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Early Childhood Education in Finland

Liisa Heinämäki

Liberales Institut

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Editor
Liberal Institute
Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit
Karl-Marx-Straße 2
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Phone +49 3 31.70 19-2 10
Fax +49 3 31.70 19-2 16
libinst@fnst-freiheit.org
www.freiheit.org

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Office Berlin
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Early Childhood Education in Finland

Liisa Heinämäki

National Research and Development Centre for Welfare
and Health STAKES, Jyväskylä Satellite Office

In this paper early childhood education is presented by three main aspects: 1. Finnish social policy as a frame for early years education, 2. Arranging services: systems and forms, and 3. Early years education: principles and guiding

1. Social policy in Finland

In Finland Social Policy is a frame for early years education. In order to understand the ways education has been arranged, you need to know some basics about social policy and service organization.

Social policy in Finland – the basics

Finland uses Nordic Welfare state principles and methods. Shortly, the main ideas consider access to services. In Nordic Welfare model social security is based on the state's responsibility for its citizens, and welfare services are arranged and funded by central and local government. Access to services is based on citizenship; you need not to work or have an insurance etc. to get services.

Due the Nordic model in Finland there are kinds of multiple systems for family policy activities and services; both services and benefits. There is for example maternity and child welfare clinics, maternity grant, family leave, child day care and early childhood education, child care subsidies, family allowance, child maintenance support, paternity leave, family guidance and child protection and private family care. Guiding level for these services and activities is the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Early childhood and pre-primary education

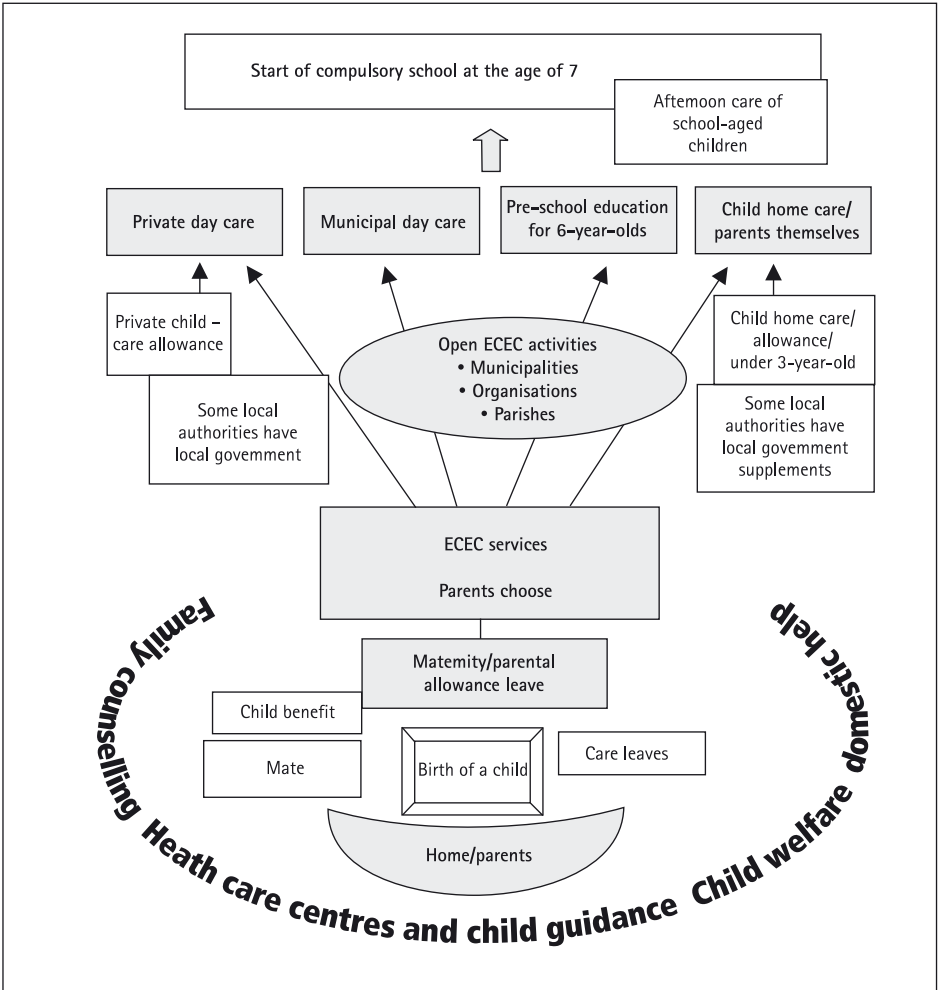
So, Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (ECEC) is one part of social services. Policy definition about ECEC has been done at government level, by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH). Key principles and guidelines¹ of publicly provided and supervised ECEC, and guideline's aim is to further the development of the content and quality of ECEC throughout the entire service and support system. ECEC is a service for children from 1 to 6 years, and the family. ECEC principles have four perspectives: society, children, parents and staff.

Children permanently living in Finland have the right to participate in voluntary pre-primary education during the year preceding compulsory schooling. Nearly all 6-year-olds do so. Pre-primary education is free.

