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Documents in interaction: a case study on parent–teacher meetings (ECE)

Maarit Alasuutari

Whilst the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is being monitored increasingly closely, various documentation methods and practices that aim at recording and assessing children’s advancement and activities have expanded in ECEC. The research on the impact of such documentation methods on grassroots-level practices is however currently scarce. This chapter illuminates the role of a specific documentation method—that is, a child’s ECEC plan—in parent–teacher meetings in Finnish ECEC. This plan was implemented as a means to increase pedagogical quality of ECEC in Finland. The chapter considers the ECEC plan a participant during parent–teacher meetings and, by applying discursive and conversation analytic methodology, demonstrates how this plan structures these meetings. However, this structuring may also be perceived as partly compromising the quality aims associated with children’s ECEC plans.

Keywords: parent–teacher interaction, early childhood education and care (ECEC), a child’s individual ECEC plan, discourse analysis, conversation analysis

Introduction

Engaging families in children’s institutional education is considered one of the key levers in advancing quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2012). The need to monitor the quality of ECEC is underlined in international discourse, and therefore children’s development and outcomes are becoming increasingly scrutinised in ECEC; as such, documentation is perceived as a tool for this monitoring (see OECD 2015). Following the recognition that parents¹ have a fundamental right to be involved in their children’s education (OECD 2012), ECEC documentation as it relates to children is commonly discussed and shared with parents (e.g., Knauf in this volume).

The implementation of a child’s individual ECEC plan has been one of the means to increase the quality of ECEC in Finland (see Stakes 2004; Vlasov et al. 2019). This plan is

¹ In this chapter, the term ‘parent’ refers to a child’s legal guardian regardless of the guardian’s biological relationship to the child.

stipulated in the legislation and prepared for each child attending an ECEC centre or family daycare (see Finnish National Agency for Education 2018) in a meeting between his/her parent(s) and ECEC teacher. The plan is also followed up in meetings between the same parties on a regular basis. Indeed, the core curriculum (ibid.) underlines the importance of the observations and views of both the parent(s) and personnel concerning a child's development and learning stage, and ability to act in a group whilst preparing each individual ECEC plan. The plan's main aim is to set goals for pedagogical activities and care related to a particular child. The plan should also specify measures that support these objectives and the evaluation of their achievement. Moreover, the plan should consider the child's strengths related to development and learning as well as his/her interests. The goals set in children's ECEC plans should be taken into account whilst planning the child group's education.²

Each child's ECEC plan is considered an aspect of pedagogical documentation (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018), which is typically the topic of research on ECEC documentation, although this term may refer to many approaches. It can denote any documentation method that is considered to support children's learning and development, such as the Reggio Emilia approach to pedagogical documentation (see Rinaldi 2006), portfolios (Knauf 2017a), or the narrative method—that is, 'learning stories' (Carr and Lee 2012). Characteristic to this research is an interest in how documentation functions and is applied in ECEC pedagogy (e.g. Emilson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014; Fleck et al. 2013; Rintakorpi and Reunamo 2017), in collaboration with parents (e.g. Birbili and Tzioga 2014; Rintakorpi et al. 2014), or as a means to support children's participation in ECEC (e.g. Bath 2012; Elfström Pettersson 2015; Knauf 2017b; Paananen and Lipponen 2018). Moreover, the existing research discusses the use of ECEC documentation in to assess children's learning (e.g. Anthony et al. 2015; Buldu 2010; Ebbeck et al. 2014). Consequently, current research often focusses on documentation methods' manifested aims and usually finds documentation useful in ECEC pedagogy.

The study presented in this chapter departs from the research literature's dominant interest in the educational and pedagogical functions of ECEC documentation and thus the idea that documentation—in this case, a child's ECEC plan—would (only) be a tool for

² In Finland, the word 'class' is exclusively used in discourse that focusses on schools; in ECEC, the term 'child group' is applied. When considering three- to five-year-old children, one child group usually comprises 21 to 24 children and 3 staff members.

enhancing the quality of ECEC; rather, documents and documentation are approached as agentic in the practices in which they are implemented. In other words, this chapter examines the drafting of a child's ECEC plan as an interactional encounter between his/her teacher, parent(s), and the document involved—which in the present case is often partly filled out—in these discussions. This chapter examines how this document structures the interaction during parent–teacher discussions.

