Epistemic governance in local policy debates: The case of entitlement to early childhood education and care in Finland

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In Finland, children below school age have enjoyed the right to attend subsidised full-time early childhood education and care (ECEC). However, the attendance rate in Finland is low in comparison to other Nordic countries. Furthermore, the entitlement was restricted to 20 hours per week in 2016 unless the child's parents work or study full-time or unless it is believed that the child will benefit from full-time ECEC. The debates concerning restrictions in ECEC entitlement in three municipal councils serve as the data for this study. By using the framework of epistemic governance, we identify three differing constructions of the ECEC's societal functions in the municipal policy debates. The similarities and differences between these constructions aid us to understand resent changes in ECEC policies. This case illustrates how focusing on epistemic governance on local level policy debates opens interesting insights in policy changes more generally.

Keywords: epistemic governance; epistemic capital; early childhood education; childcare; policy

Introduction

We currently live in a transnational era of global policy trends. However, policies become actualised in local contexts. In this article, we argue for an increased focus on local policy debates, especially in relation to early childhood and family policies, in order to understand the drivers behind policy changes.

Before the 1990s, policy discussions concerning early childhood education and care (ECEC) throughout the Global North mainly focused on ECEC's role in enabling parents to participate in the workforce. Interest in ECEC mainly arose from labour-market policy goals such as increasing employment rate, and gender equality (Mahon, 2016). In recent years, the focus in terms of the rationales for ECEC, and more specifically, the societal functions of ECEC, has shifted to its role in enhancing

children's school readiness, reducing poverty, and enabling social integration (Penn, 2011a). Emergent knowledge on early brain development, together with objectives associated with the knowledge economy, have redirected the international and national focus and ambitions for early childhood interventions (Cheeseman, Sumsion, & Press, 2014; Campbell-Barr, 2012).

This increased focus on ECEC has resulted in changes in its policy aims. For example, young children's access to and participation in education and care have become widely discussed in national policymaking and international debates. For example, one of the European Union's (EU) education goals for 2020 is that at least 95% of children from the age of four to compulsory school attendance age participate in ECEC (European Commission, 2009). Similar to other international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the EU recommends the universal accessibility of ECEC as ECEC attendance is believed to build the foundations for children's later learning, thus contributing directly to the knowledge economy, increased socio-economic mobility, and the prevention of marginalisation (Campbell-Barr, 2012; Heckman, 2000; 2011; Penn, 2011b).

In this article, we maintain that policy change is not a one-way street that passes from international policies to national and local policies. Many approaches to governance and policy change lack an analysis of the *mechanisms* of social change (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2013). In this article, we argue for the necessity of considering epistemic governance – the way in which actors influence on other actors believes about the world – in local policies when trying to understand policy change and its mechanisms. In this article, we use the case of Finnish ECEC policy to shed light on this argument.

On one hand, Finland is a model country in terms of universal access to ECEC, as all children in the country enjoy entitlement to subsidised education or care.[1] From 1990, children under the age of three enjoyed the unconditional right to attend full-time ECEC, which was provided by local authorities. In 1996, this entitlement was expanded to cover all children under school age. This is known in Finland as 'the subjective right to day care.'

On the other hand, Finnish ECEC policy is contradictory in terms of access and participation. Despite the universal access it offers, the ECEC participation rate of Finnish children is low by European comparison.[2] Due to the government's desire to balance budgets, the parliament enacted new legislation in 2016 that allowed municipalities to limit ECEC entitlement to 20 hours per week (Government proposal 112/2015).[3] Full-time ECEC was restricted to children with employed parents (statute

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[1] In Finland, institutional ECEC encompasses integrated care and education services for children aged between zero and five and pre-primary education for children aged six. Children begin primary school the year they turn seven.

[2] For example, 87.4% of children in Finland aged between four and seven (the starting age of compulsory primary education) attend ECEC, while the EU average is 95% (Eurostat, 2016).

[3] Finland has a strong multi-party system, with coalition governments usually formed by the largest party. Parties that are not in the national government are referred to as the opposition. Parties work in parliamentary groups in parliament, usually voting with party discipline. Parties are composed of local chapters based in municipalities. Unlike the national government, where there is a government and an opposition, municipal boards are selected proportionally based on local council elections. At the time when the restriction was made, the parties in the national government were the Centre Party, the Finns Party, and the

108/2016). Full-time ECEC (over 20 hours per week) is still guaranteed if the child's parents work or study full-time and if the child is believed to benefit from it for developmental or social reasons.

The 2016 governmental proposal was not the first challenge to ECEC entitlement (Salmi & Närvi, 2014). Before this, public opposition was sufficiently strong to force the government to halt the enforcement of restrictions. In 2016, the leading party was the one that had traditionally supported compensation for parents who cared for their children at home. This compensation is in the form of the Child Home Care Allowance (CHCA) and has been available since the 1980s to parents of children under three years of age who do not attend publicly subsidised ECEC, i.e., whose parents prefer looking them after at home. It consists of a monthly lump sum, an additional amount that is dependent on family size and income, and possibly a municipal supplement, depending on the municipality. The CHCA is also paid for any siblings of the child who are below school age and looked after at home. However, payment ends for all children in the family when the youngest child reaches the age of three (Sipilä et al., 2010). Earlier research suggests that the low attendance rate of children in ECEC in Finland is at least partly due to the country's generous home care policies (Mahon et al., 2012).