1 Government resolution concerning the national policy definition on Early Childhood Education and Care. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health Publications 2003:9

The principle underlying pre-primary, basic and upper secondary education is to guarantee basic educational security for all, irrespective of their place of residence, language and economic standing. A Finnish child usually starts schooling at the age of seven. The nine-year basic schooling is free for all pupils. Pre-primary education is guided by the Ministry of Education.

Finnish early childhood education and care system includes various systems and possibilities to arrange family affairs:



Forthcoming changes?

In Finland there is a huge re-organisation of social and health services going on, starting at autumn 2007. Municipalities must organise their services in minimum 20 000 citizen areas. Many consolidations of municipalities are prepared and also new ways to organise services. Day care services are now allowed to be organised in municipalities as they will: among social services or educational Services. Government will speak out during next few years, if they will transmit day care system guidance from MSAH to Ministry of Education.

2. Arranging Services

Including Nordic social policy welfare services are arranged by local government authorities. Main characters about service systems and forms are organised by early years education including day care services, and allowing parents a wide range of possibilities to choose.

Local municipalities are organising day care services following governmental main principles. At first, Day Care services are open for every child. All children below school age are entitled to receive municipal day care either at a day care centre or in family day care.

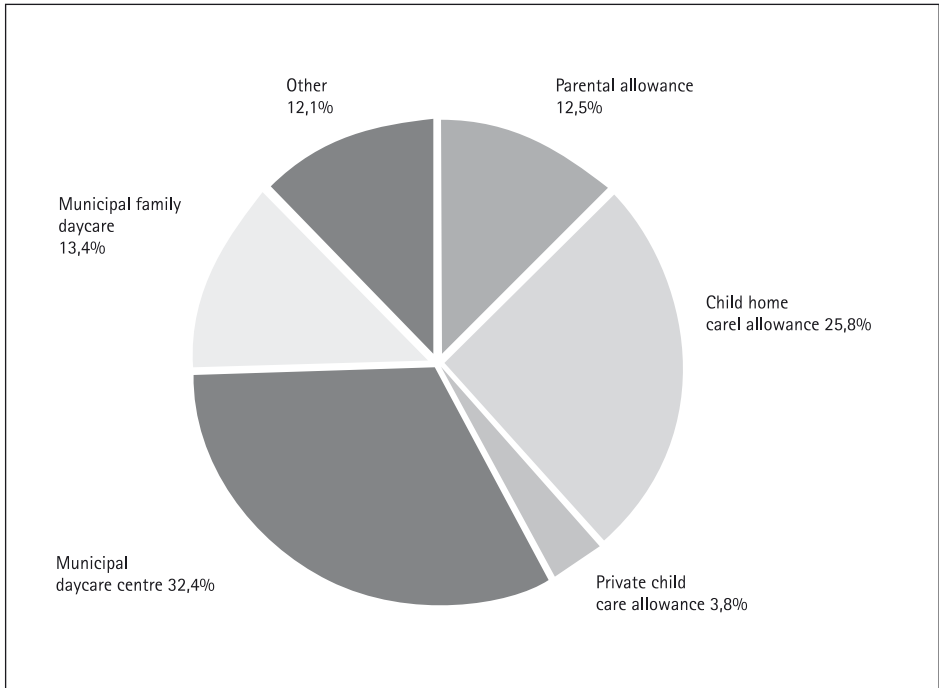
Day care costs are calculated according to the size of a family and income. They range between EUR 18 – 200 a month. The costs start to decline if you have a second child in day care. Day care services are free for low income families, but about this there has been an actual discussion in summer 2007, and the policy may be more limited in the future.

Parent's Choose

Parents choose, if they want to use day care services or not. Day care arrangements for children under 7 year are like following: about 50% of age group is involved to day care services under 7 years² (Municipal day care centre and family day care 45,8% and private child care allowance 3,8%). Parental and child home care allowances – which usually means mother or father is staying at home with child – is used in 38,3% of cases.

So, the main allowances and services are private day care, municipal day care and child home care:

2 Day care arrangements for children under 7 year. Finland's family policy, Brochure 2006:12, page 17.



1. Private day care

- private day care allowance EUR 140/month (governmental), in some municipalities local supplements
- parents organise the service themselves; private services had to act like day care
- In some communities they use a voucher system [palveluseteli], but that's not very widespread due to some legal questions about citizen's democracy

2. Municipal day care

- service is organised by local authorities
- parents pay EUR 0 – 200 per month
- in some cases municipalities buy services from private service producers [ostopalvelu]

3. Child home care (under 3-year old child)

- Parents care for their children themselves
- Allowance EUR 295 per month, in some municipalities local supplements

Parental allowance is a part of maternity/paternity benefits; child is usually under 11 months.

Some numbers and facts about day care services in Finland

In Finland there are about 2.700 day care centres; most of them are quite small ones. Total number of children in day care services is app. 180.000. About 40.000 of them join day care part-time, usually due to parent's different working hours.