Institutional interaction, documentality, and institutional ethnography as conceptual starting points

The drafting of a child's ECEC plan is herein approached as institutional interaction, which is characterised by objectives set by an institution (Drew and Heritage 1992). At the time the data was collected for the present study, the official goal of the individual ECEC plan was to comprise a pedagogical document on which the child's education and care would be based (Stakes 2004).³ Moreover, the ECEC plan aimed to consider each child's individuality and actualise educational partnership between the parents and ECEC staff.

Another characteristic of institutional interaction is the participants' asymmetric positions (Arminen 2016; Drew and Heritage 1992), which in ECEC contexts can imply that teachers lead and parents mainly add some points to the discussions (Karila 2006; Alasuutari 2010). Finally, documentation and documents usually play an important role in institutional interactions and practices (e.g. Arminen 2016; Van Haute et al. 2018; Markström 2011; Svinhufvud and Vehviläinen 2013).

The present study also specifically draws on the theory of documentality in that it concerns institutions (Ferraris 2013; Ferraris and Torrenco 2014). The theory presents an ontology of social objects and assumes documents play an agentic role in social life. Its key argument is that all social objects (e.g., childhood and education) are the result of recordings

³ In Finland, the first curriculum guidelines for ECEC that introduced the individual ECEC plan and the concept of educational partnership were published in 2003 (Stakes 2003), and the document's English translation was published in 2004 (Stakes 2004). The present study collected data before the guidelines were renewed in 2016, when a binding core curriculum for ECEC was published. An updated version of the core curriculum was enforced in 2018 (see Finnish National Agency for Education 2018), with some minor changes made to the 2016 version. In the present core curriculum, the role of pedagogy and educational practices are underlined as both being related to the objectives set in a child's ECEC plan and that plan's assessment. Moreover, the concept of educational partnership is no longer applied inside the text, replaced instead by the term 'cooperation'. The regulations nevertheless stipulate that a child's ECEC plan is drafted together with the guardians, and the child's opinions and wishes must also be considered whilst preparing his/her ECEC plan.

of social acts on some medium, such as on paper or within a computer file. Social acts, which involve at least two people or one person and a machine, exist in time and space in that recording a social act makes it permanent. Recording refers not only to writing, but also to communicating and implementing symbols more generally.

In the theory of documentality, institutions are understood as specialisations of social reality and as constituted by a massive number of documents. Documents are not supplemental but are rather fundamental to the social life of an institution (Ferraris 2013). Although documentality assumes documents and recordings play agentic roles, it does not assume documents possess a determining power in institutional contexts. The documentality approach argues that a document's power is contextual: a document can be either informative or normative. However, an informative document can additionally become normative and vice versa in another context or in relation to another issue. To become normative, a document's content must be validated in systems of practices (Ferraris 2015).

By drawing on the theory of documentality, one may presume that, while drafting a child's ECEC plan, the social object or phenomenon of educational partnership between his/her parents and teacher is constituted. In the same way, drafting the plan produces an understanding of what it means to consider the child's individuality in ECEC. The ECEC plan itself suggests specific positions for those participating in the practice (Karila and Alasuutari 2012). It additionally presents certain topics that should be considered during the process and consequently defines the subject areas that may be understood as belonging to pedagogy and addressing the child's individuality. However, the question still remains as to whether or not the positions and topics will be validated in the actual practice of drafting the ECEC plan—in other words, whether or not the ECEC plan becomes performative during the human–document encounter.

The theory of documentality does not offer conceptual tools for scrutinising human–document encounters at the micro level. Therefore, this chapter is also informed by institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), which emphasises the need to examine texts in human action—as they 'enter and coordinate people's doings' (ibid., p. 170). Institutional ethnography bears some similarities to the theory of documentality, firstly by considering documents as active, as coordinating interindividual territory, and thus as specifying what is social. Secondly, it assumes documents constitute institutions on their part. Institutional ethnography argues that texts are activated by their readers and introduces the text–reader

conversation concept. According to Smith (2005, p. 105), the concept ‘brings the text into action in the readers who activate it’ (ibid., p. 105) in that the reader becomes the voice or agent of the text. The present analysis draws on the concept of the text–reader conversation and pays attention to the voicing of the ECEC plan.