Lundqvist, Nyby, Autto, and Nygård (2017) have examined the national political debate concerning these restrictions. They argue that the national debate reflects a shift in focus from the rationale of children's social mobility to rationales of austerity and the employment of mothers. Thus, it could be argued that this shift in discourse rendered

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National Coalition Party. In the opposition was the Social Democratic Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, the Swedish People's Party, and the Christian Democrats.

the restriction of entitlements possible, even though concerns regarding low ECEC attendance have been raised (see Committee of Education and Culture, 2018).

However, as the contemporary governance of ECEC in Finland forms a two-fold system, where the nation-state and municipalities play their respective roles in ECEC policies, we believe it is beneficial to examine the case from the perspective of local debates. The proposition to restrict entitlement in 2016 was debated in several municipalities, as the municipalities had the right to decide whether to enforce the restriction. The municipalities are responsible for and obliged to provide ECEC, but they are free to decide how they provide the relevant services as long as they fulfil the statutory, minimum demands (e.g. staff qualifications and child–staff ratios). Municipalities can, for example, arrange and organise ECEC by themselves or subsidise (and monitor) private providers (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 1973). Municipalities receive funding from the central government to organise services, and this funding is based on certain factors, including the number of residents of different age groups. Municipalities decide how they divide funding between different services (e.g. social welfare, healthcare services, and educational and cultural services), for which each municipality is responsible. In principle, government funding covers approximately 30% of the costs of municipal ECEC services. Thus, restricting entitlement to ECEC gave municipalities the opportunity to reduce their ECEC costs.

By presenting the case of local negotiations regarding these ECEC restrictions, we argue that examining local policy discussions helps us understand policy changes. Both international (e.g. Penn, 2011a; Mahon, 2010) and national (Alila, 2013; Autto, 2016; Nyby et al., 2017; Onnismaa, 2010; Paananen, Lipponen, & Kumpulainen, 2015; Penn, 2011b) constructions of ECEC and its functions have been widely researched in policy texts. In these texts, ECEC has been credited with enabling labour-market

participation, increasing gender equality and social mobility, fostering democracy, and supporting the development of social capital (Paananen, 2017). However, there is surprisingly little research on how ECEC policies are deliberated in actual policy debates (see, however, Autto, 2016; Lundkvist et al., 2017). This dearth of research is especially noticeable in local and municipal decision-making, despite the fact that in many countries – including Finland – numerous decisions concerning ECEC are made at municipal level. Thus, these arenas hold debates where tensions between differing constructions concerning, for example, the societal functions of ECEC, become visible. There is a need for a closer examination of municipal policy deliberation in ECEC so as to better understand ECEC policies and the tensions within them. Also, many approaches to governance and policy change lack the analysis of the *mechanisms* of social change (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2013). Exploring the mechanisms of social change is essential for a better understanding of the political incentives that drive policy decisions. This article aims to address these gaps in the research. Furthermore, we suggest that the analytics of epistemic governance, drawn from the work of Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) and Alasuutari (2016), provide useful tools for understanding the mechanisms of policy change. This framework directs us to an examination of how restrictions to ECEC entitlement were debated at the local level, what kinds of presuppositions concerning ECEC and societal contexts were shared, and what was contested in the debates.

The paper is organised into three sections. First, we present the conceptual and methodological premises of the study. Second, with the help of the concept of epistemic governance, we examine the constructions of ECEC's societal functions via the norms and constructions of the ontology of the environment present in the council debates. Third, we discuss the implications of the findings – namely, how does an examination of local-level epistemic governance help us understand ECEC policy more widely?

The framework of epistemic governance

In this article, we draw on Alasuutari and Qadir's work (2014) concerning the strategies of power that influence policies. Aligning with the work of Foucault (1977), Castells (2009), and Rose and Miller (1992), they approach governance as the way in which actors amend people's conceptions of reality. Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) argue that the mechanisms of how social change is affected has often been overlooked in terms of power and governance in research. Previous conceptualisations seem to revolve around quite abstract actors who pull the strings to implement change. Such actors include researchers, experts, neoliberalism, and the media. Although earlier studies provide valuable tools for understanding social change, especially on the global level, they do not consider the particular ways in which actors attempt to influence the beliefs of others (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014, pp. 69–70). To address this gap, Alasuutari and Qadir have suggested the use of a framework of epistemic governance in order to understand social change.

A starting point for their argument is the notion that political talk reflects the collective constructions of the any topic at hand. Political talk is a specific type of discourse that possesses its own structures and strategies of argumentation. Within these structures and strategies, the opposed standpoints of the political 'others' are attacked, while the standpoints of the political in-group are defended. Both explicit and implicit premises organise and govern a debate. An important point to note is that political talk does not only address political 'others' and political in-groups but also a wider audience that includes potential voters (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013; Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). In order to pass a new proposal, policymakers need to win sufficient support for it. Such support is sought by what Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) refer to as epistemic work, which consists of particular techniques used to affect the views and hegemonic

definitions of the situation at hand. However, these techniques are not necessarily conscious choices – rather, they comprise the actors' attempts to promote a particular policy in order to find a solid basis for their proposal and ground their arguments in the premises they believe to be accepted and socially established.

