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Author(s): Kivimäki, Mirka; Karila, Kirsti; Alasuutari, Maarit

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Mirka Kivimäki, Kirsti Karila & Maarit Alasuutari

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Enrichment and safety -the parents of young children constructing early childhood education and care institution in Finland

Mirka Kivimäki ^a, Kirsti Karila ^b and Maarit Alasuutari ^c

^aDoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; ^bEmerita Professor, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; ^cProfessor, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT



Parents' significance in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is emphasized in the research, but primarily from the perspective of ECEC professionals. Drawing on discursive institutionalism, we analysed what parents of young children in Finland constructed as essential in ECEC from the child's point of view in their discussions concerning the forms of ECEC services. We found that parents constructed ECEC through two interconnected frames: enrichment and safety. The frames indicate that an individual child and her well-being here and now are considered essential in ECEC for Finnish parents. Parents' interpretations differ from one of the global discourses of ECEC, which emphasizes children's development for the future. On the other hand, parents' discourses maintain the cultural distinctions traditionally present in the Finnish ECEC institution. Our study underscores the significance of scrutinizing the construction of educational institutions in the discourses of those whose everyday lives these institutions are.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; institutions; parents of young children; discursive institutionalism; discourse analysis

Introduction

The previous research has emphasized parents' significance in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions. However, parents have typically been examined from the perspective of ECEC professionals. Several studies have explored the competence of professionals to collaborate with parents (Almendingen, Clayton, and Matthews 2022; Licardo and Oliveira Leite 2022; Murphy et al. 2021; Norheim and Moser 2020) and how the professionals understand and enact the collaboration (Cottle and Alexander 2014; Hujala et al. 2009). The collaboration has also been considered from the parents' perspective (Vuorinen 2018; 2021). Parental involvement and engagement in ECEC have been addressed (Devlieghere, Li, and Vandebroek 2022; Garvis et al. 2021;

CONTACT Mirka Kivimäki  mirka.kivimaki@tuni.fi  doctoral researcher, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, P.O. Box 700, 33014, Tampere, Finland

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Hakyemez-Paul 2020; Li et al. 2023). Studies have also investigated parents' perceptions of ECEC quality (Grammatikopoulos et al. 2014; Scopelliti and Musatti 2013; Sollars 2020) and how parents choose education and care for their child (Karlsson, Löfdahl, and Perez-Prieto 2013; Vincent, Braun, and Ball 2010).

Despite the emphasis on parents, the positioning in existing research has largely been such that the interpretation of ECEC institution – in other words, what it is about – comes for parents as 'given'. However, recent studies depict parents as active agents constructing childhood and parenting through their discourses (Geinger, Vandenbroeck, and Roets 2014; Karlsson, Löfdahl, and Prieto 2013; Perrier 2012). In line with these studies, we view parents as participants in the ECEC construction. Drawing on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008; 2010), we ask what matters the parents consider essential in the ECEC institution. This perspective has been less present in the earlier research on ECEC and parents.

According to Schmidt (2008; 2010), as much as an institution serves as a structure and set of boundaries for actors to think about and act in, it is a construction of thinking and acting created by institutional actors themselves. The actors of an institution should be treated as agents who use historical and societal meaning to maintain, challenge, and change the institution with their discourses (Schmidt 2008). As Avigur-Eshel and Berkovich (2019, 2) put it:

Institutions are founded, preserved, and reformed based on shared understandings about what they are and how they should function. These understandings are formed through discourse in an interactive process that includes multiple actors in an institutional context.

Nonetheless, following an examination of the previous research in education and ECEC utilized discursive institutionalism (DI), it appears the direction of discursive interaction is not so much 'interactive' and does not 'include multiple actors', rather than 'top-down', where policies and documents are constituted as the actors constructing the institutions. DI has been used to study dynamics between transnational, national, and local educational policies (Wahlström and Sundberg 2018) and to analyze the introduction of global managerialism into national education contexts (Avigur-Eshel and Berkovich 2019) and the ideational drivers of national ECEC reforms (Lundkvist et al. 2017). DI has been useful in the examination of curriculum change (Nordin and Sundberg 2018) and Nordic school evaluation practices (Wallenius et al. 2018). It has proven valuable in the studies of marketization and privatization (Ruutiainen 2022) and the construction of access to ECEC (Fjällström, Karila, and Paananen 2020) in local policies. Regarding parents, DI has been used to study how policy ideas about parental involvement are shaped in Swedish educational documents (Karlsson, Hallsén, and Svahn 2019). Thus, the research applying DI has focused on national or local policies, not on those whose everyday lives the educational institutions are. By treating the parents as actors producing the ECEC institution, we believe we can bring a fresh perspective to the extant literature on discursive institutionalism in education.

