

The ECEC Curriculum Guidelines and its Implementation in Finland

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Introduction

We all agree that early childhood education is the first step in lifelong learning and highly important in promoting the well-being of our children. Advancing high quality early childhood education is a strong interest area among researchers and policymakers in different countries. Today, many countries are actively involved in the process of developing and revising curricula for early childhood education. Also the OECD has in its reports *Starting Strong I* and *II* identified the development of appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children as a vital factor for promoting quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (OECD, 2001; 2006).

Finland has developed a national framework for ECEC during the years 2003 to 2005. This process has opened up a new era in Finnish ECEC. Despite the fact that early childhood education has been intentional and goal-oriented since it was started in the mid-19th century (Välimäki, 1998), provision has been seriously limited by the lack of a binding standard curriculum. This is an issue also raised by the OECD during its review of the Finnish ECEC in 1999-2000 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2001).

In this paper, I will introduce the Finnish national curriculum process as a case study. I will describe the process of forming national guidelines, the implementation process so far, the evaluation of the process and its implications for developing new innovative ideas. I will also attempt to foreground the biggest challenges we have faced during the procedure and how we have attempted to find solutions.

The Context

I will start by describing briefly a few facts about our country and its ECEC system. As the OECD made apparent when assigning the cross-national comparison, making cultural, social, demographic and even geographical factors visible makes it easier to understand the challenges countries face and the solutions they reach when developing their ECEC systems. ECEC is strongly socially and culturally dependent. ECEC concepts are linked with language and its meanings. Therefore, we should keep in mind that there may be major differences between the concepts used in different countries.

Facts about Finland

Geographically, Finland is a large area of about 338,000 square kilometres. This is 4.8 times the size of Ireland and a bit larger than the size of UK and Ireland put together. The country is sparsely populated. The population is 5.3 million, the population density being

15.5 inhabitants per square kilometre. 10% of the area is covered by water and 69% by forest. 62% of the population live in towns or urban areas and 38% in rural areas. A rural area in Finland means very low population density and long distances to everywhere. Many of the smallest municipalities fall into this category. About one million people live in the Helsinki metropolitan area: Helsinki (561,000), Espoo (232,000), Vantaa (187,000), and another half a million in the other three biggest cities.

The ECEC System in a Nutshell

The Finnish ECEC system could best be described as holistic. Care and education are brought together in one integrated system. Provision covers both the daycare arrangements offered to families and the goal-oriented early childhood education open to children. All children under compulsory school age (seven years) have an unconditional right to daycare once parental leave comes to an end (at about ten/eleven months). Unconditional here means that children are entitled to full-time, year-round daycare independent of the employment status and income level of their parents. The system is affordable for parents; they pay about 15% of the costs. The daycare fees are based on family size and income level, varying from 0 to €200/month/child in full-time services. Parents pay for eleven months annually, although the place is available for twelve months. There is also free pre-school education for all children aged six, and morning and afternoon activities for school children in first and second grades.

The ECEC system is mainly public. Municipalities provide services through municipal daycare centres, family daycare and pre-school groups located in daycare centres or in schools and they can outsource to private providers. Services also include evening and round the clock care. Municipalities have a statutory obligation to provide a subsidised place for all children up to seven years of age, if parents so choose. It is also possible for families to receive a private childcare allowance in order to provide their children with private care. Currently, this entirely private provision covers about 4.5% of services.

From a European perspective, the participation rates in ECEC in Finland seem rather low. This is partly due to the option for parents to choose child home care allowance instead of municipal daycare until the youngest child in the family turns three. Participation rate for children from one to six/seven is 62.7%, but almost all six year-olds (96.3%) participate in pre-school education.

Although the Finnish system is decentralised, there are also clear national regulations that apply to public as well as to private providers. These set out mainly structural standards, such as staff qualifications, adult-child ratios and the provision of meals and a proper environment for the children.

There are 416 municipalities in Finland that vary in size from about 250 people in smaller regions up to 561,000 in Helsinki. Each municipality provides services according to its own municipal strategy. Often these strategies are linked to the geographical and demographic characteristics of the municipality. A cornerstone in the delivery of ECEC services is parental choice. However, in some rural, isolated and sparsely populated areas, the selection of services on offer is more limited than in urban or metropolitan areas.

In the small municipalities the major type of daycare is family daycare in its different forms. There are thirty-eight municipalities who do not have centre-based services at all, usually for very understandable reasons, for example, if the child population is small and scattered around the municipality. On the other hand, in the big municipalities it is difficult to recruit family daycare staff, and therefore that option is not widely available.

