlight the importance of high-quality early childhood environments on students' later educational outcomes.

1.7 Part III: Towards Finnish Pedagogy

Chapter 14 starts our final and third part called towards Finnish pedagogy. This chapter is authored by **Sonja Rutar, Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola, Tina Štemberger** and **Sonja Čotar Konrad**. This chapter has a comparative perspective on Finnish pedagogy, closer planning practices as a reflection of teaching and learning concepts in ECEC. The aim of the chapter is to identify pedagogical planning practices and thus recognise the prevailing teaching and learning concepts in ECEC in Finland and Slovenia. Pedagogical planning is one of the key elements of quality for ECEC in both countries. As a result three learning and teaching concepts were recognised (i) transmissive pedagogy; (ii) constructivist-developmentalism, with a transmissive notion of the aim of education; and (iii) participatory pedagogy. Chapter 15 is authored by **Jonna Kangas** and **Heidi Harju-Luukkainen** are creating a theoretical framework for playful learning and pedagogy and moving towards a so-called Finnish perspective with the topic. The Finnish curriculum for ECE play is considered essential for learning and is supported with a systematic and goal-oriented

approach to scaffold children into engaging in learning opportunities. Therefore, teachers create good preconditions for play, supervise it in a suitable way and ensure that each child gets an opportunity to participate in play according to their skills and capabilities. At the end of this chapter the authors present a theoretical framework for playful learning and pedagogy. This model is conducted through a meta-analysis of learning theories, theories of play and of the recent research literature. It is a tool for teachers and researchers to reflect their playful practices and contextualize the concept of play in the context of education. In the next chapter (Chap. 16) authors **Eeva Hujala** and **Kirsi Alila** discuss leadership in the changing context of Finnish early childhood education. This paper focuses on the importance of leadership in a changing context of Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). Leadership is perceived to be embedded in the context of ECEC and defined as an integral part of the mission and core tasks defined in legal and administrative premises. This paper also introduces the Finnish framework for leadership in ECEC. This framework consists of several intertwined reforms that have been introduced into Finnish ECEC during the last few years. These are ECEC legislation renewing, curriculum reform, new guidelines concerning evaluation policy, and reforms in staff's qualifications. The authors conclude that factors supported by growing research in ECEC leadership have a significant impact on conducting leadership and its working culture. Chapter 17 takes a closer look on Sustainability Education in Finnish Early Childhood and Care and it is authored by **Christin Furu**. According to the author, in recent years, there has been a major shift in how sustainability issues are addressed in Finnish early childhood education and care policy and research. Sustainability education has come to the fore through changes in legislation and national core curricula. This chapter aims to provide a glimpse into how practitioners understand and address sustainability education. The chapter ends with a provocation to enhance future dialogue between different stakeholders in order to overcome the gaps between policy, research, and practice and thereby facilitate urgent change towards a sustainable world. Chapter 18 describes elements of the pedagogical process in Finnish early childhood education. This chapter is authored by **Kirsi Alila**, **Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola** and **Jonna Kangas**. This chapter introduces the Finnish Pedagogical Process as a central element of the educational system of early childhood education. A conceptual definition and shared understanding and interpretation of the educational process are essential for the high-quality pedagogical practices of ECE. The authors aim to create a conceptual framework of the Pedagogical Process through a theoretical analysis of different aspects of the process. Through this framework, the authors provide and promote the evaluation and development debate of current pedagogical practices as well as provide tools to identify, structure, phase, and clarify the process as a management system.

The final chapter of this book, Chap. 19 concludes this book. This chapter is authored by **Jonna Kangas**, **Heidi Harju-Luukkainen** and **Susanne Garvis**. It highlights the similarities and differences between the different chapters of this book and critically examines the Finnish ECEC system. It takes an outlook for the future and highlights potential pitfalls but also success factors of policies and

practices. It critically examines the contemporary research issues and provides future direction and guidelines for researchers in order to develop the system further.

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Part I
Multi-theoretical Teacher Training and
Professional Approach

Chapter 2

Pedagogical Leadership in Early Childhood Education Teachers' Work



Johanna Heikka, Katja Suhonen, and Sanni Kahila

Abstract In this chapter we investigate the pedagogical leadership of ECE teachers in Finland. Theoretically, this research was anchored under the concepts of distributed pedagogical leadership and teacher leadership. The research in this area has shown that teachers share leadership responsibilities with ECE centre directors, lead their staff teams, and are considered responsible for the pedagogy of their child groups. Qualitative shadowing and individual interviews were employed to investigate the enactment and perceptions of the three ECE teachers on pedagogical leadership in selected settings. The analysis of findings suggested that the teachers lead the planning, assessment, and development of pedagogy in their multi-professional staff teams. The study also showed how personal dispositions of the teachers influence the enactment of pedagogical leadership in ECE practice. The findings of this study can inform and promote the implementation of pedagogical leadership and can enhance the preparation of teacher graduates as well as the continuing professional development of all ECE staff in ECE settings.

2.1 Introduction

In Finland, an early childhood education (ECE) teacher has the pedagogical responsibility: they are charged with planning, assessing, and developing pedagogical activities. Their role in the ECE team is to show that pedagogy is realised in a child group and to ensure that team members understand the goals of pedagogy and how to achieve these goals. Because of this status, teachers are expected to act as

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pedagogical leaders and professionals who are committed to the implementation of the national curriculum and to the development of ECE pedagogy in their child groups (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018).

The significance of this research arises from the growing importance of investigating ECE teachers' involvement in leadership (Aubrey, 2016; Douglass, 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2017). ECE as a public service has to accomplish societal effectiveness and meet the political and societal goals of each country (Aubrey et al., 2012; Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). By shifting the focus away from centre directors to teachers, this study also provides new knowledge about leadership by indicating how it is enacted within child groups, involving professionals from diverse backgrounds and expecting teachers to lead pedagogy in their teams, which are made up of staff with little or no ECE training. This research will help teachers to better prepare by informing the development of ECE teacher education courses at universities. The findings can also influence the professional development of ECE staff so that it can strengthen teachers' capabilities to lead small teams focusing on pedagogy and curriculum design.

Leadership is a contextual phenomenon and is highly influenced by societal and local regulations and conditions. Also, from the perspective of the Finnish early childhood education context, due to political changes and increased expectations of teachers for pedagogical leadership (Karila et al., 2017), this study addresses a topical and important research topic. Not much is known about teachers' pedagogical leadership and how it is enacted in daily practice in ECE. By utilising a shadowing methodology and through individual interviews with the ECE teachers, this study investigates pedagogical leadership enacted by ECE teachers. The research question was, "How can the pedagogical leadership of ECE teachers be characterised in ECE settings in Finland?"

2.2 Overview of Educational Policies and Theoretical Background

Early childhood education (ECE) policies have recently undergone significant changes in Finland. Along with these changes, ECE legislative and policy regulations (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018) emphasise pedagogy and ECE teachers' responsibilities for pedagogy and leadership of multi-professional teams within ECE centres. According to the Act (540/2018, 37§), teams must include one childcare nurse, at least one ECE teacher, and either one social educator specialising in ECE or ECE teacher. The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) in Finland aims to clarify the roles of each professional group based on their educational competencies, highlighting the pedagogical skills and leadership roles of ECE teachers and breaking away from the traditional so called 'everyone does everything'