According to Alasuutari and Qadir (2014), epistemic work focuses on four different but interrelated aspects. The first aspect is termed the ontology of the environment. When policymakers argue for a reform, they need to convince citizens that the current state of affairs is unsatisfactory, thus meaning that they need to outline the current state of affairs. As mentioned above, this is based on certain beliefs of political actors – namely, that a certain definition of a state of affairs is sufficiently accepted in order for them to refer to it when trying to influence others. (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014).

The second aspect is termed actor identification, which refers to the identity politics used by actors to influence the other's identifications in terms of who they (the actors and the listeners) are and to which community they belong. Such epistemic work on actor identifications is not restricted to language; it may also include ritualistic aspects that function through the emotions and other individuals' bodily experiences (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014).

The third aspect of epistemic work concentrates on norms and ideals by appealing to a general ideal or principle about what is good or desirable. Alasuutari and Qadir (2014, 66–67) note that norms and ideals can include commonly held principles, like rationality, equality, freedom, and the creation of 'ever-new ideals such as "child-centredness" or "sustainability", which often quickly circulate across the world when they become popular and actors justify their political goals by applying them'.

The fourth aspect is the account of authority upon which the justification of a

certain policy suggestion draws (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). When aiming to utilise epistemic governance, the actors need either to present themselves as authoritative or to appeal to other authorities they assume others would will accept. Alasuutari (2016) argues that there are four identified modes of authority. The first is ontological authority, which refers to the justification of a certain policy by making factual statements. When utilising ontological authority, actor presents or frames the nature of the situation as an objective fact for, example, by using research or statistics. The second is moral authority, which draws on generally approved-of and morally binding norms, such as human rights. The third is capacity-based authority, which depends on the perceived ability of an actor to condition the actions of other actors (e.g. by imposing sanctions). The fourth is charisma, which is based on referring to the unique character of an actor, be it a person or an organisation. The four forms of epistemic work are mutually intertwined and can – and often do – accumulate meaning. In other words, an actor can utilise more than one aspect of epistemic work to support their argument.

The theory of epistemic governance posits that in the practice of epistemic work, the four different forms mentioned above appear in combination. This means that a single argument simultaneously deals with several aspects (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014). Policy discourse that is aimed at concrete issues and targets, such as promoting a particular policy, usually entails that the premises (i.e. the ontology of the environment, actor identifications, norms and ideals, and the accounts of authority on which it is grounded) are already or will become commonly accepted, thus forming a solid basis for the proposal (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013). Thus, examining epistemic work facilitates our understanding of the collective constructions of ECEC's societal functions.

The identity politics by which actors aim to influence their own and other's identifications through, for example, certain rituals, are prevalent in political talk in the formal environment in council debates. This aspect of epistemic governance is not, however, the focus of this study, because the rituals related to council debates do not vary depending on representatives' cultural constructions on ECEC. Thus, it would not provide any additional value to our argument. Instead, we focus on the three other aspects of epistemic governance presented in the council debates – namely, the ontology of the environment, the norms and ideals, and different modes of authority related to ECEC. We believe that focusing on local cases brings a new perspective to the extant literature on epistemic governance and contributes to the literature of policy change.

Data and methods

This article is based on naturally occurring data, which consist of municipal council debates in three Finnish municipalities: Tampere, Jyväskylä, and Oulu.[4] These three cities are among the largest in the country. The municipal council in Finland is the municipality's supreme decision-making body. Its members are elected in local elections for four-year terms. In this article, we study debates about the proposition to restrict unconditional entitlements to ECEC. These debates took place in spring 2016, after the previously mentioned law regarding ECEC entitlement restrictions had been enacted at national level. The debates took place after a national change to the legislation, thus meaning that this article analyses the renegotiating process of local

[4] The number of inhabitants in the three municipalities varies from 130,000 to 230,000. There are also variations in the economic situation of the municipalities, their political strength, and various demographic factors.

ECEC provisions in the aftermath of the national legislation change. The debates focused on whether the municipalities should restrict their ECEC policy. All of the debates took place as part of discussions regarding the municipal budget. The budget comprises the financial plan for the administration of the municipality. The Local Government Act stipulates that the council decides on the budget, and the budget for the coming budgetary year is approved by the municipal council or the joint municipal board before the end of the previous budgetary year.

The debates of the three aforementioned municipal councils were selected for this study, as each council arrived at a different result. The council in Tampere decided not to restrict the entitlement, but Oulu's council decided to implement the restrictions. Jyväskylä also decided to enact the restrictions, but not to their full extent, as the council decided that the entitlement to ECEC could vary from four to six hours per day. The different end-results of the debates provide a potentially fruitful site from which to conduct an examination of the representatives' of the municipal council epistemic work, including culturally shared and contested constructions of norms, conceptualisations of the ontology of the environment, and the conceptualisation of valid authorities.