Many municipalities also provide so-called open ECEC services. These include playground activities for children or the whole family, art clubs or open supervised daycare centres. These open services are especially for families who choose not to use the daycare option. Family day carers also frequently use these services. However, while the large and medium size municipalities have a variety of options to offer, about two-thirds of the small municipalities cannot provide any of them. Nevertheless, there are, in most of the municipalities, some open services organised by the church or the third sector.

In a system as decentralised as the Finnish one, a key question, and one that is also posed by the OECD, is whether each small municipality has enough adequately trained administrators and experts to ensure that national standards are met. Another important question is whether the financial and other resources in each of the smallest and most remote municipalities are sufficient to ensure all children equal opportunities for services and high quality content.

The aforementioned facts form a big challenge for the curriculum implementation process. For instance, when STAKES (The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health) organised mentor training, which will be discussed later, the city of Helsinki sent thirty people, whereas there were many small municipalities who could not send a single person. I will try to describe how we have overcome some of these challenges.

One could say that the Finnish ECEC sector has reached far in some aspects. We can provide sufficient amounts of rather good quality services for children and families throughout the country, although there is variation between municipalities. We have a long history of highly valued daycare with its pedagogical aspects. However, our challenge is to provide, as well as possible, equal services for all citizens. This challenge

that goes beyond ECEC is well recognised and therefore there is an ongoing national process to reorganise the municipal structure and functioning, especially from the point of view of basic services. In the future there will be fewer municipalities and more collaboration and networking among the remaining ones.

Why Finland Needed a National Framework for ECEC

Finnish ECEC has undergone major changes in recent years. These changes created a need for a national framework to steer the content of ECEC due to several reasons:

- As a result of administrative decentralisation, diversity between municipalities has increased. This created pressure to develop national guidelines to improve and equalise the quality of ECEC throughout the country.
- The unconditional right to daycare changed public policy from targeted approaches to a universal entitlement to ECEC.
- The introduction of the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education¹ (for six year-olds) in 2000 increased pressure to look at ECEC for younger children as well.
- The social context and the theoretical paradigm of ECEC have changed considerably since the old regulatory framework was introduced in the 1980's.
- Increased research since 1995, when kindergarten teacher education was moved to university level, has enhanced the discussion of content quality and pedagogy in ECEC.
- The national ECEC website Varttua² was gradually developed by STAKES since the summer of 2000. For the first time, Varttua created a proper tool for an open national dialogue. Likewise, this web site (or net service, as we call it) functions as a tool to combine all necessary steering information and news, along with media for understanding, developing and assessing the curricula on different levels.

National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland²

The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (referred to as guidelines from here on) document was first introduced in September 2003 (STAKES, 2003/2004). The guidelines are based on the Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on ECEC (The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2003) approved by the Finnish Government on February 2002². The policy definition contains the central principles and development priorities for publicly operated and supervised ECEC. The values underlying ECEC in Finland are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

Note:

- 1 Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education is defined by the National Board of Education.
- 2 The English version is available from <http://varttua.stakes.fi>

The guidelines aim to standardise national provision of ECEC. As municipalities differ markedly from each other, it is important that each one draws up its own specified strategic guidelines for drafting local ECEC curricula.

The guidelines cover all forms of publicly operated and supervised ECEC. Municipalities are to use them to assess the extent to which their ECEC services meet the standard and to specify the content and modes of action for different ECEC activities in their own curricula.

The guidelines serve as a basis for local and municipal curricula and for the curricula implemented in the daycare units. They emphasise the importance of ECEC in the educational continuum as part of lifelong learning. Hence, the content and aims are linked to the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (National Board of Education, 2000).

The guidelines document is not normative, but a recommendation for the municipalities. It is a contextual and reflective document that should promote an ongoing development process on each level. I will detail these aspects in the following sections.

The Content of the Guidelines

According to the guidelines, the primary aim of ECEC is to *promote the child's overall well-being*. The *educator community* that gives space to children, understands them and their needs, is willing to support them and participate with them is fundamental to ensure that children enjoy meaningful experiences that promote *joy of learning* and feelings of being understood and heard. By interacting and discussing with children, educators get insights into the children's world and thinking. This also requires mutual, continuous and committed interaction between parents and educators in all matters concerning the child. The importance of this *educational partnership* is emphasised throughout the document.

The guidelines emphasise an *inclusive perspective* concerning children who need support, and children with different lingual and cultural backgrounds.

