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## Rationalizing early childhood education and care in the local context: A case study of Finnish municipalities

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### <A> Introduction

Throughout the 2000s, keen global interest has been shown in early years policies, especially early childhood education and care (henceforth ECEC or early education). Such actors as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the European Union have played a central role in the international debate and produced recommendations and policy goals for national ECEC (European Commission, 2009; Moss, 2010; OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006). The debate reveals a change in perceptions on the function of ECEC in society that is also reflected in the terminology used (Urban, 2015). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the discussion on early years policies was still mainly concerned with issues of ‘childcare’ and how to increase and facilitate female participation in the labor market. In the new millennium, attention has increasingly turned to ‘early childhood education and care’ as a service that integrates these two objectives (Mahon, 2006; Urban 2015). Currently, early education is seen as important for child development and learning and for the future prosperity and wellbeing of society. As a consequence of this conceptual shift, global attention on children’s equal access to early years learning has increased dramatically (see the Introduction-chapter of the book).

The international debate has inspired research on the global discourses of ECEC (e.g. Mahon, 2010; Morabito et al., 2013; Paananen et al., 2015) and the relationship between the global and the national or local in ECEC (e.g. Author1; Author 2; Cheeseman et al., 2014; Lundkvist et al., 2017; Campbell-Barr & Bogatic, 2017). While interest in the relationship between the global and the national often concerns national regulation and ECEC provision, research on the local may, for example, focus on ECEC institutions, their cultural context, or the viewpoints of professionals or parents (see Campbell-Barr, 2017). In this chapter, our interest is in ECEC policy discourses on the local level in Finland, local referring here to the municipalities responsible for the organization and provision of ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018)<sup>i</sup>.

In the literature, the interest in local ECEC has tended to focus on the implementation of educational or ‘best’ practices (Campbell-Barr & Bogatic, 2017). Less attention has been paid to local ECEC policy discourses, although local decision-making often plays an important role in the implementation and interpretation of national-level policies. In the Finnish case, due to high level of municipal autonomy in organizing ECEC, local policy discourses and decision-making has also a pronounced role in providing access to early education. However, we do not equate local policy discourses or reasoning

with municipalities' actual policy decisions. Instead, we consider these as reflecting the ways in which local ECEC policy can be justified and as potential orientations for future policymaking. Moreover, we do not expect local policy discourses to be separate from or inevitably show tensions with national or global discourses but instead approach the relationship between global, national and local discourses as intertwined (cf. Campbell-Barr & Bogatic 2017; Robertson, 1992: 173). Thus, we assume that it is not possible to explicitly differentiate a 'local' ECEC discourse from a 'national' or 'global' discourse. Our approach is informed, in particular, by the idea of domestication (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014), which draws on the world polity theory, also known as world society theory (Meyer, 2010; Meyer et al., 1997), Foucauldian notions of power, the new institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) and Bourdieu's theory of fields (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993; see also Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). The idea of domestication derives from the notion that there is no single global or national model for local actors to adopt. Rather, we should talk about global trends. The spread of extraneous trends is not the result of local actors simply copying what is going on elsewhere. Instead, they are active agents in the process; they often play a crucial role in 'constructing, packaging and marketing the practices' (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014: 9) followed in another country or place.

The conception of domestication thus draws attention to the conceptions of the actors in policy reforms. In this chapter, we analyze 78 qualitative interviews with politicians and administrators in municipal authorities providing ECEC. We focus on local policy discourses and study the rationalities given for ECEC in ten Finnish municipalities. In other words, we are interested in the informants' explanations and justifications — which we expect also to 'echo' discourses on the topic in the national and global context— for the organization and provision of ECEC at the municipal level.

Next, we briefly discuss the global discourses of ECEC and the recent debates and policy changes in Finnish ECEC. We then describe the data and research process before reporting the results of the study supported by data examples from the interviews. Finally, we sum up the results by presenting the three rationalities identified in the data for organizing and providing ECEC.

### <A> Global ideas and national debates on ECEC

Contemporary discourses of ECEC are characterized by an understanding of ECEC as a worthwhile investment, for both the economy and growth at the macro level and human capital and wellbeing at the individual level (e.g. Heckman, 2011; Heckman, 2008; Author2; Moss et al., 2016; OECD, 2006; Jenson, 2009; White, 2011). Naturally, the macro and individual viewpoints are not seen as unconnected. For example, arguments on the individual level – mostly concerning children and their development – are often justified with reference to their ultimate societal benefits.

