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Glossary terms

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) consists of services for children from birth to approximately seven years of age (mandatory pre-primary year for six-year-olds and preceding ECEC). It can be arranged in day care centre or as family day care. Other club-based services are also available. Finnish ECEC (under six-year-olds) is regulated with Early Childhood Education Act and a national curriculum from ECEC.

Pre-primary education

Pre-primary education is a mandatory educational service for six-year-olds. It is provided four hours a day and it is free of charge for the families. Pre-primary education is part of ECEC services. Pre-primary education emphasises play-based learning and learning of social skills in peer interaction. Finnish pre-primary education is regulated with Basic Education Act and a national curriculum from pre-primary education. After pre-primary education, children start the compulsory school at the age of seven.

Early childhood special education (ECSE)

Early childhood special education (ECSE) is arranged as part of ECEC and pre-primary education services. ECSE relies on the values of inclusive education. ECSE includes additional resources, as smaller group size, early childhood special education teachers (ECSET) support and/or an assistant as well as individualized instruction and interventions typically in children's own class. The legislation and regulations in curricula are cursory which has led to great variance in municipal practices.

Early childhood special education teacher (ECSET)

Early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) work either as teachers in classes or/and as consultative professionals. ECSETs are ECEC teachers (bachelor degree) with at least one-year additional training for special education. Consultative ECSETs support generic staff in creating inclusive and supportive environments, interactions and practices by bringing the knowledge from the field of special and inclusive education to general ECEC groups. According to the law, every municipality needs to make sure the availability of ECSETs.

Text of the article

Definition and approach to special education

In Finland, early childhood education and care (ECEC) consists of services for children from birth to approximately seven years of age (mandatory pre-primary year for six-year-olds and preceding ECEC). ECEC and early childhood special education (ECSE) are publicly funded both by governmental and municipal resources (EASNIE, 2018). Families pay a fee of 290€ yet this fee is gradually reduced based on family income and situation. Families of children with special educational needs (SEN) or disability can choose either public (municipal) or private ECEC operator, yet in practice, only few of them are in private services (Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; see also Ahlgren-Leinvuo, 2016, p.11).

In Nordic Educare model, teaching, education, care and support services are daily interlinked and provided in one setting (see Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010). The basic principle for Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education is children's right to instant and effective educational support as soon as their needs are identified. Finnish ECEC is provided in all three official languages, Finnish, Swedish and Sami and when needed, a child is entitled to ECEC arranged

in sign language (FNBE, 2016; FNBE, 2014). Moreover, every child, irrespective of SEN, is entitled to an individualized pedagogical document, which is an internationally divergent practice. Individualized pedagogical documents aim to plan the education for children and taking under consideration their unique needs, strengths and wishes. Moreover, through drafting of a plan, systematic and target-oriented education is ensured for all. For more detailed description of documentation practices in ECEC and pre-primary education, see Heiskanen, Alasuutari and Vehkakoski (2018).

Finnish education system is committed to the values of inclusion (Kovanen, 2002; Viitala, 2001 p.81). All children have a right of access to shared ECEC services irrespective of SEN, disabilities, family's socio-economic background or family situation. This right covers 20 hours of ECEC attendance per week for all children yet often, when a child has SEN or disability the hours of participation are extended in order to offer more comprehensive support for a child. The shared services include both shared learning environments and curricula. In practice, children do not necessarily go to the nearest kindergarten or preschool. Moreover, transition to primary school, especially from the point of view of inclusive education, is found challenging (EASNIE, 2016, p.17). The importance of play, peer-interactions and social inclusion of children and parents are highlighted in ECEC practices (Suhonen, Nislin, Alijoki & Sajaniemi, 2014; Viitala, 2014).

Special Education programs and support services

In Finnish educational system, the individual assessment of SEN forms a starting point for supporting children individually instead of relaying for example to disability-related interventions. However, as characteristic to the Finnish ECSE, municipal differences have been notably as shared guidelines and standards of arranging ECSE and identifying SEN have been lacking (see e.g. Pihlaja, 2009). Moreover, Finnish ECEC and ECSE have struggled with the insufficient and comparable statistical information about children's needs,

identification of SEN in municipalities as well as the provided supports for children (see Pihlaja, 2009). According to the previous national report of National Institute for Health and Welfare (NIHW, 2017), approximately 7% of children in Finnish ECEC would be identified as having SEN in 2016. In the same report, 88% of the municipalities reported that they provide sufficient pedagogical supports for children with SEN or disabilities (NIHW, 2017). In 2016, 9% of children in ECEC had a multicultural or immigrant background with the 2% of growth from 2013 to 2016 (NIHW, 2017). This can still be considered as a small percentage as compared to many other countries (Arvola, Reunamo & Kyttälä, 2017). The increase in the number of children with immigrant background is one of the key developments that is expected in Finnish ECEC and ECSE in the future (see also EASNIE, 2016, p.18).