The guidelines place a strong emphasis on language. However, this goes beyond the 'traditional' curricular aspects on language from the perspectives of *language* acquisition and skills or literacy. Language is seen as the thread running through the whole curriculum, and therefore it is not treated as a content area but as a vital communicative and cultural element in the ECEC communities. In the following paragraphs I will clarify some important principles in the guidelines.

Pedagogy: Care, Education, Teaching

Pedagogy is defined as integrating the intertwined dimensions of care, education and teaching. To understand this concept properly, I must explain why we use these three

words instead of the more traditional 'educare'. The Finnish equivalent for the term education is 'kasvatus'. In the Finnish language it has a narrower meaning by excluding the pedagogic perspective. Therefore, we added the term teaching to focus on all the different dimensions we find in pedagogy. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have clarified the Swedish interpretation of the word pedagogy, which differs to some extent from that of many other countries. This definition also describes the Finnish interpretation quite well:

"[Pedagogy] combines a particular concept of learning (foregrounding relations, dialogue and construction of meaning rather than the transmission of predetermined knowledge) with a broad idea of care that goes well beyond physical caretaking to a concern for and engagement with all aspects of life (social, physical, aesthetic, ethical, cultural, etc.)" (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 33).

These three dimensions receive different emphasis according to the specific needs and the situation of the child. This kind of an approach stresses the importance of everyday activities and the children's possibilities to be involved and to participate in every matter concerning their lives. Participation creates a feeling of belonging that helps to develop a healthy self esteem and promotes well being. Moreover, when the child feels that he/she has a place of his/her own and that he/she is important, learning becomes more meaningful.

The Child's Way of Acting: What is Meaningful and Characteristic for Children?

According to the guidelines *playing, movement, exploration and self-expression through different forms of art* are ways of acting and thinking peculiar to children. Such activities enhance their well-being and perception of themselves and increase their opportunities for participation. An activity that children find meaningful also gives expression to their thoughts and feelings. These ways of acting are used as guiding principles in the educator community's interactions with children.

Recent research proves that a meaningful environment is child-friendly. Possibilities for independent mobility reveal many affordances, and the actualisation of affordances motivates the child's further exploration and mobility in the environment (Kyttä, 2003.)

Process Aims: Goals to the Work of Educators and the Environment

The curriculum guidelines do not set goals for the child's development. All goals are aimed at the educational process and the environment. The guidelines challenge the educator communities to reflect upon their work and interaction in the community of children and adults. The guidelines do not give an answer to the question 'what works'. The ambitious goal is to go beyond these practical questions and argue about what is important in ECEC and how we can build a real community of children and adults, a place to belong to.

The Process of Forming the Curriculum and its Implementation

Two major principles in the whole curricular process (including the implementation) have been to base the work on a *strategic framework* (a collaborative interactive process on each level) and on an *open dialogue* (a deductive-inductive steering procedure in implementation). The guidelines form the basis for the municipal and unit-based curricula and the text is quite general. Each municipality should start its own process of discussion and reflection, in order to take the ideas to a more concrete level. Questions like 'what does this mean in our municipality?' or 'how does this apply to our daycare centres?' should be asked. A single correct answer does not exist, only different viewpoints and negotiated solutions.

The National Level

The document was prepared in a rather short period of eight months. The task of drafting the Curriculum Guidelines was assigned to STAKES. A steering group, with representatives from all important stakeholder organisations, was appointed. The steering group was assisted by a working committee, the ECEC expert team at STAKES, and other expert groups established as required for dealing with the different content areas. The document was available on the Varttua website for general consultation and commentary.

After publishing the first version of the Curriculum Guidelines in September 2003, STAKES organised a *mentor-programme*. Eight two-day mentor training sessions for experts chosen by the municipalities were organised during one year. The mentors' task was to start a networking project in their own municipalities or areas. Thus, the mentors were co-ordinators of the municipal curriculum processes.

This kind of networking approach was crucial; since there are over 50,000 ECEC workers in Finland, some quite isolated. Therefore, these mentors were not necessarily mentoring just one municipality. In many areas, the municipalities combined their resources and chose one mentor to co-ordinate a larger area of several municipalities. On the other hand, in some areas the municipalities formed a larger network, where each municipality sent their own mentor. This was the case, for example, in the Oulu area, in Northern Finland. There, twenty-two municipalities formed a network together with a Social Competence Centre and the University of Oulu. They continued the mentoring process by organising their own meetings, training and consultation. Another example is the city of Helsinki. They have divided their ECEC organisation into twenty-two regional sections. They positioned their mentoring and the whole curriculum process inside the existing organisation.