Although the existing research findings vary, some positive impacts of ECEC on children's long-term outcomes, such as formal education, have been reported (e.g. Esping-Andersen et al. 2012; Havnes & Mogstad 2011). In a recent study based on register data, Karhula and colleagues (2016) found that this also seems to be the case in Finland. Their findings suggest that ECEC is likely to influence the educational outcomes of children in a positive way. Moreover, existing research argues strongly for the beneficial effects of quality ECEC for children from low-income and ethnic minority families (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2010; Sammons et al., 2004). Overall, ECEC is considered, and justified, as the first stage of children's lifelong learning and education (e.g. OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006).

Research findings on the outcomes of ECEC participation on children's development and wellbeing are increasingly being linked with issues of equality and equal access to ECEC. Investing in ECEC and guaranteeing the equal access are argued for as a way of reducing the social inequality of children from divergent and unprivileged social backgrounds (Heckman, 2011; Morabito et al., 2013; Vandebroek et al., 2014). However, the debate on equality and ECEC in general is not new (Urban, 2015). For decades, ECEC has been related to gender equality, and the development of ECEC services in different countries has been very much influenced by the objective of promoting female participation in the workforce. The fact that this continues to be the case in many parts of the world also illuminates the dual role of ECEC in contemporary societies. Alongside its role as an educational institution, ECEC is also closely connected to labor market issues and to work and family reconciliation (Mahon, 2006).

It has been argued that the global discourses of ECEC are diverse and display divergent readings (Cambell-Barr & Bogatić 2017). Lundkvist and colleagues (2017: 3-4), drawing on the rationales presented in the European Commission report (2009), differentiate 10 main rationales for ECEC in the current debate. They argue that two of these, the 'economic investment rationale' and 'high-quality ECEC rationale', both emphasize investments targeted at future economic gains or at improving the prospects of vulnerable children. The rationales of 'equality' and 'lifelong learning' underline ECEC as an instrument to promote social inclusion and social mobility, and thus imply an idea of universal services. A further three rationales focus on parents, especially on maternal emancipation and female participation in the workforce. The 'pro-natalist rationale' sees ECEC as part of a range of family-friendly policies aiming at increasing birth rates, while the 'child poverty rationale' argues for redistributive policies to mitigate child poverty. Finally, 'the children's rights rationale' emphasizes ECEC as a children's right. The ten rationales imply different ideational constructions of society, economics and politics. They also imply different practical recommendations or policy ideas in relation to a specific problem.

Lundkvist and colleagues (2017) also state that recent Finnish policy on ECEC signals a shift away from the principle of the equal access and universal provision of ECEC as a means of promoting social mobility, lifelong learning and children's rights towards regarding ECEC as primarily serving parental, especially maternal, participation in the work force. They refer primarily to the recent central government decision to restrict children's unconditional entitlement to ECEC. Finnish municipalities have been required to deliver all-day ECEC services for all children aged 0-5 in their catchment area after the end of parental leave<sup>ii</sup>, if the parent so wishes and if s/he is not being paid a child home child-care allowance<sup>iii</sup>. This duty is based on the child's so-called subjective right to ECEC enshrined in legislation passed in 1990 for children under age three and extended to all children under school age in 1996. However, statutory changes (due to government austerity policies) in 2016 enabled municipalities to restrict the number of hours of ECEC provided to children who have a parent at home owing, for example, to unemployment or being on parental leave to care for a younger sibling. This also broadened the autonomy of municipalities in the provision of ECEC and thus increased disparities in ECEC services between Finnish municipalities.

On the one hand, the argument presented by Lundkvist and colleagues (2017) is well founded. On the other, Finland has furthered ECEC as an educational institution during this millennium, and especially along the lines suggested by the OECD (see Miho Taguma, 2012; OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006). Among other actions, Finland reformed its legislation on ECEC in 2018 and implemented a new and binding national core curriculum for ECEC (Opetushallitus [Finnish National Agency for Education], 2016). At present, ECEC is deemed a right of the child (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Moreover, the understanding of ECEC, previously known as 'day care' – as primarily a social service for families with children (Sipilä, 1997) – has given way to the idea of ECEC as a pedagogical institution and the start of lifelong learning (Author3; Lundkvist et al., 2017).

In the context of the keen global debate on ECEC, changing and contradictory national ideas and discourses, and increasing local variation in the provision of ECEC, it is of interest to find out how municipal politicians and ECEC administrators rationalize the provision of ECEC at the local level in different Finnish municipalities. We approach this question by investigating the interpretative frames informants draw on when describing, explaining and considering their local ECEC situation in the research interviews.