Both documentality (Ferraris 2013) and institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) point out the linkage between documentation and power. The theory of documentality argues that ‘governmentality’ in the Foucauldian sense (e.g. Foucault 1991) is possible because of documentality (Ferraris 2013, p. 271). According to institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), the basis of ruling relations is textual; while texts coordinate human action and interindividual territory beyond the here and now, they produce, stabilise, and subsequently transport governing relationships to new situational contexts. Considering that an equal relationship and encounter between teachers and parents is regarded as essential when preparing a child’s ECEC plan (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018; Stakes 2004), these arguments are interesting in relation to the study goal.

The Finnish context and the study’s implementation

This chapter reports results from an ethnographic study that was conducted in three ECEC centres in a mid-sized Finnish municipality with about 30,000 inhabitants.⁴ In Finland, ECEC is publicly provided, and the municipalities are responsible for providing services to the extent that the need for those services is met in a particular area. All children younger than school age are entitled to ECEC services regardless of their parents’ labour market positions. ECEC is primarily provided in municipal ECEC centres and, to a lesser extent, in municipal family day care. Private ECEC provision—particularly centre-based ECEC—has grown in recent years due to municipal support for the use of these services (Lahtinen and Svartsjö 2018), but the provision must follow the same regulations as does the public provision. The fees for ECEC are income tested in Finland such that low-income families pay nothing for their children’s education and care.⁵

⁴ The project was funded by the Academy of Finland (SA116272).

⁵ In 2019, the maximum fee for whole-day ECEC was 290 euros per month, which is less than 10 percent of the mean monthly income among the Finnish work force. If a family has several children in ECEC, the fees for the younger children are reduced.

All three ECEC centres involved in this study are public. In each centre, the participating teachers voice recorded their meetings with parents, during which the children's ECEC plans were drafted. The data included the ECEC plans that were prepared during these meetings. This chapter analyses the audio recordings of eight parent–teacher meetings and the ECEC plans applied during these discussions, each of which lasted 40 to 90 minutes. In all, 35 ECEC plan discussions were recorded in the project. In order to enable an intensive analysis of interaction, the data has been limited in compliance with the principles of maximal variation (Gobo 2004) and saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 188). We have aimed at maximal variation by, for example, always analysing discussions conducted by different teachers. Furthermore, in limiting the data, we have considered differences that characterise the discussions throughout the data. Such differences include the presence of mothers and fathers in the discussions, the child's gender and age, and whether the individual ECEC plans were created for siblings or for one child only. Hence, both parents were present in three of the eight analysed discussions, while five discussions were attended only by the mother. One of the discussions concerned the ECEC plans of two siblings; all the other meetings focused on one child. The children's ages varied from two to six years. Five of them were boys and four girls. In our analysis process, we continued to include new cases in the examination until it became clear that they would contribute no new information to the research questions.

Apart from a few minor exceptions, the forms for ECEC plans used in the discussions were identical for the ECEC centres and comprised seven to eight pages. They had been designed by a local team of ECEC teachers and administrators⁶ and included basic information such as the parents' contact details and addressed topics such as the child's activities and characteristics as well as the practices agreed upon between the parent and staff of the ECEC centre. Before the discussion, the parents were asked to take the form home and write down their views and wishes on it. They were also instructed to return the form to the ECEC centre before the discussion so that the teachers could see the answers before meeting the parents.

⁶ Since 2017, the Finnish National Agency for Education has provided a model form of the child's ECEC plan (<https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-ja-tutkinnot/lapsen-varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma-mallilomake-ja-ohjeistus>). This model – with some changes and additions made locally – is applied in many Finnish municipalities. Before 2017, municipalities used to apply ECEC plans that were drafted locally. However, the local ECEC plan documents often had similar content areas and they shared ideas about the positioning of parents and practitioners in the planning process (Karila and Alasuutari 2012; Alasuutari and Karila 2010).