This mentoring programme proved to be very successful. The mentor network was provided with its own extranet environment inside the Varttua website, with all training

materials and other important information, and a discussion forum. The idea was that via the extranet the mentors had the opportunity to interact with mentors from a different municipality, and thus share their visions, understanding and problems in the network. However, as this kind of working culture is still rather new, they ended up more or less using the extranet as a source of information. The communicative element was not used much.

Evaluation

STAKES started a review process of the guidelines at the end of 2004 and Spring 2005, the aim of which was to evaluate how the document fitted the requirements of the different stakeholders, ECEC experts and staff. The mentor network was asked to participate by completing an Internet survey. A number of stakeholders were asked to participate in a content analysis. Forty-nine municipalities and twenty-seven stakeholders responded. Changes were made accordingly to the document and the second edition of the guidelines was published in October 2005.

One of the biggest challenges on a national level during this whole process has been to reach all municipalities. Those 146 mentor municipalities comprise most of the ECEC staff in the country, as all the biggest municipalities are included in that figure. However, we wanted to know whether the rest of the 270 municipalities are in any way involved in the curriculum process. Therefore, another Internet survey was launched to all municipalities in Summer 2005. This time the enquiry was targeted at senior administrators of ECEC in each municipality. We asked them to bring their municipal results straight to a new database, which is easy to update whenever they make progress. As we wanted a 100% response rate, we sent two reminders to the municipalities. According to the results, 91.8% of all municipalities in Finland had started their curriculum processes. We were excited by this result. Less than two years after the first edition was published as a recommendation, almost all municipalities had started to form their own curricula.

STAKES initiated a new procedure in 2006 to build a permanent network of ECEC curriculum experts from each municipality. At the moment, 312 municipalities have joined this network and the target is to reach the remaining municipalities during Spring 2007. Through this network STAKES has a direct connection to all service providers in the country. This is necessary, for instance, when gathering quality-related information for national evaluation. The aim of this project is to assist in particular those municipalities who do not have enough resources or their own experts to proceed in the curriculum process. This project, which is called 'Curricula in Shape' is funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The Municipal Level

On the municipal level, the open dialogue has meant different kinds of processes, where ECEC administrators, personnel, parents and elected officials have participated. Some of the municipalities have also created their own web-based environments to aid the process. The aim is not to copy the national guidelines but to create their own unique framework.

Within the individual settings, this requires the staff to become more reflective and to use the curriculum as a tool to bridge the national framework and the municipal perspective with the practical daily work and pedagogy.

Another challenge is to involve parents and children in this process. Only a curriculum that everyone concerned can feel ownership of, is more than just a mere publication.

Current and Future Challenges

The curriculum process from the national to unit level should proceed from a framework to concrete actions. It has to be constantly evaluated and therefore is seen as an ongoing process. The result of this process should be a contextual and reflective curriculum, to prevent it from being simply a series of manuals for 'what works'.

One element that we have in our favour to support this process is that the basic educational level of our staff is good. In addition, most municipalities also organise systematic in-service education. During the last few years a lot of attention has been focused on new thinking in ECEC, including the changing view of the child.

But does new thinking actually change practice? There are certain global perspectives that have been very dominant in ECEC throughout its history. Their effects are perhaps bound to the countries' own cultures and values. However, in most cases they still have an effect. I am referring to the perspective Moss has argued, the developmental psychological perspective with its implications to 'best practices' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). This paradigm has been influential in Finland, too. Although the aim of these new guidelines is to promote a paradigm shift, we find ourselves on a constant collision course with the old routines based on the dominant perspectives. Even when people start turning the steering wheel in a new direction, sometimes the hectic everyday situations bring back old habits and routines.

One should keep in mind that change happens gradually. However, our process has shown that:

- there has been a tremendous need for new pedagogical thinking,
- a medium steering the content has been missing,
- with clear goals and a persevering attitude change is possible.

I would like to finish with a comment from a small municipality, which perhaps best sums up the successes of the new curriculum process:

"To develop the curriculum in collaboration with parents, daycare, school, the church, and the health care has brought our practices closer. We have been able to discuss more, for instance about how parents could be better involved in planning their children's ECEC. This curriculum process has been one of the best collaborative actions we have ever had. It has given everyone something and our work for promoting the children's best continues."

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