#### <A> Data and analysis

In Finland, municipal ECEC policymaking is conducted collaboratively by two different groups: municipal politicians and ECEC administrators. Their work is distributed as follows: the politicians are in charge of political decision-making on municipal ECEC while the administrators are responsible for

planning the future development of local ECEC, preparing the political decision-making processes and implementing political decisions. Hence, the data analyzed for the study consist of 78 qualitative interviews with representatives of both groups involved in municipal ECEC policymaking<sup>iv</sup>. Municipal politicians (n=31) and ECEC administrators (n=47) were interviewed individually in early 2016. The semi-structured qualitative interviews with both groups focused on the organization and provision of local ECEC services, municipal supplementary payments to parents, such as allowances for home care and private ECEC, municipal ECEC service guidance, and the strengths, challenges and future directions of municipal ECEC.

Mean interview duration was 90 minutes. Three-quarters of the interviewees were aged from 41 to 60 years and more than 90 percent had at least post-secondary education. Most of the interviewees were female (n=71), mainly due to fact that in Finland ECEC at the municipal level is predominantly administered by women. Participation in the interview was voluntary and all the interviewees gave their informed consent to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted by a team of nine researchers, including all the present authors. To ensure cohesion in the implementation of the interviews, two joint training events for the interviewers, who all had previous experience in qualitative interviewing, were held. The first training event took place before the embarking on the interviews, and the second after the first few interviews had been conducted. Once the interviews had been gathered and transcribed, the interviewers had a joint discussion session to share and reflect their interview experiences.

As this is a qualitative study, the interviewees did not comprise a representative sample of Finnish ECEC policymakers and administrators. Instead, their invitation to participate in the study, and thus selection, was purposive, with the aim of ensuring contextual variation. The interviewees were drawn from ten municipalities that had been explicitly invited to collaborate with the research project due to several important differences between them. In a qualitative inquiry, it is important to consider the variance of the phenomenon under study and aim at maximal variation in the data to increase the generalizability or transferability of the results. Ideally, each category of the phenomenon of interest would be included in the study, thereby meeting the criterion of generalizability (Gobo, 2004). Hence, the ten municipalities participating in this study varied not only in their geographical location but also in their demographics, key aspects of their economic life and ECEC provision.

Four of the municipalities represent major Finnish cities, with populations ranging from 100 000 to 650 000. These cities are relatively densely populated and characterized by positive net migration, mainly due to work and study opportunities. Another two of the municipalities are midsize provincial

towns with populations between 20 000 and 100 000. Owing to structural economic changes, both municipalities have faced economic difficulties in recent years. With decreased work opportunities, they have experienced negative net migration. The remaining four municipalities have populations of less than 20 000. Two of them are large in geographical area, sparsely populated and can thus be characterized as rural. The other two can be considered small towns. The main differences in ECEC provision in the ten municipalities concern the relative proportions of public and private ECEC provision, the provision of municipal support to parents using private ECEC services and those caring for children at home, and the provision of ECEC for children who have a parent at home owing, for example, to unemployment. In all, the municipalities represent the wide variation in the service provision situation of Finnish municipalities.

The interview data analysis draws on a diversity of discourse analytic approaches (Van Dijk 2011). Our analysis can be characterized as “generic discourse analysis”, which Antaki (2008) describes as a general working procedure that aims to make sense of a specific domain or topic through, e.g., interview transcripts. The analytical concepts that we apply are interpretative frame and discourse. The concept of interpretative frame refers to the overall perspectives – e.g., locality and economy – from which the organizing of municipal ECEC is observed. That is, interpretative frames answer the question “What are the key determinants of organizing ECEC at the municipal level?” Our understanding of interpretative frame<sup>1</sup> resembles Goffman’s (1974) conceptualization of frameworks as tools for meaning making, which answer the question “What is going on here?” (see also Alasuutari, 1995: 114). By discourse, in turn, we refer to more particular approaches within a frame that specify how the overall perspective of a frame is related to the local organization and provision of ECEC in the interview talk. That is, a discourse will highlight shared meaning making that orientates to, explains, or suggests future or present action on ECEC (cf. Gergen, 1999: 48-50). To sum up, interpretative frames are general-level determinants (e.g. the municipal economy) through which the organizing of ECEC is discussed, whereas discourses are more detailed local interpretations of each frame (e.g., cost-cutting; investment) that justify or account for local ECEC policy. Following the social constructionist approach to discursive research, we should make it clear that the interpretative frames and the discourses identified here are our interpretations and constructions of interview talk that was produced by both the interviewee and interviewer. We do not claim that our interpretations are the only correct ones. However, we aimed at achieving communicative and adequate interpretations of the data through careful examination of the

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<sup>1</sup> To improve readability, we mainly use the term frame when referring to the concept of interpretative frame.

interview talk and by demonstrating our reasoning to the reader through the analysis of several data extracts.