The research material is studied from the perspective of discourse and conversation analysis (Wood and Kroger 2000; ten Have 2007). This means that the data analysis has been guided by the following questions: how do the participants of the discussion create meanings in their interaction, and how do they simultaneously produce a certain conversation structure and certain positions for the participants in the situation. The study thus focuses on what is done with language and language usage in the situated context; it does not aim at discovering the participants' underlying ideas or reveal their minds (Wetherell 2009). Therefore, each turn of talk is analysed in relation to the preceding and following turns in the conversation (Potter and Hepburn 2007).

The analysis was started by listening to the recordings and making the preliminary transcriptions more accurate (see Hepburn and Potter 2004). Thereafter, the progress of interaction was examined by reviewing the ECEC plan documents and their texts alongside the transcriptions and recordings. In this way, it was possible to distinguish each participant's discourse space in the conversations, in other words, when the interaction included parent or teacher narration and when it consisted of reading the text of the ECEC plan or talking about it (cf. the concept of text-reader conversation by Smith 2005). In this stage, we also used quantification as a tool in the analysis. We calculated the amount of each participant's discourse space: their share of content-bearing turns of talk, calculated based on the number of lines in the transcriptions. Content-bearing speaking turns of talk are thus turns that are given space in the conversation and influence its themes. Although quantification is quite rare in discursive and conversation analytic research, it can even be considered necessary in particular type of analyses (see Seedhouse 2005). In this study, quantification broadened the picture about the role of each participant during the interactions at hand.

Next, the discussions were divided into episodes according to their thematic entities and speech rhythm. Typical of an episode is that it adheres to a specific topic and that speech is divided into sections through, for example, transitional words (e.g. but, then, well next) and pauses (see Sorjonen 1989; Hakulinen and Sorjonen 1989). The division into episodes was thus not based on the ECEC plan document but on the features of language usage. However, the interfaces of episodes are essential in examining the role of the document because, as we will later explain, the discourse space of the form focuses on them. In the same way, the beginning of each episode shows how the teachers and parents orient themselves to the ECEC plan document in their interaction.

In order to protect the participants' privacy, the names in this article are pseudonyms. The ECEC plan document of the research municipality cannot be identified, either, because the excerpts do not contain the precise wording of the document. Participation in the study was voluntary for the municipalities, day-care centres and parents, and written consent forms were used.

The child's ECEC plan document in the parent-teacher meeting

The role of the document in the discussions

Analysing the discourse spaces of the teacher, the parent(s) and the ECEC plan document as well as examining the structure of the discussions provide different but complementary pictures of the role that the document plays in the analysed material. Based on the amount of discourse space (i.e. content-bearing turns), it seems that the space of the ECEC plan document is minor, even though the discourse spaces vary a lot between the different discussions. The share of the teacher's discourse space is 38%–68% of the overall discourse space, while the respective rate for the parents is 25%–52% and for the document 5%–18%. On average, the teacher has more discourse space than the parent does, and the average space of the ECEC plan document is about 11%. Moreover, the majority of the document's discourse space consists of turns in which the teacher reads it or refers to it. The document thus seems to be principally managed and voiced by the teacher.

Despite its minor discourse space, the role of the ECEC plan document is very salient in the actual interaction. First, it is talked about or read from at the beginning of all the discussion recordings. It therefore serves as an initiator of the discussion about the child's ECEC plan. Most commonly, this also includes an orientation to using the document as a basis for discussion. In several discussions, this orientation occurs in the same way as in the following excerpt. (The transcription symbols are explained in the Appendix.)

PD:	I suggest we follow this (1) form and
MD:	OK
	(.)
P:	then talk about [anything that comes to our minds
M:	[yeah
	(.)
P:	when it feels that we need to talk about something
M:	yeah

Excerpt 1

The teacher's suggestion of 'following the form' above is a metaphor that many of the teachers use. It provides the ECEC plan document with the capacity of guiding the discussion and its content. In some of the discussions, a corresponding orientation occurs in which the teacher proposes that the participants look at the items on the document together. Even though the conversation is oriented around the document, the orientation can be softened in order to appear less compelling. For example, in the preceding excerpt, this is accomplished by suggesting that less formal topics can also be discussed ('anything that comes to our minds') when necessary. The parents accept (or do not resist) the teacher's and ECEC plan document's leading role in the discussions, as demonstrated by the above excerpt.