Finland offers a fruitful context to study parents in ECEC. In the Finnish ECEC system, children under six years have a subjective right to ECEC after parental leave (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a; Ministry of Education and Culture 2023). Thus, the children are entitled to the services regardless of the parental labour market position. Our research focuses on parents of 1–2-year-old children for whom the decision

about the child's care arrangement is topical. At the time of the data collection of this study in 2016, the Finnish parental leave period ended when the child was 9–10 months old.¹ Afterwards, parents can take care of their child at home with a home care allowance until the child turns three. Most parents take advantage of this possibility and care for the child at home at least for a few months (Repo 2010; Salmi and Närvi 2017, 18). The other possibility is that the parents enrol the child in ECEC. While over half of under-two-year-olds are cared for at home (Salmi and Närvi 2017), many of them are enrolled in ECEC by age two. Thus, this decision period offers an interesting phase to investigate parents' discourses and what kind of shared understandings of ECEC are formed through them (Avigur-Eshel and Berkovich 2019; Schmidt 2008).

In Finland, ECEC is organized as three forms of ECEC services available for parents to consider: centre-based ECEC activities, family daycare, and open ECEC activities. Parents are able to use the open services if they receive the home care allowance, but not family daycare or centre-based ECEC (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a). All three forms of ECEC are regulated by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a), but they differ, for example, in their history (Välimäki 1999), service environment, and regulations regarding staff qualifications (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 15).

If the child needs full-time ECEC, centre-based ECEC and family daycare are available. The former is organized and participated in more than the latter (Säkkinen and Kuoppala 2021). Centre-based ECEC is following on different pedagogical grounds, provisions on staffing and maximum group sizes (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 15). The staffing and maximum group size vary for children under and over three years, allowing seven over three-year-olds and four under-three-year-olds per educator (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018b, 1 §). According to the Act of Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a) the maximum group size is the number of children that corresponds to the number allowed for three educators in total. The staff of centre-based ECEC comprises ECEC teachers, social pedagogues (ECEC), and childcarers (35 §). Family daycare involves a childminder caring for up to four children in a home setting or up to eight children with two childminders, or in special cases up to twelve children with three childminders in shared rooms (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018b, 2 §). Family daycare childminders need suitable vocational qualifications or other relevant training (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a, 29 §).

If the child does not need full-time ECEC and is in-home care, parents can decide that the child participates in open ECEC activities in addition to home care. The provision of open ECEC is not regulated in Finland nationally and may vary regionally (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a, 1, 3 §). Open ECEC can be organised for example as playground or club activities in which the child participates alone or with the parent, once or a few times a week, for a few hours. Typically, open ECEC activities for children under three years old are those in which the child participates together with the parent (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 16). Open ECEC can employ teachers, carers, or instructors, but this is not regulated either (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a).

In our study, we are interested in how parents consider centre-based ECEC, family daycare, and open ECEC activities at the point when the childcare decision and the

child's potential enrolment in ECEC become relevant to them. We examine what kind of ECEC institution they are constructing in their considerations.

Our research questions are:

How do parents of young children describe the three forms of ECEC services from the child's point of view?

What matters are constructed as essential in the ECEC institution in the parents' descriptions?

Data and methods

Our data comprises qualitative interviews with Finnish parents of young children from the CHILDCARE research project (SA293049 and SA314317) conducted in 2016 and 2017 across ten Finnish municipalities with varying demographics and sizes. All of these municipalities organized centre-based ECEC, family daycare, and open activities, but there was a variation among municipalities in the participation of these forms. A total of 64 interviews were conducted, involving either one (53) or both (11) parents, including 52 mothers and 23 fathers. Most parents (58) held university or polytechnic degrees, with some having vocational school backgrounds. Families had at least one child aged 1–2 years, with 37 in centre-based care, 11 in family daycare, and 16 in-home care, some attending open ECEC activities regularly or occasionally.

Interviewees were personally invited based on their participation in a survey conducted by the CHILDCARE research project. In the survey, the parents had been informed about the possibility of participating in the research interview. Before the interviews, they signed a consent form and were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage of the process. The research protocol was pre-reviewed and accepted by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä (20.5.2016). To protect the privacy of the interviewees, the quotations in this article have been pseudonymized.