Despite the variation in municipal practices, in Finnish ECEC, children with SEN or disability typically participate in ECEC in regular class with peers with no identified SEN or disability (NIHW, 2017; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). Then, additional resources, as smaller group size, early childhood special education teachers (ECSET) support and/or an assistant as well as individualized instruction and interventions will be provided in children's own class. Children who speak other than Finnish as their first language can also be taught by Finnish/Swedish as a second language – teacher. However, according to legislation, special classes and centres exclusively for children with SEN or disability can also be formed. In practice, however, special day-care centres or programs, which welcome only children with SEN or disabilities, are absent and special classes are invariably located in regular day-care centres (see Pihlaja, 2009).

In accordance with the ideas of early intervention, Finnish children with SEN and disabilities and their families may have a right to receive other services, such as therapy, medical care and disability allowance. However, Rantala, Uotinen and McWilliam (2009) describe,

referring to Rantala (2002, p.192) that Finnish early intervention “has characteristics of professional-centered and sector-based practices”. This can be understood as a lack of cooperation between sectors and professionals as well as lack of support in families natural environments and children’s everyday settings. Pre-primary education needs to be arranged also when a child is hospitalized. ECEC services are also available in the biggest hospitals in Finland yet this is not regulated by law.

Role of teachers in ECE

Due to the emphases on inclusive arrangements, in Finnish ECSE, general ECEC teachers play a key role in supporting children in everyday life (Kovanen, 2002). ECEC teachers work in teams with ECSETs, daycare nurses and assistants. The importance of cooperation and working in teams has found to be in high significance to the realization of children’s supports (Nislin et al., 2015). In previous research, however, generic teachers’ knowledge about SEN and supports (Viitala, 2001) as well as their planning and assessment practices (Kovanen, 2002) have found to be insufficient. Teachers also report that their initial training did not include enough contents about these matters (Viitala, 2001).

In practice, ECSETs work either as teachers in classes or/and as consultative professionals. Consultative ECSETs support generic staff in creating inclusive and supportive environments, interactions and practices by bringing the knowledge from the field of special and inclusive education to general ECEC groups (see Suhonen et al., 2016, 20). In the Finnish study (Viitala, 2001), generic ECEC teachers acknowledged the consultative ECSETs as their main source of support in working with children with SEN. However, ECEC teachers have reported that, as an ideal practice, ECSETs would center more on working with the children instead of purely consulting adults (Rantala, Uotinen & McWilliam, 2009).

The prevention of bullying is mandatory according to both legislation regulating ECEC and pre-primary education. In pre-primary education, pupil welfare services needs to be catered

and the means of preventing and intervening to bullying needs to be documented in pupil welfare plan (Basic Education Act, 21.8.1998/628, section 31).

Key challenges in working with children with SEN or disabilities

Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education have undergone significant legislative and administrative reformations during the last ten years. First, in 2010, the change in legislation concerning pre-primary education (six-year-olds) regulated significant elaboration. Three tiers of educational support (general, tier 1; intensified, tier 2; special, tier 3) were introduced as an administrative frame of arranging ECSE in pre-primary as a continuum to primary and secondary school (Basic Education Act 21.8.1998/628; see also Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2016). The key aim of the model is that from the first tier, instant pedagogical and instructional arrangements are available. When moving from general to intensified or special, support becomes more individualized and multidimensional (for more detailed account, see FNBE, 2014; EASNIE, 2016).

Considering the reform in ECEC legislation, ECEC and pre-primary education remains to have different legislative and administrative basis for supporting children with disabilities and SEN as the tiered model of support is not implemented in ECEC. In 2015, renewed legislation concerning ECEC (under six-year-olds) came into effect and, for the first time, binding curriculum was provided also for ECEC (FNBE, 2016). This curriculum, alike the curriculum for pre-primary education (FNBE, 2014), is common for all ECEC services irrespective of children's SEN. However, from the point of view of ECSE, only cursory regulations concerning the arrangements of ECSE in ECEC were provided. Also the new ECEC curriculum has been criticized of mainly mentioning inclusion as an overall value without any further definition or guidelines for the provision of support (Hermanfors, 2017). A need for more detailed and consistent regulations considering ECSE is yet acknowledged and recommended in Finnish research over the years (see e.g. Pihlaja, 2009; Rantala, Uotinen

& McWilliam, 2009) and the government has announced a further development of the legislation especially from ECSE's perspective, which will take place in the near future (HE 40/2018).

According to the law, every Finnish municipality needs to make sure the availability of ECSETs. In 2016, 79% of the municipalities reported that they had met this requirement (NIHW, 2017). As one of the key current debates about Finnish ECSE, the role of ECSETs has been in the process of significant change during the last decade. Municipalities are reducing the number of ECSET-led special education classes and altering the role of ECSETs towards consultation-based work. This has raised concerns about the actual realization of support in ECEC as the role of ECSETs in interventions and individual instructions of a child is typically unestablished and undefined (see e.g. Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017).

Further reading and online resources

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