Once the discussion has started, it is typically led by the teacher based on the ECEC plan document as follows: the teacher reads from the document, proceeds to the next items on the document and selects the points to be addressed. This means that the episodes usually start with the discourse space of the document. The speech pauses between the episodes can mainly be interpreted as the participants' orientation to the next topic. Commonly, majority of the items on the ECEC plan document are handled in the discussions.

The document mostly also signals when to end the discussion. The last discourse space of the document usually comprises the last item on it, in other words, the participants' signatures. The recorded conversation also typically ends here. At the end of the discussion, the participants also, for example, thank each other. In some of the discussions, the signature item is passed over, but even in them, some other item on the last page of the document is talked about before ending the discussion. A couple of discussions end for a situational reason when, for instance, the teacher refers to the passing of time ('I'm looking at the clock').

As a whole, the analysed material suggests that the ECEC plan document occupies a significant role in the parent–teacher discussion. The discussion is started by talking about, or referring to, the document, and the discussion follows the topics on the form. Branching off topic is rare, and even when it happens, the participants return relatively quickly to the document's items. The document also indicates when to end the discussion. During the conversation, the teacher and the ECEC plan document 'collaborate', and the document is at the teacher's disposal.

The role of the ECEC plan document in the discourse episodes

The discussions consist of episodes determined by topics, speech pauses and transitional words. In the analysed ECEC discussions, we could identify 229 episodes. After a pause, the episode most commonly begins by the teacher reading from the ECEC plan document, that is, with the discourse space of the document, as stated previously. The teachers generally use some introductory words in this context, such as 'well', 'so', 'then', 'er', 'here', and 'but' (see Hakulinen and Sorjonen, 1989; Sorjonen 1989; Raevaara 1989) or stretch a speech sound (see Frers 2009). Based on the discussion that follows the discourse space of the document, we can distinguish the three most common episode beginnings, in each of which the document occupies a different role. More than two thirds of all the episodes begin like this.

In the recorded discussions, the most common way to start an episode is that the teacher first reads aloud or refers to the topic of the ECEC plan and then comments on it. The following example represents the beginning of such an episode:

- (2)
- PD: but then speech and language development ((an item on the ECEC plan document))
- MD: yeah
- P: speech for us ((refers to the view of the teachers)) is at least Ego- (.) good and clear (ha [ha])E
- M: [yeah yeah there shouldn't really be any problem there that (.) that (.) like at that two-year check at the child welfare clinic they also said ---

Excerpt 2

Above the change of episodes is marked by a pause between them. The new episode begins with the teacher reading the heading on the ECEC plan document aloud, which concerns speech and language development. Here the teacher uses the words 'but' and 'then' – words that are common at the beginning of the episodes. These words in a way shift attention to the next topic (see Sorjonen 1989, p. 174). The parent answers with the interjection 'yeah' and simultaneously confirms the discourse space of the form and shows that she is following the change of topic. Thereafter, the teacher starts to talk about the child's speech and language development. There is no gap in the conversation at this point, so the teacher does not expect the parent to first say something about the theme. By saying 'for us', the teacher expresses the individual teacher's own views as the shared opinion of her

colleagues in the ECEC centre. The episode continues with the parent's narration, followed by both participants' discussion on the topic⁷. There is a pause before the following episode.

In episodes like the above example, the ECEC plan document invites or initiates the dialogue. Explaining the ECEC teachers' point of view to the parents, or sharing information on the child with them, is interpreted as the first task in this dialogue. After sharing this information, the parent usually participates in the discussion as well.

In part of the episodes, the discourse space of the form at the beginning of the episode is followed by a dialogue based on the parent's views and narration on the child's activities. This occurs, first of all, so that the teacher reads from the form and then asks the parent about the topic on the form. In this case, the pause between reading from the form and asking a question is usually not long, as the following example demonstrates.