We commenced our analysis by coding the interviews thematically. Due to the high number of interviews, the coding was carried out with Atlas.ti. After coding, we analyzed the municipalities one by one, with the aim of understanding how the organization and provision of ECEC is discussed in each municipality. Subsequently, we produced a concise summary of the situation in each municipality. The municipal summaries were then elaborated and compared, processes which enabled us to identify three interpretative frames for organizing ECEC at the municipal level. In conducting the detailed analysis of the frames, we referred to the summaries several times. The analysis showed that each of the three interpretative frames comprised several discourses. Eventually, after further contemplation of the frames and discourses, we finalized our analysis by presenting three rationalities for organizing ECEC.

To protect the anonymity of the respondents, only their position (municipal politician/ECEC administrator) and the general character of the municipality (major city/midsize town/small municipality) are revealed in the extracts from the interviews. Since most of the interviewees were female, all are referred to as she to protect anonymity, particularly in the case of the male informants. As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the interview extracts have been translated into English with the aim of capturing the general sense of the talk in the sample, rather than a literal word-for-word translation (see Nikander, 2008).

## <A> Results

We differentiated three interpretative frames through which local ECEC was discussed: the local frame, the economy frame, and the ECEC function frame. While the frames are overlapping and dependent on each other, each contains its unique perspective on organizing ECEC.

### <B> The local frame

In the data, the local frame served as the backdrop for rationalizing the organization and provision of ECEC at the municipal level. That is, in the interviewees' accounts, understanding of the local situation was the most significant perspective from which the organizing of ECEC was viewed. The local frame emphasizes how the descriptions of the organization of ECEC are entwined with understanding of local circumstances. That is, the frame highlights how municipal ECEC policies and decisions about organizing ECEC at the municipal level are interlinked with issues such as notions about the identity of the municipality and demographics.

The local frame is characterized by rather coherent accounts of “our municipality” produced by interviewees from the same municipality. We understand these accounts, in which the municipality was relatively uniformly characterized by both the administrators and politicians from all political parties, as examples of an identity discourse. We understand identity in broad terms as encompassing both “fact-based” and interpretative accounts of the municipality. Fact-based accounts include, for example, reference to the demographics and geography of the municipality, while interpretative accounts concern, in particular, the mentality of the inhabitants and local traditions. In the accounts of local identity, the municipalities were characterized in different ways. Whereas major cities were often described as “urban and diverse”, mid-size towns and sparsely-populated areas were characterized as “small but vivid” and “traditional and old-fashioned”. These municipal characterizations were often offered as justifications for the local provision of ECEC.

Interviewees who described their municipalities as urban, diverse and multicultural, emphasized the importance of targeting ECEC services and making ECEC accessible to diverse groups of children and families. Furthermore, ECEC was portrayed in their accounts as an educational institution and as having a self-evident role in an urban childhood. In the following extracts, the link between the interviewees’ conceptions of the culture and characteristics of their municipality and ECEC is demonstrated by a reference to multiculturalism. The extracts emphasize how multiculturalism is a pervasive part of a “dynamic and growing city”, and how it is thus also an integral part of the municipal ECEC curriculum.

*I think we have a kind of... A kind of a view that it (multiculturalism) is a part of this city, like, our thing [...] This is a dynamic, growing city with different characteristics, with distinctive features (ECEC administrator, major city)*

*And, it’s [multiculturalism] so commonplace here nowadays... Like, if we think about our municipal preschool curriculum, cultural diversity is everywhere in it. (ECEC administrator, major city)*

In the municipalities described as traditional and rural, ECEC was seen more as a social service with the aim of facilitating parental participation in the workforce than as an educational institution. Hence, in these municipalities the issues of access were primarily discussed in the work-life context, and ECEC was produced as an alternative to homecare rather than as a self-evident part of childhood. The interviewees in these municipalities often emphasized that the children’s interests would best be served if they were mainly cared for at home until their third birthday. This is

highlighted in an example by a politician, who defined her municipality as “*a traditional and old-fashioned place, a good place to bring up children*”. According to her:

*Of course, the home’s the best place for the youngest ones, definitely.* (Politician, small municipality)

Though the issue of gender was not explicitly raised in the interviews, it was discussed by the interviewees in their municipal characterizations. These characterizations also highlighted the discursive link between the understanding of gender and the organizing of ECEC. That is, especially in the municipalities characterized as rural and traditional, the interviewees’ talk often indicated fixed parental gender roles, such as mothers as “natural” caregivers, and fathers as self-evident breadwinners. Though these notions were not explicitly given as reasons for specific solutions in municipal ECEC, they were related to the interviewee’s understanding of the provision and function of ECEC. This is evident in the account of a municipal politician, according to whom “*we have kind of traditional families, like, where mothers take care of the children and fathers go to work*” (Politician, small municipality). When the same politician later describes the municipality’s open clubs<sup>2</sup> for small children not in full-time ECEC, these clubs are seen rather as breaks for mothers than a step along a child’s educational path. According to her:

*Those are, like, get-togethers, with playing, doing crafts, whatever they like to do... And it’s quite often important for the mothers too. [...] Like, if they are at home with their children, clubs offer them a great possibility to have a break and relax.* (Politician, small municipality)

In addition to municipal identity, the interrelation between the ‘local’ and ECEC can be seen in the discourse of customization, which in our analysis, appeared in three forms: service provision customization, personal customization and localized customization. The use of the customization of service provision discourse showed how descriptions of who are regarded as desirable providers of ECEC vary across municipalities. For example, in the municipalities described as urban, privately-run ECEC was mentioned in relation to the opportunities and variety of urban life. It was broadly stressed as an alternative or as supplementary to municipally operated ECEC, and thus as an additional option for families. Furthermore, privately run ECEC was also perceived as both a cost-effective and efficient way to respond quickly to the changing and fluctuating needs for ECEC

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<sup>2</sup> Clubs are part of so called open early childhood education, which is targeted for children not in full-time ECEC.

services, which were presented as a commonly encountered problem in the big and mid-size cities. For example, according to a politician from a major city:

*Well, if we think of privately-run services, I'd say that in many areas of our city we're in the situation that if someone can just offer us more access to ECEC, we are definitely ready to take them. Like, if someone would now call us, saying "Hey, I would like to start an ECEC center", we would welcome them with open arms (Politician, major city)*

In smaller and more rural municipalities, however, publicly provided ECEC was perceived as important and it was stressed that there was little or no need for privately run ECEC. This can be understood as adhering to a Nordic model in which key educational and social services are publicly funded (Author3). For example, in a small municipality in which *"people like to hold on to tradition"* and *"economically speaking, our situation is difficult"* (ECEC administrator), the need for privately run ECEC was strongly rejected by a local politician, who described how there was no need for privately run ECEC in a small municipality and, even if it existed, the inhabitants wouldn't be able to afford it, as the rates charged for privately run ECEC are usually higher. As the administrator's account illustrates, in municipalities with more traditional perceptions on early education, the word *"day care"* (in Finnish: päivähoido) was used instead of *"ECEC"* (in Finnish: varhaiskasvatus), which has become established as the common word for early education in the Finnish vocabulary. According to her:

*Well, I think this is such a small municipality that... Like, our own municipal day care is enough for us. I doubt there would be interest even if there were other options... And, on average, our inhabitants have relatively low incomes, so most people couldn't afford to pay for private services. (Politician, small municipality)*

The discourse of customization was also evident in the binary opposition of personal and localized customization. Personal customization, broadly present, especially in the accounts of interviewees from the smaller municipalities, stresses how the individual needs of families and children – also in terms of access – are met through personalized solutions. The interviewees described this as a family-friendly and flexible approach, and illustrated how, if a parent needs a day-care place for his or her children at short notice, this will be arranged no matter what. They also emphasize personal customization as a characteristic of small municipalities that would not be possible in bigger cities. According to ECEC administrators from a small municipality:

*We are a small actor, so it's easy for us to make arrangements [...] Like, we can make flexible arrangements, and tailor our services when needed. (ECEC administrator, small municipality)*

*It's all about the family and their situation, like, what are their needs [...] If a place in day care is needed urgently, then we just act quickly. Like, even if we're out of free places, we'll find a place. (ECEC administrator, small municipality)*

While the personal customization for ECEC was broadly present in the smaller municipalities, in the major cities it had a significantly narrower role. Instead, localized customization, which demonstrates the social class dimension of providing ECEC, was described by the interviewees from the urban municipalities. That is, localized customization refers to the organization of ECEC services based on expected demographic differences between neighborhoods and residents. For instance, families living in reputable middle-class neighborhoods were often spoken of as “good” or “normal” families, who are expected to have different needs for ECEC than families from “more problematic neighborhoods”. That is, middle-class families are expected to be interested in the early education of their children and willing to pay higher fees for more specialized services. These are the kinds of neighborhoods where privately-run and various other kinds of specialized ECEC services are mainly offered. Localized customization is exemplified in the following excerpt by an ECEC administrator from a major city:

*As I see it, there's great variation in our inhabitants between neighborhoods. Like, we have huge areal differences in this city. Thus, families' need for ECEC varies so, so much. For example, in the area that I'm managing, we have lots of families with multiple problems in life management, but on the other hand, we also have really nice neighborhoods with ordinary families without any specific problems. (ECEC administrator, major city)*

The sample portrays a dichotomy in which families are segregated into the categories of “ordinary families” and “families with problems in life management”. As the example illustrates, the need and demand for ECEC between families from different social categories are understood as different. Thus, the social categorization of families might pose a threat to equality, equity and equal access to ECEC for families with disadvantaged backgrounds and life situations.