Half of municipalities organise also 'open' services as activities at playgrounds, clubs etc.

Day care staff

Because Finnish day care includes both education and care, the staff is also multi-disciplinary.

In day care centres all staff must have at least secondary-level education, and one third of the staff must have the post-secondary level degree (bachelor of education, master of education or bachelor of social sciences). In family day care appropriate training is needed, and new recommendations demand vocational training (further qualification for child minders).

Adult-child ratios in day care services are as follows: Basic ratio: 1 adult for 7 children (3-6 years), 1 adult for 4 children (0-3 years) and in family day care 4,5 children for one adult.

Financing day care service

As the Nordic model insists that social security is based on the state's responsibility for its citizens. Also day care system is mostly financed by authorities. Total costs are EUR 1.655 m, the government and municipalities are covering most of it (Government EUR 417 m and municipalities EUR 1.001 m). Parents fees are about EUR 237 m.

At the same time support for private care costs are EUR 58 m totally.

3. Early Years Education: Principles and Guiding

Principles and guiding have been developing a lot in last years. Government resolution concerning the national policy definition on early childhood education and care was given in 2002, and National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland was given in 2003 (cover picture below).



*How to kindle curiosity and the joy of learning?
How to give sense to play and physical activity?
How to create joy through participation?*

Early childhood education and care includes caring, educating and teaching. ECEC is an educational interaction taking place in young children's different living environments, aimed at promoting their balanced growth, development and learning. Educational goals in ECEC principles and curriculum are as follows:

1. Promotion of personal well-being
2. Reinforcement of considerate behaviour and action towards others
3. Gradual build of autonomy

Implementation of these goals is made e.g. by these main characters and ideas: taking care of child's well-being; integrating care, education and teaching; assessing and developing educator's action; considering environment of ECEC; respecting the importance of joy of learning ("*Children learn best when they are active and interested!*"); knowing and using a important role of language/interaction; and respecting child's way of acting.

Partnership with parents

Partnership with parents is very highly appropriated in ECEC guidelines and curriculum.

Partnership combines the knowledge and experiences of parents and ECEC staff, both of which are important influences on the child's life.

Following the national curriculum all municipalities are introduced to write out their own curricula, and also all day care centres have to do it. An individual ECEC plan for every child is made together with parents.

Child's way of acting

Child's way of acting is defined as playing, moving, experiencing, a exploring. Goal of the educator is to make it possible for a child to use these ways of acting. Educators must understand

1. What is the child's important experiences it she/he is moving, playing etc.,
2. What must educators do to give a child these experiences?
3. What does it demand from the educational environment?

Content orientations

Contents of educational action are described in curriculum in the new way. There are no lists about 'right' action, but a demand for educators to help the children to learn: giving skills for analysing, synthesising and integrating knowledge and experiences. In interaction with the environment and people, children process and analyse information using their existing conceptual frameworks, being active learners. Content orientation areas are mathematics, natural sciences, history & society, aesthetics, ethics, religion & philosophy. These contents has continuum in preschool curriculum.

Children with special needs in Finnish day care

Special support during Early Years is usually organised in day care and health care system. In Finnish day care children with special needs and children at risk are usually included in the general system of early education and care. A child with special needs may be placed in a special needs group (5% of children with SN), or in a integrated group (10% of children with SN). Still, 85% of children with SN receive instruction in an ordinary group from a special need preschool teacher who visits the institution regularly.

More than half of all municipalities can not offer special teacher's services. This situation is changing due to new legislation in 2006.

More information about the Finnish social system and early years education:

Please visit www.Stm.Fi/english/family, where you can find e.g. these:

- Early childhood education and care in Finland. Brochures 2004:14eng
- Decision in principle of the council of state concerning the national policy definition on early childhood education and care. Helsinki, 2002. 28p. (Publications of the ministry of social affairs and health.
- Social welfare in finland. Ministry of social affairs and health's brochures 2006:11eng, ISSN 1236-2123 ISBN 952-00-2098-5 (paperback), 952-00-2099-3 (PDF)
- A Finland fit for children. The national finnish plan of action called for by the special session on children of the un general assembly. Publications 2005:7
- Opportunities to reconcile family and work. Ministry of social affairs and health's report 2007:16 .

Visit also: www://varttua.Stakes.Fi in english

- National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland. www.Stm.Fi

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Dr. Liisa Heinämäki:

Senior researcher and head of office of STAKES Jyväskylä Satellite Office.

Her interest areas are social service systems, early and special support for children and families.

Liisa Heinämäki has researched especially special education in day care services, and she has developed a new early support ideologue and acting models for day care and school environments. She is now doing research about early support in all services for children and families. She is also involved in many national social services developing processes, for example the reform of municipalities and service structures (called Paras).

Contact information:

National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health STAKES,

Jyväskylä Satellite office Matarankatu 4 FI- 40014 Jyväskylä University

Tel. no and/or fax no; Phone +358 142604801; Mobile phone +358 400 717475

Email: liisa.heinamaki@stakes.fi; www.stakes.fi/FinSoc