The interviews were carried out by a team of nine researchers, who were jointly trained beforehand. Each interview was conducted by one researcher. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, lasted 1–2 h each, and included questions about everyday family life, childcare and ECEC solutions and their rationale, the reconciliation of work and family, and the future of the family. This study drew attention to those points where parents described ECEC solutions and their rationale. The excerpts used in this article were translated into English by the first author and were checked by the English language revisor.

Some of the interviewees did not use the ECEC services but were still considered actors of the ECEC institution. Namely, they were in the process of deciding whether to use the services for their child. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that they attached themselves to the same interpretations and arguments as parents who already used the ECEC services. Some of the interviewees had older children who currently or previously used ECEC services. For this reason, the analysis included all sections discussing forms of ECEC services for any children of the family, not just ages 1–2.

In the data analysis, we applied a discourse analytic approach. Thus, we did not approach the interview talk as reflecting how things factually are in ECEC, but as a

social practice that constructs the ECEC in some kind (Potter 1996). Therefore, we see that there are no ready-categorized ways of understanding ECEC that parents are forced to accept and are just expressing; in their interview talk, parents are doing something – they use words, phrases, and expressions that constitute ECEC and its forms one way or another, and they could have been otherwise (Potter 1996). However, this does not happen randomly or accidentally, because it needs to ‘make sense’. This means that the descriptions are rationalized based on certain socially and historically legitimized norms, rules, and ideas (Schmidt 2008). Consequently, when examining parents’ descriptions of ECEC with a discourse analytic approach, we are dealing with various versions of ECEC. These versions are important as such, and we cannot separate a version that is more ‘correct’ from another (Wood and Kroger 2012).

At the beginning of the analysis, the first author reviewed the complete data and identified similarities and differences in the interviewees’ descriptions of ECEC services. Sections discussing the forms of ECEC from a child’s perspective were separated in the second phase. All authors jointly evaluated and approved the progression of the analysis. Thereafter, the first author explored connections and repetitions within these sections. Variabilities and consistencies within and across the sections were assessed, with input from the other authors. A consistent pattern emerged: interviewees seemed to compare the forms of ECEC to home settings in certain, consistent ways. This led to the introduction of the analytical term ‘frame’ (Goffman 1986). We understand a frame as the coherent lens the interviewees use to make sense of the ECEC from the child’s point of view and its essential aspects. The two different frames were identified, *enrichment* and *safety*, which structured discussions and produced an overarching perspective for ECEC construction (Peltoperä, Siippainen, and Karila 2023; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, and Karila 2020). Centre-based ECEC, family daycare, and open activities were differently presented in these frames. Interviewees used both frames, typically overlapping and intertwining in their discussions.

Findings

Enrichment frame

In the enrichment frame, parents highlighted the child participating in guided activities and having the company of a peer group in ECEC, contrasting it with growing up only in the home environment with the parents. As a result, ECEC is depicted as offering ‘more than a home’ for the child in her everyday life. Parents evaluated the forms of ECEC services in terms of the extent to which they provide this ‘more than home’. Typically, centre-based ECEC was described accordingly:

Those days, for example, are there [at the ECEC centre], it is planned that there are many kinds of activities, and the children develop and grow and learn there through that. (—) When I was alone at home [with the child], I started to get tired of inventing something new all the time. (—) Those [children] are there, of course, with other children. That’s important, you get a bit of a peer group there, and of course, you learn new things from the older ones too.

In the excerpt, the interviewee’s description seems to convey relief. The parent praises a variety of activities and peer groups in the centre-based ECEC and contrasts it with

feeling exhausted by constantly ‘inventing something new all the time’ at home. The child is depicted as needing structured activities and social interactions, perceived as lacking at home. In turn, the ECEC centre is considered to provide these and thus complement the assumed limits of the home. While the interviewee emphasizes guided activities and peer groups for child development, she does not refer to the learning of certain academic skills. Typically, activities and peer groups were linked together, and parents did not specify their significance. Rather, learning was seen ‘holistically’; as involving stimulation, something to do, socialization and growth, that produces good things and quality in general in the child’s life. The open ECEC activities were similarly described as complementing the home like the ECEC centre, but they were typically seen as alternatives to it:

This kind of play club activity (—) is nice if there is some such activity that you might not be able to do at home. (—) When you are not at the ECEC centre, but you’re at home. And this is always (—) nice, different. (—) You meet other children a little.