The council meetings were audio-recorded as routine practice, and the recordings were made publicly available on the internet. The debates concerning the entitlement to ECEC, lasting approximately four hours, were transcribed verbatim. In total, the representatives of the city councils deliberated over the entitlement to ECEC in 143 addresses. Typically, participants in a research study must give informed consent based on the nature of the research, the usage of the research results, and the possible implications for the participants. In addition, publishing information in a way that allows an individual to be inadvertently identified is usually permitted based on the participants' explicit consent. As the data consist of public debates, and since the

informants are public figures, explicit consent for the use of the data has not been requested, even though the participants may be recognisable through the publicly available data. As we want to focus on the wider societal phenomena of epistemic governance rather than on individual actors, and because we wish to avoid any possible harm, we do not include any detailed identification information regarding the policymakers (e.g. municipality, gender[5], age). In this way, we want to highlight that the focus of this research is on wider cultural constructions rather than on individual opinions.

Since the discussions in the councils concerning the possibility of restricting ECEC entitlements were elaborate, we believe they provide a suitable entry point through which to explore the epistemic work of Finnish ECEC policy and the ways in which the societal functions of ECEC are constructed in policy debates. In addition to the debates, various preparatory documents, such as budget proposals, were examined as secondary data.

The analysis of the data began with a careful reading of the transcribed council discussions. At this point, our focus was mainly on the content, with the aim of identifying moments where the subjective right to ECEC was discussed. In relation to the data, epistemic work in political debates concerning the subjective right to ECEC was approached in terms of the following question: What type of epistemic governance, and especially, what aims, norms, and statements concerning the ontology of the environment were referred to when suggesting a solution? (Alasuutari, 2016). We then examined which modes of authority were used to justify these statements. We reflected on the aspects that were constructed as being self-evident in policy deliberation, the

[5] We will use the pronominal ‘she’ when referring to councillors regardless of their gender.

matters agreed upon, the matters left unchallenged, and the issues the councillors disagreed over. We also paid attention to any issues that were missing from the discussions.

Shared aims and norms in ECEC policy debates: Children's rights and equality

Based on the shared and contested aspects of the norms and ontology of the environment, we argue that three distinct yet partly intersecting constructions of ECEC can be identified. These constructions all have shared aims in relation to ECEC policy. We also find constructions of the ontology of the environment that were left unchallenged.

The aims and norms presented in the municipal council discussions dealt with children's rights and the reduction of inequalities. References to all of these aims were used when arguing for and against restricting the entitlement to ECEC in each of the three municipalities.

When notions of equality, equity, and social rights were referred to, they were related to gender and inequalities between children, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds. The councillors promoting the restrictions argued that the restrictions do not threaten equality. Rather, they argued that when full-time ECEC is means-tested, it allows even better opportunities for intervention, since parents need to apply for full-time day-care services and justify their needs. Policymakers highlighted that the restrictions would increase equal access to ECEC, as there would be more ECEC places for children if the restrictions were implemented - they are able to apply lower ratio for the children who have only restricted 20 hours entitlement to ECEC, and thus, have more children per educator: 'This [restriction] increases equality among our children in

terms of the availability of early childhood education. This is not about limitations – this is an opportunity.' (National Coalition Party).

The councillors opposing the restrictions also referred to questions of inequality. In their accounts, ECEC was considered an effective method of reducing inequality:

> All children should have the right to high quality early childhood education regardless of the parents' [work status]. Restrictions to the entitlement to day care cause inequality among children. This endangers children's right to education and learning and increases inequalities in Finland. The right to day care is first and foremost the child's right, not the parents' right (Youth Council).

References to equality were used to argue that the planned restrictions would violate the right to learning, as the above excerpt illustrates.

When discussing these shared aims and norms, moral authority was used to argue for the obligation to think about the 'rights' or 'equality' of the children. Even though equality and children's rights were shared aims among the speakers, references to moral authority were made only by those who opposed the restrictions. Claims in relation to moral authorities, such as references to the constitution and the EU, were made when some speakers argued that savings could not be the only criterion to influence decision-making. Other norms, such as the rights of children, had to be taken into account.

> The European Union has set a target of 95% of children over four years old participating in pedagogical early childhood education. This raises a question of whether Finland is violating the aims of European Union when it restricts access to early childhood education. In this way, by categorising children we violate the

> rights of children, which should be untouchable and not sacrificed on the altar of [the] economy (Social Democratic Party).[6]

In the excerpt above, the councillor presents the EU's targets for ECEC coverage. Although the aim is not legally binding, it is presented here as a norm that should be adhered to. The councillor further strengthens the moral authority in her statement by utilising a strong metaphor – that of a sacrificial offering – to highlight that the issue concerns the rights of children, who should not be compromised.

To conclude, the aims and norms were, on the surface, shared and unchallenged. Using the concepts of epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014), the shared starting point concerning ECEC policy in the three council debates can be identified as the enactment of children's rights and equality.