### <B> The economy frame

At the time when the interviews were conducted, the Finnish economy was in a prolonged recession that affected almost all the Finnish municipalities. This is evident in the economy frame, which

comprises accounts in which ECEC provision is considered from the viewpoint of the local economy. The interviewees commonly emphasized the municipal economy, along with the local frame, as another key issue that informs the organization and provision of municipal ECEC. That is, the interviewees narrated at length the major role played by the municipal economy in decisions, solutions and negotiations on local-level ECEC organization. Thus, municipal economy was given as one of the key justifications for the state of local ECEC. For example, the significance of the municipal economy for local ECEC is accentuated in the following accounts given by two ECEC administrators:

*The situation here, you know, we're doing really poorly. The unemployment rate just keeps rising, companies aren't willing to come here, and the first place this shows up in is day care. (ECEC administrator, mid-size town)*

*Although we've put a lot of effort into our ECEC, and we've pondered these questions from so many angles, I think the economic pressure is so pervasive, that... We're [municipal ECEC] definitely in a bad situation. (ECEC administrator, major city)*

The examples show how municipal ECEC is perceived as dependent on the current state of the local economy. This connection is broadly present, and is rarely questioned, in the data. Instead, the task of maintaining a balance between meeting the target quality of services and not running out of money was frequently described. As a municipal politician from a major city put it:

*It's really difficult to balance, like, we've tried to keep the standard of our services high, and keep our municipal services as good as possible, but when you have to cut costs, it's obvious that in some way it's evident everywhere. (Politician, mid-size town)*

In the extract, the interviewee describes the incessant struggle between economic constraints and the provision of a standard of services that is as “good as possible”. At some level, accounts highlighting the economic recession and difficulty of striking a balance were present in all the municipalities studied. However, a closer look indicated the presence of two contrasting discourses – cost-cutting vs. investment – on the relations between the local economy and ECEC. The cost-cuttings discourse argues that, owing to the economic downturn, the need for cuts, including in ECEC, is unavoidable:

*Well, the fact is that economically our municipality is in bad repair, which means that, no matter what, we just have to cut costs if we want to survive. (ECEC administrator, small municipality)*

*We have these, you know, economic pressures, as tax revenues have decreased... So we just simply have to make cuts [in ECEC]. (Politician, midsize town)*

In these excerpts, ECEC policymakers describe how, owing to the economic situation, cuts in ECEC are unavoidable. According to the interviewees' accounts, in some municipalities the cuts were made by restricting the access to full-time ECEC of the children with one or both parents outside the labor force. The cost-cutting discourse was especially voiced by ECEC policymakers from the smaller municipalities and midsize towns. However, "unavoidable" cuts were either questioned or not mentioned in the investment discourse, in which the interviewees underlined the local decision to invest in ECEC, and to guarantee the equality of access, despite economic hardship. The investment discourse was especially foregrounded in the major cities. The discourse is stressed in the following excerpt, in which an ECEC administrator narrates the decision to invest in ECEC instead of making cuts:

*Well, I think it's a kind of policy making thing here... The atmosphere is, like, we've chosen to invest in early childhood education and not to make any cuts. (ECEC administrator, major city)*

The decisions to invest in ECEC were primarily linked with the idea of lifelong learning, and thus, with the international discourse on ECEC as an investment in human capital (Urban, 2015). However, investment in ECEC could also be considered from the viewpoint of providing satisfactory services to the families in general.

The boundaries of the two discourses were by no means clear-cut, as they also appeared in parallel in the interviewees' accounts. Although interviewees from different types of municipalities often drew on discourses with different characteristics, in some municipalities the importance of ECEC as a long-term investment was stressed while at the same time cuts were narrated as unavoidable due to the current state of the economy.

#### <B> The function frame

The function frame portrays how the meanings related to the societal role of ECEC – its function – constitute the third key frame for justifying the local organization of ECEC in the interviewees' accounts. Although the intertwining of the local and the function frames of ECEC were touched upon above in connection with the local frame, we shall direct our attention to the discourses through which the function of ECEC is understood. While the importance of providing quality ECEC was stressed in all the studied municipalities, discursive tensions and differences were noted, especially

in the accounts of the social function of ECEC. Two divergent discourses, i.e., an education discourse and a working-life discourse, were identified.