- PD: well then, here ((on the form)) we've also got Peetu's interests like ((reads the parent's entry)) cars, machines and animals
(.)
- PD: is he (.) is it so for him that he likes to take care of animals [or
- M: [yeah and
- so [that
- P: [so]
- M: if you meet dogs, he £would like to pet all dogs [(ha ha)]£
- P: [yeah yeah
- Excerpt 3

In the above example, the new episode begins after a brief pause when the teacher starts to read the next item on the ECEC plan document and the text the parent has written on it. The interjection 'well' used by the teacher marks the change of subject (see Londen 1997), as does the word 'then'. After a short gap, the teacher asks the parent a question to clarify the parent's entries on the document, and the parent answers. The situation can be interpreted so that the parent in a way adopts a role as someone obliged to explain what they have written (see Bartesaghi 2009). At the same time, the document directs the conversation towards a sort of interview with the parent. The episode continues by the parent explaining the child's activities, while the teacher comments only by saying 'so', 'yeah' and 'right'. The episodes starting like this usually include both the teacher's and the parent's talk on the topic, but some episodes like this example include narration by only one of them.

⁷ The laughter in the episode may be linked with the positive evaluation of the child's speech presented in the episode. Pilllet-Shore (2012) shows that praising a student in a teacher-parent discussion may be associated with praising the parents, which can cause a problem for the interaction, since for example self-praise is not usually preferred in interaction. Laughter again can signify such interactional tensions and problems.

In some of the episodes, parents themselves adopt the role of those obliged to explain, even though the teacher does not pose them questions on the document items. In these cases, the episodes begin so that the teacher reads from the ECEC plan document and the parent immediately comments on the topic. The document thus serves alone as the parent's 'interviewer'. The parent's talk also often overlaps the discourse space of the document, that is, the parent starts to speak while the teacher is reading the document text. However, the following example begins with a situation where the parent takes a speaking turn immediately after the teacher has read the topic.

(2)
 PD: the:n char:acter ((one of the topics on the document))
 MD: yeah, we thought about those a lot last night that
 (1)
 MD: I don't know if they now went correctly but the way [like
 P: [mmm
 MD: it felt like at the moment when [we completed those
 P: [yes and then surely the child s/he can usually be
 totally different at home than [what s/he is
 M: [mmm
 T: in a group
 Excerpt 4

At the beginning of the excerpt, the teacher reads the next item on the document aloud, simultaneously stretching the words. The parent comments on what the teacher has read. She expresses her uncertainty on whether the child's traits written down by the parents ('we thought') describe the child in the expected way. This implicitly suggests that there would be certain correct answers to describe a child's character, which the teacher might know better than the parents do. The teachers seem to interpret the mother's turn as suggesting an expectation of a unanimous characterisation of the child by the parents and ECEC staff. Nevertheless, the teacher refutes this assumption by noting that a child can be different at home and in a group. Thereafter, the episode consists of both teacher talk and parent talk about the child and the child's character.

The three most common episode beginnings, presented above (Excerpts 2-4), demonstrate that during the interaction the discussion topics are primarily determined by the ECEC plan document and the teacher. This hypothesis also seems to guide parents' activities in the discussions. Thereby, the discussion is based on teachers' views on the topics presented on the document– or its starting point is a kind of interview with the parent, where the questions are formulated by the teacher or by the document.

A small amount of the discourse episodes also begin with parent talk, most commonly concerning an external topic not related to the form. Considering the goals of the ECEC plan discussion, the parents' initiatives in the discussions cannot be called irrelevant because they are mainly related to the child. Their infrequency, however, indicates that the parents in the analysed data do not easily challenge the (asymmetric) position they obtain in the ECEC discussions. Instead, they adapt to the framework set for the situation.

Finally, a small proportion of the episodes also begin in varying ways. Some of them begin with the teacher's narration, which in some cases seems to be based on a separate note sheet. In addition, an episode can begin with and only consist of the discourse space of the ECEC plan document. This means that the teacher reads the question on the document, as well as the given answer, but does not continue handling or discussing the topic, after which the discussion proceeds to the next topic and simultaneously to a new episode. In this case, the document is dominant and the only agent in the episode.