Unchallenged constructions of the state of affairs: The municipal economy and families at risk

As previously mentioned, the initial topic of discussion for the council debates was the budget proposals for the next year. Each budget proposal contained a presupposition that the restriction concerning children's unconditional entitlement to ECEC would materialise and that savings would be made by enacting it.[7] However, none of the

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[6] As some readers might be interested in the political backgrounds of the representatives, we have provided information about their party affiliation at the end of the excerpts, even if we do not include the topic of party affiliation in the analysis.

[7] The estimations made by municipality officials in relation to ECEC savings, assuming that all of the changes that the national legislation allowed were enacted, varied from €1.6 million to €3 million, while the total budget for each city for early childhood education services varied from €204 million to €412 million.

proposals provided an explanation as to how savings at the municipality level had been estimated, nor did any of the councillors question this.

In the debates, the councillors either backed the proposed cuts or suggested adjustments in relation to them. However, the construction of the challenging economic situation of the municipality remained uncontested. It was a shared presupposition in all three council debates that the books of each municipality required balancing. The representatives opposing the restrictions to ECEC entitlement and those supporting it commonly presented the need for austerity measures as a given. This is evident in the following excerpt, which is the address of a proponent of the limitations.

> Of course we have these huge economic challenges. The suggestion [concerning the restriction] is based on that. How can we survive this massive economic deficit? I wouldn't like to see any cuts made to social benefits for children. Yet, rationally thinking, we need to make a minor cut here where the effect is the smallest (National Coalition Party).

The councillor begins the argument with an expression ('of course') that presents the severe economic situation of the municipality as an unquestionable fact. Moreover, he underlines the economic challenges faced by the municipality by using extreme adjectives ('huge,' 'massive'). After constructing an alarming image of the municipality's economic reality, he then creates a compassionate identity for himself as a decision maker by expressing his unwillingness to cut children's social benefits. However, following this, he adopts a more distant stance to the situation by referring to rational thinking. Thus, he invokes once again a more 'factual' and cognitive discourse as justification for the budget cuts in ECEC.

The opponents to the ECEC restrictions also believed that there was a need to balance the budget, as shown in the following excerpt:

> Unfortunately, the government's decision allows the restrictions on entitlement to early childhood education and care. Yet, for example, the Assistant Parliamentary Ombudsman has criticised it. She underlines that the economic situation of the state and the municipalities is not a justified reason for children to be treated unequally […] She does not represent any special interest group… She is a top official (Social Democratic Party).

The councillor begins the account with 'unfortunately,' expressing dissatisfaction at the decision. She refers to an authority, the Assistant Parliamentary Ombudsman, and summarises her argument – namely, that restrictions would result in the unequal treatment of children. Her account does not question the savings that may be possible due to the restrictions, but she does reference a well-known official to question the entitlement restrictions. The councillor then supports the criticism provided by the Assistant Ombudsman regarding the suggested restrictions by making assurances as to the objectivity of said official by stating that she does not represent any special interest group. The councillor bolsters her statement even further by describing the Assistant Ombudsman as 'a top official,' thus attempting to convince her listeners of the trustworthiness of her statement and of the argument in general. However, she does not challenge the overall perception of the municipality's economic situation as being strained.

Using the concepts of epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014), the shared starting point concerning the municipality's economic situation in the three council debates can be understood as a shared ontology of the environment. The shared ontology of the environment in terms of economic challenges is used to justify the need for budget cuts – or, in other words – local austerity measures. The emphasis on the need for budget cuts can also be seen as a norm in the epistemic work, since the budget cuts were presented as something that the councillors were obliged to implement, and

this implementation was the correct course of action given the municipality's economic situation. Thus, the issue debated in the three council meetings concerned *where* the cuts should be addressed, not if they were *needed*. This is in line with the findings of Nyby et al. (2017) according to which also the national debates on restrictments constructed adjustments of the public economy as necessities to ensure the future of welfare services.

Even though the budget proposals were vague and opaque in terms of their calculations, the premises of these calculations were only questioned on a general level. For example, one of the councillors pointed out that the possible costs of increased bureaucracy had not been taken into account. However, municipalities' early childhood officials did not enjoy similar levels of epistemic authority in the debates.

The shared construction among the councillors in each municipality was that a family's need for full-time day-care indicated that said family was somehow at risk and in possible need of intervention. The following excerpt exemplifies this shared construction:

> The valid question concerning the possibility of the increase in bureaucracy due to the means testing has been posed. I believe that this can be dealt with using minimal bureaucracy by our child welfare clinics, which are very low-threshold services. We have a team of different professionals meeting regularly [concerning these issues]. They know these families and children. They have representatives from day care and the child welfare clinic, which are easily and with minimal bureaucracy able to make these decisions [concerning ECEC entitlements]. I see that there is a great potential here to be able to provide timely help of the right kind for families. If there are special needs in the family, it might not be the right solution that a child attends full-day care. If they have difficulties with parenting issues, it is crucial that they get support for that. Family services can evaluate whether there is a need for full day care or whether it would be better if the family received help from family social services for a couple of days per week. It would then be possible to deal with the actual need

> and the problem. It would be much better that just letting the child be away from home for as long as possible (National Coalition Party).