The excerpt illustrates how open ECEC is considered less essential than center-based ECEC, presenting it as ‘a lighter’ alternative. Open ECEC is described as a choice for when the child is not at the ECEC centre, with utterances like ‘some such activity you might not be able to do at home’ or ‘You meet other children a little’. In the Finnish ECEC system where open activities are the sole ECEC option for home-cared children, this can be understood as referring to the generally accepted mindset that it is good for the child to get ‘the same’ enrichment assumed to be provided at the ECEC centre, despite being cared for at home.

Conversely, family daycare was associated with the assumed limits of the home. This is illustrated in the following, where the interviewee justifies why she would rather take her child to the ECEC centre than to family daycare.

[At the ECEC centre] there are more in the big group and there are more guided activities and there is no TV (—). [At the ECEC centre] every day they go out and there are certain rhythms. (—) There [in family daycare] it was obviously looser than [at the ECEC centre] because it is a home environment. There, the mother [a woman with children of her own working as a family daycare childminder] can decide what kind of day she will have on any given day.

In the excerpt, family daycare is described as not providing guided activities and a peer group for the child in the same manner as centre-based ECEC does. Home-like features in family daycare are linked to poorer opportunities to provide elements understood as enrichment in the child’s life.

The key aspect of the enrichment frame was the distinction between older and younger children, where the child’s assumed need for enrichment was understood to increase according to the child’s age. The age was not clearly defined, but parents outlined it as between the age of under and over three in descriptions like ‘somewhere around the age of three to four when the child is beginning to need’. With the attainment of a certain age, the child was understood to develop a kind of ‘essence’ wherein getting enrichment begins to be relevant:

He [the older child] can communicate more and he can already play a little with the other children. That younger one is so young, he doesn’t know, he doesn’t get interested in the other children as such, he doesn’t know how to share, he doesn’t play and doesn’t know, he doesn’t want the company of others. (—) The [older child] enjoys the company of

others and that he has someone to play with, because fewer parents are able to play with the children all day [at home](—), isn't it just a two-year-old who doesn't need any activities, when they can figure out what to do from anything [at home], a fun game or a thing. He doesn't need anything, arranged entertainment.

In the excerpt, younger children are depicted as less capable and less interested in activities and interactions, implying they do not require enrichment assumed to be provided in the ECEC centre. The home environment is deemed 'sufficient' for them. Conversely, older children are portrayed as more capable and social, thus benefiting more from the offerings of the ECEC centre. This perspective extended to family daycare in descriptions like

Our older child is getting to the age where you should play a lot of sports with him, and then one childminder in family daycare may not be able to run with him.

[Family daycare] doesn't fulfil the need that these older children have for friends

Through such descriptions, the ECEC centre was considered 'worth going' for older children due to its enriching attributes, while home or family daycare was seen as 'not meeting their needs'.

Regarding open ECEC activities, we found that the question of the child's age did not actualize in the parents' discussions. This can be explained by the fact that the Finnish system for open ECEC activities is already divided by age; for children under three, parent-participated open ECEC is common, while over three, children typically participate independently in the playing clubs. Therefore, parents do not need to consider the child's age for open ECEC as they do for centre-based ECEC and family daycare.

Safety frame

In the safety frame, the parents emphasized the child's individual physical and socioemotional need for attention and care from an adult. At the core of the frame, parents presented doubts about 'the safety' of ECEC, which stem from concerns that such attention and care might not be provided as at home. This approach focused on the youngest children and their assumed needs for ECEC. While the enrichment frame portrayed the centre-based ECEC positively as enriching the child's life, the safety frame presented it negatively, where a number of children and a lack of time emerged as barriers to the physical and socio-emotional attention and care:

[The ECEC centre] is bad and therefore creepy. (—) Maybe you don't have time to change diapers, maybe you don't have time to play, you don't have time to hug and pick up children who fall down and cry like that, nobody wants to take their child to such a place.

It's just so chaotic, so many children and a few adults are running after them. (—) [At the ECEC centre] there are too big groups and there is no time for that, for holding in the arms and just being like that, it's just that, performing things and that. Too big groups and the children feel insecure.