The education discourse emphasizes ECEC as a first step in lifelong learning, and consequently, the importance of the equal access to ECEC. In the following extract, the discourse is produced by an ECEC administrator in a major city:

*Well, according to our view, ECEC is part of the child's learning path and the pedagogical issues have been important and crucial for us too. That's where we've markedly advanced during the last few years, as it's been like an overarching theme in everything we do. (ECEC administrator, major city)*

The interviewee emphasizes ECEC as part of a child's learning path. She also stresses the importance of pedagogy by referring to its development in her municipality. Thus, the education discourse is twinned with the global discourse of ECEC as an investment in human capital (e.g. Urban 2015). The discourse was particularly evident in the municipalities where investment was perceived as important in the economy frame.

The focus of the working-life discourse – which emphasized the labor marker perspective on ECEC (e.g., Mahon 2006) – was altogether different. In this discourse, the main function of ECEC is to help the parents of small children to take up paid work and thus enhance the vitality of the municipal economy. Thus, providing effortless access to ECEC is emphasized as a tool to promote local economy by advancing parents' possibilities to participate in work-life. In the following extract, the interviewee describes how ECEC is related to the importance of working life, by drawing attention to the parents' need for ECEC in order to be able to work:

*It's a kind of premise that we enable parents to go to work. Especially in places like this [the municipality] where unemployment rates are quite high, it's essential, that... Like, we can't afford to have people staying out of the workforce because we can't organize proper day care services. (ECEC administrator, a small municipality)*

The working-life discourse was especially foregrounded in the municipalities where cost-cutting was perceived as unavoidable in the economy frame. Although the work-life discourse does not exclude the education discourse, an educational perspective on ECEC was not widely apparent in municipalities in which the working-life standpoint was accentuated.

## <A> Conclusions and discussion

This chapter has thus far focused on identifying the interpretative frames and discourses pertaining to the organizing and provision of ECEC by Finnish municipal ECEC authorities. Our analysis shows how these frames and discourses are linked to global ideas on ECEC and how the different discourses appear in municipalities with different characteristics. We also demonstrate how the frames encompass divergent approaches on access to ECEC. Based on the analysis, we argue that urban/rural is a key dichotomy informing the discourses drawn on in the municipalities.

We conclude our study by presenting a threefold classification of the rationalities for ECEC given by informants from ten Finnish municipalities. The three classes of rationalities, based on the linkages between the frames and discourses produced by our informants, are: *investing in education in a diverse environment*; *a personal service conditioned by working life*; and *the best possible quality of ECEC with the resources available*. They should be understood as flexible patterns that rarely exist in their purest form, but which give an overall picture of municipal variation in the rationalities for providing ECEC. Though direct implications for the municipal practices e.g. in terms of access to ECEC cannot be addressed, we expect the rationalities to reflect the local atmospheres influencing on decision-making on ECEC in municipalities.

The rationality of *investing in education in a diverse environment* stresses the value of ECEC as an educational institution. That is, the role of ECEC is understood through its educational function, and thus, despite the economic downturn, it continues to be a target of investment. Equal and effortless access to ECEC are emphasized in the rationality. This rationality is strongly linked to the global discourses that see ECEC as part of life-long learning and as a promoter of social equality and human capital (OECD, 2006; Morabito et al., 2013; Heckman, 2011; Urban, 2015) and to the national emphasis on these aspects of ECEC in recent legislation (e.g. Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017). The local life environment is described as diverse. For example, neighborhoods are narrated as having distinctive features, and thus the importance of customization in service provision between them is emphasized. Family forms and backgrounds are also characterized as diverse. Consequently, ECEC in these municipalities is premised on diversity. Specialized services and curricula are also offered to client families. This rationality was especially common in the major cities.

The rationality *a personal service conditioned by working life* emphasizes tradition. First, it sees home care (by the mother) as the most desirable option for the youngest children and thus connects with the discourse of maternal care, which remains strong in Finnish debates on early childhood (Mahon 2006; Repo 2010). Second, instead of an educational emphasis, the function of ECEC is to

care for children while their parents are at work. The reasoning for this function is based on the needs of the municipal economy, as quality ECEC is perceived as an instrument to increase labor force participation, and hence tax revenues. Consequently, the rationality includes a work-life approach on the issues of access, and it is in line with discourses highlighting the labor market perspective on ECEC (Mahon 2006; Lundkvist et al. 2017). In ECEC, familiarity and a feeling of security are viewed as key objectives. ECEC services are narrated as tailored to the needs of families and children, and flexible access to services is also accentuated. The rationality of personal service conditioned by working life was mostly voiced in the smaller and some mid-size municipalities.