The councillor argues that for such families, the best option is for professionals to evaluate their needs and provide the most fitting solution to the problem. He builds on a construction of the superiority of expert knowledge by explaining that the personnel know the families and can provide the right kind of solutions for them. The families' own solutions, such as utilising full-time day care, are considered inferior to expert knowledge, with the councillor stating that 'it might not be the right solution.' In addition, attending full-time day care when one parent is at home is considered to be indicative of a problem or issue that needs to be addressed. This problem is situated in the family. Utilising full-time day care for practical reasons, for example logistic reasons, or for reasons related to the perceived quality of different kinds of services is ignored. This construction was reproduced by both the opponents and the proponents of the restriction in each municipality and was uncontested, thus forming the dominant construction of the ontology of the environment.

Differing constructions of the ontology of the environment: ECEC, childcare, and the nature of the proposed change

While the councillors in each municipality shared the same view regarding each municipality's economic situation, not all of them viewed the ECEC restrictions as the right choice for the municipality's budget cuts. The ontology of the environment was related to the use of services in the municipality, and the nature of the suggested restrictions varied substantially as we illuminate in this chapter.

First, the majority of speakers seemed to share the view that ECEC plays a beneficial role in children's lives and, therefore, in society. The opponents of the restriction typically based their argument on this belief, especially in relation to the

development, future learning, and well-being of children. Many of the proponents of the restriction also acknowledged this viewpoint. Below is a quote from an opponent of the restriction, where the construction of the ontology of the environment is illustrated:

> According to different studies, children who attend day care are provided with stimulation that advances their social skills. To prevent exclusion, one needs to do everything one can, especially in the early stages of children's development. Therefore, our group [referring to the councillors representing his party] will propose that the city not restrict the subjective right to day care (Left Alliance).

Using research as an authority, the councillor justifies her statement regarding the importance of ECEC in children's development. Like many other opponents of the restriction in our data, he implies that future social problems (i.e. exclusion) may arise if the right of children to ECEC is restricted. For those who opposed the restriction, the practical counterpart to their construction was the potential future costs derived from increased needs for special education in school, dropout from education, mental disorders in adolescence, and exclusion in later life.

The proponents of the restriction who agreed with the benefits of ECEC did not adopt future perspectives in their addresses. Their practical concern was how many hours of ECEC fulfil children's need for stimulating educational activities. Referring to the views of ECEC professionals, they argued that 20 hours of ECEC per week would provide adequate support for children:

> In a day care centre, the children's day includes guided activities in the mornings when the children are alert and energetic. In the afternoons, activities are more focused on basic needs, play, and outdoor activities. Therefore, day care staff think that 20 hours of early childhood education per week is sufficient for providing equal opportunities to all children. Pre-primary education and primary education for the first grades are provided for 20 hours per week. Why should younger children have full-day early childhood education for 40–45 hours per week? (National Coalition Party).

A viewpoint presented in the debates highlighted that the actual *educational* activities in ECEC took place before noon. Drawing on this discussion, and by referring to the authority of ECEC professionals, the councillor justified his view that 20 hours of ECEC per week was sufficient. Using a rhetorical method to strengthen her argument, he also invoked a comparison between children's daily hours in ECEC, pre-primary education, and during their first year of school.

Some proponents of the restriction constructed their argument in a different manner but also linked said argument to the beneficial impact of ECEC. They highlighted that children would still have entitlements to ECEC, despite the restrictions, even though their entitlements covered a shorter time period than before. If the shorter entitlement was not sufficient, children could still be provided with full-time ECEC (based on a special application and professional assessment). In short, the argument presented the consequences of the restriction as quite minimal.

Other proponents of the restrictions used another construction of the ontology of the environment. They emphasised the importance of home care by referring to it as a child's right. As a practical counterpart to this ontology, they invoked an image of ECEC as depriving parents of their parenthood and reducing the likelihood of close family relationships. Below are two excerpts illustrating this construction:

> Shouldn't every child in the city have the right to their parents? If the parents are at home, why should we allow the children be cared for outside their home and not let parents to do it? It is society's role to support parenthood rather than take it away from parents (Centre Party).

> In practice, the child's hours of attendance have been dependent on the working parent's schedule, even though the other parent is at home with a

> younger sibling. Why shouldn't children have the right to their parents and home care together with their siblings? (National Coalition Party)

In both excerpts, the councillors use the concept of rights in their arguments. This was typical in the speeches of the proponents when they underlined the importance of home care: They took advantage of the shared norm of children's and human rights. At the same time, they implicitly described society or ECEC as the 'evil' that deprives parents and children from their most important right – namely, the right to have close relationships with their family members. This is evident, for example, in the first of the two excerpts displayed above, where 'we' identifies the councillors (i.e. the decision makers of the municipality) as officials who restrict parents from taking care of their children and take parenthood away from them.

While only the proponents of the restriction constructed home care superior to ECEC, both the proponents and opponents discussed how families use ECEC in their addresses. In this regard, their constructions of the ontology of the environment differed. The proponents claimed that if the entitlement to ECEC remained unconditional, children would be left in ECEC all day. In other words, in their construction, parents would use the services unnecessarily. Some councillors even raised the notion of 'storage' to denote children spending all their time in day-care centres.