5. Discussion

This chapter has analysed how the discussions of children's ECEC plans are structured when the ECEC plans are examined as participants present in these discussions. The analysis reveals that the documents played a significant role in structuring these discussions. Soon after meeting one another, a child's parent(s) and teacher started talking about his/her ECEC plan, which also determined the topics and progress of the discussion. In addition, after addressing topics not included in the document, the participants soon returned to the specified topics. The last items on the document, on the other hand, were a signal to end the discussion. Based on the findings, it thus seems that the discussions largely followed the ECEC plans and that going through the documents became the key institutional task of these discussions (cf. Kekkonen 2012, p. 125). Earlier research suggests that documents can play a corresponding role in determining the progress of institutional interactions (Günther et al. 2015; Markström 2011).

The observations demonstrated that, during each ECEC discussion, the ECEC plan and the teacher often 'collaborated' in that the discussion most commonly progressed such that the teacher read the next item on the document aloud, thereby 'voicing' the plan (Smith 2005). A discussion was thus structured based on not only the document itself, but particularly whereby the teacher implemented the document (see also Frers 2009). Together,

the teacher and the ECEC plan constituted a strong pair of agents during such a discussion. Cooren (2004) characterises such collaboration between documents and people as hybrid agency, which provides the involved actors the opportunity to achieve more than would be possible for any of those involved in isolation (see also Alasuutari et al. 2014, p. 100; Putnam and Cooren 2004; Latour 2005).

Due to their strong position during these interactions, the ECEC plans produced coherence between the many parent–teacher discussions and thus functioned as normative documents (Ferraris and Torrenco 2014) that constructed a specific practice of planning for the children’s ECEC. One aim of the national curriculum guidelines on ECEC that introduced the planning practice was to promote the provision of ECEC on equal terms throughout the country (Stakes 2004, p. 9). On one hand, the individual ECEC plan seems to advance this goal by standardising the planning for a child’s ECEC; on the other hand, the standardisation of parent–teacher discussions entail a kind of formality, and the application of the ECEC plan therefore raises questions.

The first question focusses on how documents can advance the objectives set to a child’s ECEC plan; namely, the plan should consider the child’s individuality and actualise partnership or cooperation on equal terms between his/her parent(s) and teacher. While the individual ECEC plan standardises and formalises the discussion between a child’s parent(s) and teacher, it may nevertheless entail that the child’s individuality may solely be addressed within the limits set by the document’s contents and structure. In a similar way, the document provides the frames for constructing parent–teacher partnership by presenting the topics that the partnership is expected to concern. Therefore, the ‘documentalised’ practice of planning for a child’s ECEC possesses internal tensions regarding standardisation and the addressing of each child’s individuality and each parental viewpoint.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that although the individual ECEC plan played a normative role in this study (see Ferraris and Torrenco 2014), documents do not take deterministic positions in relation to human actors. In the encounters between human actors and documents, what is essential is the way whereby human actors interpret the documents, how and how they act on those documents (Alasuutari 2015; Smith 2005). Therefore, while discussing the individual ECEC plan, parents and teachers can also depart from and ‘resist’ the limits set and the suggestions made by the document (e.g., Alasuutari 2014, 2015). This

resistance was evident in a few episodes of the present study, although parents and teachers quite quickly returned to and resumed following the documents during their discussions.

This chapter has presented a case study executed in one Finnish municipality, and one must therefore be careful in transferring its findings to other contexts. On the other hand, the study offers a methodological example of how the force and impact of documents in institutional encounters can be examined at the grassroots level.

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Appendix

Transcription symbols

P	practitioner
M	mother
F	father
D	Turns of talk in which the child's ECEC plan is read or talked about. For example, PD refers to the practitioner reading or talking about the document.
((reads))	clarification of the data excerpt
(.)	a pause lasting less than a second
(2)	a pause and its length in seconds
[start of overlapping talk
e::	stretching a sound
£joo£	a section of the turn spoken with a smiling voice
£(he he)£	laughter
te-	an unfinished word
---	part of talk is not shown, for example, the end of a turn