In the excerpt, centre-based ECEC is characterized as 'bad and creepy'. Time constraints raise concerns about physical and socioemotional closeness and care. Attachment to the youngest ones can be seen in utterances connected typically to young children like 'changing diapers', 'picking up children who fall down and cry', and 'holding the child in one's

arms'. The number of activities and other children, which in the enrichment frame acquired a positive tone, become negative here: 'chaotic', 'so many children', and 'performing things'. Parents typically presented these kinds of descriptions as justifications for taking care of their children at home instead of taking them to the ECEC centre. By doing so, they implicitly construct that the adult's time to individually care for and be close to the child is realized in the home environment.

Thus, in this frame, the construction of a centre-based ECEC was 'a question of survival' for young children. One parent describes that she would rather take care of her child at home because the child 'can't talk or walk properly and anything can be done or happen to him in the ECEC centre and the child can't even express herself'. Here, the young child's physical and age-dependent limitations are seen to produce helplessness regarding the assumed lack of attention; the child should somehow struggle and be able to express her needs to be noticed at the ECEC centre. Therefore, the parents who have chosen the ECEC centre for their young child typically tend to be convinced of their child's ability to 'survive' by describing their child as social and strong-willed 'enough' to 'make it there'.

Consequently, while the consideration of the home in the enrichment frame was constructed as limited for the older children, in the safety frame it was more like a desirable ideal for the younger ones. This was manifested in the construction of family daycare. Typically, the family daycare was presented as a kind of homelike 'response' to the 'threat-filled' centre-based ECEC, as the following excerpt illustrates.

I have an image of family daycare that it is more individualized, and there are fewer children, of course, so then the childminder can pay more attention to those children. It's a more homelike environment. It's not like that, there are masses of children [like at the ECEC centre] and then someone gets their boots wrong, or someone doesn't have a coat when they haven't had time to check it. So, it's a bit like that, that this is what happens sometimes, a few years ago, the ECEC centre door, the gate was left open somewhere, and the child must have drowned or something. (—) You would think that the attention of the person who takes care of the child would be more on the child if it were a smaller group.

The interviewee highlights family daycare's homelike environment for enhanced individual attention compared to the ECEC centre. By contrasting this with a threatening image of lack of time and care in the ECEC centre, family daycare is portrayed as a safer choice. This is also reflected in one parent describing family daycare as

a bit like when I took him to a relative for care. I no longer see it as such, institutional [like an ECEC centre]. (—) It reminds me that it was somewhere at grandmas', where there were other cousins too.

The interviewee's description of family daycare as akin to relative care invokes comfort and a sense of home, while the ECEC centre is depicted as 'institutional' and less inviting. Where family daycare's less guided, home-like aspect was negatively presented in the enrichment frame, in the safety frame, it was seen positively for assuring individual attention and care. This is considered to meet the needs of the youngest children, like in the following excerpt where the mother and father describe why they have chosen family daycare for their under-two-year-old child.

Mother: So maybe that [family daycare] was like that, what a child at that age needs now, maybe it was that kind of closeness and individual consideration so that you could get as much of it as possible.(—)

Father: And on the other hand, it was perhaps a bit like the guidelines of the current ECEC in Finland in that (—) constantly, these group sizes have been steadily increased [at the ECEC centre], so it seemed a bit worrying. (—) And on the other hand, in the case of young children, in fundamental, rather care-oriented matters, the everyday life of young child.

The interviewees discuss family daycare within the safety frame by portraying it as a form of ECEC providing the child individual attention and closeness with an adult. They also contrast this with the unsafe position of centre-based ECEC. Worries regarding the ECEC centre are solved by arguing that family daycare responds to the needs of young children better than the ECEC centre. This reflects the same kind of ‘worth going’ logic as in the enrichment frame. Family daycare is represented as both an ECEC that meets the needs of a young child and a solution to the concerns regarding the ECEC centre.

Discussion

In this study, we have identified two frames that embody the essential matters through which parents construct ECEC in Finland. The enrichment and safety frames indicate that for Finnish parents the ECEC institution has according to Kampmann (2004, 144), ‘the point of departure in the individual child’. In the enrichment frame, ECEC is understood as an enricher of the child’s life, while the safety frame highlights care and closeness with an adult as an essential aspect of ECEC. Consequently, the purpose of ECEC appears to be to increase the quality of life of the individual child, and in that sense, it is seen as an environment of individualization (Kampmann 2004). The safety frame conveys the interpretation of ECEC as a substitute home, which emphasizes the close and intimate relationship between caring adults and children in ECEC (Dahlberg 1999). In our analysis, we have shown that various forms of ECEC services in Finland are considered through these frames, despite being emphasized in different ways depending on the form. Our data consisted of interviews with parents who live in different municipalities and have varying family situations. Regardless, the parents’ talk is consistently based on the enrichment and safety frames. This can be taken as an indication of the establishment of the frames found (Goodman 2008).