The opponents drew on an opposite construction concerning ECEC service use. They began by stating that there was no unnecessary service use, as parents were capable of evaluating their child's and family's need for ECEC services. Some councillors also referred to ECEC guidance as a means of preventing unnecessary service use, as it provides professionals with the opportunity to negotiate with parents regarding the rational use of ECEC services in each

individual case. Thus, the opponents claimed that a restriction on the entitlement would be unnecessary:

> I am still convinced that parents staying at home do not often use their right to full-time day care. If they do, they have their reasons for that. It might be the best for the child to be at day care for a longer time. As [councillor A] stated in his address, the unconditional entitlement to ECEC is one way of preventing polarisation and helping disadvantaged families (Green Party).

In her address, the councillor uses the shared construction of full-time day-care users as typically coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Then, by using the term 'polarisation' (of families/parents/children), she highlights what the consequences of ECEC restrictions would be. Inequality and stigmatisation were other terms that the councillors used to refer to the same phenomenon in their addresses. The councillors related these issues more often to the children than to the parents: On one hand, they argued that if the restriction was enforced, children would be divided into different categories based on their parents' position in the labour market. As a result (according to this construction), they would have unequal opportunities to participate in society and receive an education. On the other hand, many councillors claimed that due to the restriction, the quality of ECEC would be poorer for those children who would attend it only part-time as the child-staff ratio in part-time ECEC is poorer than in full-time ECEC. Moreover, the councillors opposing the restriction underlined that the restriction would negatively affect children from disadvantaged families who were in particular need of ECEC services due to their heightened risk of exclusion and other developmental problems. The view is implicit in the previous excerpt ('it might best…') and explicitly expressed in the following address:

> The main point of these studies is that if the child care is conditional, it causes certain kinds of problems, and that it is crucially important for disadvantaged families. According to these studies, it equalises opportunities that are interrelated with the parents' educational background and income level. It is a preventative service (Left Alliance).

The councillor refers to an ontological authority – research – when she constructs the nature of the proposed change. In this construct, the restriction is examined from the viewpoint of conditioning: Should the restriction be enacted, ECEC would not be a universal service but rather a means-tested service that may lead to problems for disadvantaged families. Quite interestingly, local knowledge and expert knowledge from the field of early childhood education – including information concerning the number of families utilising full-time day-care services when one of the parents is at home – was non-existent.

The statements regarding families who have their children in ECEC full-time when one or both parents are at home turned out to be somewhat contradictory in terms of the construction of the ontology of the environment. While the opponents criticised the suggested restriction as stigmatising families, they still used the shared construction of families who have their child in ECEC full-time while one parent is at home as being at risk or having problems.

Three constructions of the societal functions of ECEC

This article has examined epistemic governance in municipal ECEC policy debates in order to understand ECEC policy developments. Examining policy change through the lens of epistemic governance allowed us to examine different forms of epistemic work. When examining overlapping constructions of the ontology of the environment and the differences between them, three somewhat separate

constructions of ECEC were identified from the data. The examination presented above leads us to differentiate three constructions of the societal functions of ECEC, one of which opposes the restrictions and two of which support the restrictions. The hegemonic societal function of each viewpoint is used as the label. These constructions are presented in Figure 1. It is remarkable that despite the differences between the municipalities and their policy solutions, the same type of epistemic work and constructions were found in each of the three council debates. Only the political power relations – the proportion of council members from different parties – caused variations in their policy solutions.

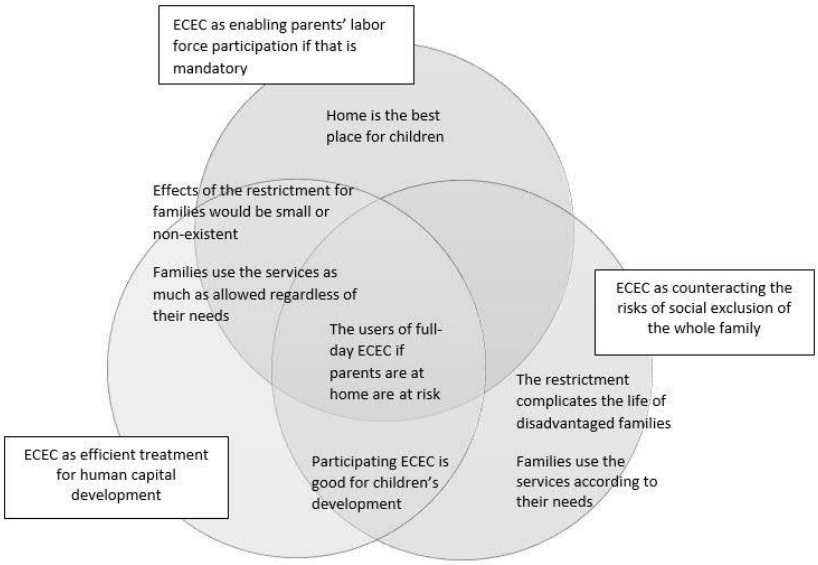

Figure 1. Differing and overlapping states of affairs - constructions of the societal functions of ECEC

In the council debates, the first construction considered ECEC as an efficient method of ensuring human capital development – primarily, ECEC fulfils an educational function (lower right circle, Figure 1). ECEC is constructed as being good for child development.