The third rationality, *the best possible quality of ECEC with the resources available*, highlights the importance of striking a balance between good quality of services and keeping within the budget. Equal access to services is pronounced as an aim and ideal. The rationality was particularly evident in the municipalities where the educational aspects of ECEC were stressed as ideals (Author3; Lundkvist et al., 2017) which are, however, challenging to implement due to economic austerity. Nevertheless, investment in ECEC, within the local resource constraints, was reported. This rationality relates to discourses in which ECEC is perceived as a profitable long-term economic investment (Lundkvist et al., 2017). While this was especially brought up in the mid-size cities, it was also present in some of the major cities and small municipalities.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, ideas such as understanding ECEC as a first step in lifelong learning and as a way of promoting equality between children have strengthened globally during the 2000s. Our results illustrate how these diverse global ideas and trends are variously interpreted and transformed in different local contexts. For example, on the national level, the educational role of ECEC has gained a significant foothold in Finland. However, this function of ECEC was mostly emphasized in the bigger and mid-size cities, while in the smaller municipalities and rural areas ECEC was linked to working life and labor market issues. To give another example, the interviewees' interpretations on equality and equal access to ECEC also varied between the three rationalities. Whereas the rationality of *investing in education in a diverse environment* accentuated participation in and equal access to ECEC as furthering equality between children, the rationality of *personal service conditioned by working life* highlighted ECEC as furthering equality between parents by making it easier for them to take up employment. In the rationality of *the best possible ECEC service with the resources available*, in turn, the importance of ECEC as a promoter of equality between children is implied, but significantly less than its importance to the economy. Nevertheless, the idea of equality, whether between children or parents or both, is strongly embedded in all three rationalities.

Our analysis illustrates how the rationalities for the provision of ECEC draw on both global discourses and understandings of local life-styles, realities and traditions. This can be understood through the idea of domestication discussed at the beginning of this chapter. That is, while connections with global discourses appeared in all three rationalities, they were not straightforwardly adopted in municipal policies and practices. Rather, it seems that global, like national, ideas undergo interpretations and transformations on the municipal level that are strongly molded by the local context. Thus, in the process of domestication global discourses become merged with national and local discourses. As a result, local rationalities are not just repetitions of the national and global discourses, but rather unique compounds that are constructed from several elements in the intersection of the local, national and global.

In this chapter, we have demonstrated how global discourses acquire divergent interpretations in different municipalities and local contexts. This finding suggests that more attention should be paid to the global-local interaction of ECEC and childhood-related discourses, as many intriguing questions remain. For example, despite the focus on gender equality in the global discourses, it was little discussed or emphasized by our sample of municipal ECEC informants in Finland, a country which has generally been perceived as among the most gender-equal in the world. Thus, to understand more profoundly the logics of domestication, more research is needed.

On the issue of policy relevance, our study is a reminder that more attention should be paid to ECEC policy making on the local level. In many countries, including Finland, public interest has mostly focused on national legislation and curricula reforms to the relative neglect of their municipal implementation and practices. However, as our study shows, municipal rationalities for providing ECEC display wide variation. The implementation of ECEC in accordance with differing rationalities might also have diverse consequences, e.g., for equal access of all children to ECEC; hence, their relevance in understanding contemporary ECEC should be acknowledged.

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<sup>i</sup> In Finland, ECEC is mainly organized by the public sector, although private sector provision has increased since the millennium. However, private service users are compensated out of public funds and privately organized ECEC is required to adhere to the same quality criteria and other regulations as public sector providers.

<sup>ii</sup> The Finnish parental leave scheme comprises three types of leave: maternity leave of 18 weeks, paternity leave of 9 weeks and sharable parental leave of 26 weeks. Paid compensation for leave is on average 70% of earned income. Though 80% of fathers take up at least few weeks of their paternity leave entitlement, only 5% of fathers take sharable parental leave (Salmi et al., 2017). This reflects how strongly the idea the of the mother's primacy in early care remains rooted in Finland.

<sup>iii</sup> After parental leave, parents receive a flat-rate home care allowance if their under-three-year-old child does not attend the publicly subsidized ECEC service.

<sup>iv</sup> The aim of the present analysis was not to focus on their differences between the two groups but instead on the interpretive frames co-produced by both sides. Moreover, because the politicians from different political parties discussed their local ECEC in rather similar ways, differences in discourses by political party are not analyzed. In any case, our qualitative data is too restricted to produce generalized knowledge on inter-party differences.