The parents’ interpretations through the enrichment and safety frames differ to some extent from one of the globally prevailing discourses emphasizing the positive impact of ECEC on children’s development and future learning (Heckman 2008; 2011; Naudeau et al. 2011; Penn 2010). Even the Nordic ECEC, which typically has taken a critical view of formal learning standards and school preparation approach (Jensen 2009; Karila 2012), has started highlighting ECEC in terms of child development for the future (Campbell-Barr 2012; Campbell-Barr and Nygård 2014). It can be considered that this lifelong learning discourse underscores the child as ‘waiting’ (Qvortrup 2004) towards the adult’s norms and competencies (Gillespie 2012; Hanson 2017). However, our results suggest that parents seem to emphasize the importance of ECEC rather ‘here and now’, which focuses on the child’s life as such. Through the frames, the child’s active and social everyday life, good care, and proximity to an adult are constituted as essential matters in the ECEC institution. In that sense, parents produce a version of the ECEC (Wood and Kroger 2012) where the child is viewed not in

accordance with the discourse of lifelong learning, as ‘a human becoming’, but more as ‘a human being’ (Gillespie 2012; Hanson 2017; Qvortrup 2004).

On the other hand, our results indicate that parents are not separated from the cultural distinctions of the ECEC, but they actively maintain them in their discourses (Schmidt 2008; 2010). This is reflected in how parents’ considerations within the frames aim at life-enriching, active, and social ECEC for children over three years old and homelike caring ECEC for younger children. Here the parents’ talk reflects the interpretations traditionally present in Finnish ECEC. The results are in line with Kivimäki, Karila, and Alasuutari’s (2021) findings that Finnish municipal ECEC officials constructed centre-based ECEC as pedagogical for older children and family daycare as nurturing for younger ones. Before 1973, the Finnish ECEC comprised kindergartens and nurseries, with the latter for children under three (Välimäki 1999). The home care allowance system is considered to both maintain the cultural construction of different environments for younger and older children as well as the interpretation that home-like care would be best for younger children (Repo 2010). The Finnish national- and local-level ECEC highlight are-related interests, emphasizing physical and socio-emotional closeness, care, and adult presence for younger children (Rutanen 2011). This can be traced to the still dominant construction of motherhood that has its roots in attachment pedagogy; it asserts that maternal care involves bringing up very young children (Dahlberg 1999, 64–66).

Therefore, parents’ interpretations are noteworthy in discussions concerning the Finnish ECEC institution. Although ECEC is regulated by uniform legislation nationally (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018a), Finland has strong municipal self-government concerning ECEC. This means that the municipalities are responsible for the organization of the ECEC in their areas, and they must ensure that the ECEC service meets the residents’ ECEC needs in the local area (Ministry of Finance 2015). The results of this study can be considered a certain kind of expression of local needs. Finland has recently introduced national reforms of ECEC, which are considered to reflect the lifelong learning discourse to some extent (Karila 2012; Lundkvist et al. 2017), but this study gives indications that for Finnish parents, the emphasis of ECEC remains on the individual child and the quality of her everyday life here and now rather than development and learning for the child’s later performance (Lister 2003).

The results also point out that Finnish parents construct care as an integral part of ECEC. Urban (2015) has argued that instead of the discourse of ECEC serving only education and learning goals, we need a more holistic approach to the function of ECEC in which care is also present and understood as a public good that must be valued in itself. Our results suggest that at least among Finnish parents, the ingredients for this kind of holistic approach to ECEC can be seen. The frames of enrichment and safety allow us to consider how policy-level discussions will meet with the everyday talk of parents in the future.

Based on this research, we suggest that discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008; 2010) provides a useful lens for uncovering the construction of the ECEC institution by parents of young children. It can increase understanding of parents’ interpretations, which are important to take into consideration when discussing and developing the ECEC institution and its various forms of service.

Note

1. In 2022, the parental leave was renewed. At present, both parents have more equal possibilities for parental leave. If they both use their share, the leave period lasts until the child is 13–14 months old.

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ORCID

Mirka Kivimäki  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0200-7578>

Kirsti Karila  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6233-2615>

Maarit Alasuutari  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4881-632X>

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