However, it is considered a public expense that should be reduced. According to this construction, parents utilise full-time day-care services when they do not need to. Moreover, it was posited that the restriction of unconditional entitlement to full-time day-care services would result in considerable savings while leading to disruptive changes to the practices or lives of the families affected.

This seems to be closely related to transnational policy trends. The discourses on globalisation have turned the gaze to national-level economic competitiveness. Moreover, the discourse on the economic crisis has led to attempts to find financially profitable solutions to education policy at international and national levels. In the domain of education and in society more generally, a transnational current that stresses the efficient use of resources is recognised (for recent developments in transnational accountability policies, see Lingard et al., 2013). Mahon (2010) argues that a close examination of the policy discourses of the OECD and the World Bank shows that they have gone beyond the neoliberal prescription of welfare cuts and structural adjustments over the last decade. This kind of deliberation is also prevalent in the context of Finland. Even though the councillors commonly acknowledged that the policy suggestion was motivated by savings, there was a need to explore what effects these restrictions would have on human capital development. This view resonates with the international discourse promoted by the World Bank: By the end of the 1980s, the World Bank had begun to promote investment in disadvantaged families rather than a limited focus on ensuring labour-force participation. Within this targeted investments- discourse, the primary interest has been the promotion of human capital by improving ‘school readiness’ and laying down the foundations for success in education to ensure a high standard of labour-market performance (Mahon, 2016). Within this way of thinking the support should be means-tested. According to this viewpoint, in the absence of ECEC,

poorer parents are thus likely to pass poverty on to their children because they provide poor care, thus contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and the reduced likelihood of those children contributing to the growth of their country (Mahon, 2010).

The second function of ECEC (lower right circle, Figure 1) is to counteract risks of the social exclusion of entire families. In this construction, the problem of the dispensable use of ECEC services does not exist. If parents use full-time day-care services when they are unemployed or taking care of the family's younger children at home, then their use of said services is valid. The family and child may be at risk. This view maintains that restrictions complicate and burden families, children, and preschools, and that the ECEC is beneficial for children. The costs of increased bureaucracy and increased costs of other services – such as schooling, healthcare, and welfare – would exceed the savings. This aligns with the discourses promoted by the EU and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, who have highlighted the principles of inclusiveness and universality in ECEC services (see Mahon, 2016). The shared premise among these views is that ECEC is a child's right.

The third construction considers the primary societal function of ECEC as allowing parents to participate in the workforce (top circle, Figure 1). Ideally, children are cared for at home. When examining policy discussions from the viewpoint of epistemic governance, it appeared that this view was not prevalent, at least in the large and middle-sized municipalities under scrutiny – the two other constructions of the societal functions of ECEC were more frequent. Yet, home care was always presented as an acceptable choice that does not need to be questioned. It is crucial here to understand that the policy deliberation is based on understandings of socially established assumptions. We must ask here whether this construction of the societal

function of ECEC relates to the low participation rate in ECEC in Finland in comparison to other OECD countries.

In this instance, our findings gained with the help of the framework of epistemic governance provide us with an intriguing perspective on policy changes. To understand policy developments, it is useful to examine epistemic governance in municipal-level policy discourse. In this case, our examination helped understand the contradictory policy situation in Finland. On one hand, low ECEC attendance is easier to understand when we acknowledge the tendency to prioritise home care over institutional ECEC and the tendency to consider the use of ECEC as an indicator of families being at risk if they do not study or work full-time. This emphasis on home care is materialised, for example, in the rather generous home care allowance system in Finland (Mahon et al., 2012). In addition, the seemingly shared idea of economic challenges (as reported previously by Nyby et al., 2017), and even more interestingly, the exclusion of early childhood officials as epistemic authorities, help us understand why ECEC restrictions were accepted in some municipalities.

This article shows how global discourses are used as tools (i.e. epistemic capital) for contrasting policy solutions. According to earlier studies, promises of returns on investment through enhanced long-term outcomes for children and the nation in general have garnered much political interest. Cheeseman, Sumsion, and Press (2014) have argued that investment discourse has increased public investments in ECEC. This study shows that although this kind of investment discourse is also used in Finland, it does not mean that increased interest results in increased investments. Rather, the economic discourse of ECEC provides epistemic capital that is used for multiple – and contrasting – purposes.

In this article, we focused on municipal decision-making in relation to the enactment of restrictions in entitlements to ECEC in Finland. Although our analysis considered only a single and very particular case, we believe that our argument concerning the usefulness of the lens of epistemic governance in uncovering the assumptions concerning ECEC can be applied more generally. We suggest that there is a need to further examine the extent to which the epistemic governance of ECEC changes in different contexts and to determine how the examination of local-level policy-making enhances our understanding of wider ECEC policy trends.

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