

Finland

Auspices

Central responsibility for the education and care of young children 0-6 years falls to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, assisted by its research agency, STAKES. Early childhood policy is intended to support the development and learning of young children and enable them to become ethically responsible members of society. The National Agency for Education has chief responsibility for the curricular orientation of pre-school education for 6-year olds.

Developments

The ECEC system in Finland is a well-developed and stable system much appreciated by parents. It is characterised by a sensitivity to the rights of the child and an avowed concern for equality and fairness throughout the system. One of its most notable features is the subjective and unconditional right of every child to have a place during the years, 1 to 6, or from the end of parental leave to the beginning of primary school. This unconditional right also includes the right of parents to choose a home care allowance instead of municipal day-care for their child. Services are very affordable to parents. Free, pre-school education for the 6-year olds – based on the “educare” concept in which care, education and instruction are combined – has become a reality since August 2000. There is much commitment across the two involved ministries to the pre-school reform, and much effort has been invested by the National Board of Education in formulating a new curriculum to embrace the pre-school year and the first two years of primary school. In parallel, STAKES is about to develop a curriculum to guide the organisation and content of ECEC programmes. ECEC in Finland is also gaining a foothold as a teaching and research discipline in the universities and polytechnics. Kindergarten teachers are highly trained and graduate after three to four years as Bachelors of Early Childhood Education, some of them going on to Master’s level. Municipalities encourage and fund research, bringing together university researchers and ECEC personnel in common research projects. A new focus for research and the early childhood centres is the broader community and family context of a child’s life. Greater outreach to parents is being practised, seeing them as not only clients but as valued pedagogical partners.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 0.4% (the Finnish background report provides a figure 1.43% of GDP for all ECEC).

Labour force rates: in 1999, 70% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour market. 13% worked part-time.

Parental and child care leave: universal 18 weeks maternity leave + 26 weeks parental leave paid at 60-70% of salary. A further paternity leave of three weeks maximum is also granted, which can be taken by fathers during maternity and/or parental leave time. In addition, for those parents opting not to enrol their children in municipal day-care, a flat-rate, three-year child care leave can be taken, or a six-year partial child care leave.

Attention to children with special educational needs before they enter compulsory school: a) *Children with disabilities:* the inclusion of children with disabilities is customary in all ECEC services, and they have priority admission to services; b) *Children from low-income groups:* the child poverty rate in Finland is 4.3% after redistribution; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* apart from the Swedish-speaking population (6%), there are no significant language or ethnic minorities in Finland. Much attention and investment is devoted to the small indigenous Sami population (only 121 children under 7). New immigrants from Somali and other countries have access to immersion programmes and special courses in schools, but to date, young children from such groups do not generally attend childcare centres, because of family custom or because the present municipal services are not attractive to them. The municipalities in which there is some small concentration of immigrants, for example, in Helsinki and the surrounding municipalities, have begun to make policy to support immigrant families and to create experimental programmes for them.

Provision

The ECEC system in Finland is predominantly public with some private provision. In general, municipalities provide services directly through municipal day-care centres (*päiväkoti*), family day-care homes/places or pre-school groups (the main forms of provision), but they may also outsource to private providers (about 5% of total provision) or support voluntary services, e.g. the play groups provided by the Lutheran Church. Play groups and family circles run by voluntary organisations and the Church are much in demand, as the 1973 Act on Children's Care did not especially mention afternoon care. The municipalities have the obligation to organise day-care (including afternoon care) for all children who need it, but only children under 7 years have an unconditional right to be taken in charge. Parents may also request a private childcare allowance (700FIM per month) to be paid by the municipality to the childminder or day-care centre of their choice.

Every child in Finland under compulsory school age (7 years) has an unconditional right to early care and education, to be provided by the local authority once parental leave comes to an end. This right is scrupulously respected in Finland, and problems of access are found most usually in isolated rural areas in which children may be very dispersed. Affordability is not an issue, as all together, client fees cover only 15% of costs, the rest being subsidised by state and local authority taxes. Parents pay eleven months only per annum, although their child's place is available during holidays also. No fee is charged for low-income families, while the highest fee cannot be more than FIM1 100 per month (c. \$150). Pre-school hours for the 6 year olds are free.

0-1 year: almost all children are cared for by parents or through informal family care.

1-3 years: about 24% of children are in ECEC services during this period, of which 54% in family day-care and 46% in childcare centres. Services are open 10-12 hours daily, and almost all children take full-time places.

3-6 years: 54% of children from this age group attend, generally full-time in childcare centres, with another 12% in part-time provision.

6 year olds: 78% of children currently attend the pre-school class, either in the kindergarten (90%) or in schools (10%, but a growing trend). Forecasts predict that about 90% of the age group (60 000) will participate in the new pre-school amounting to 18-20 hours per week (700-760 hours annual), which began in August 2000.

Child-staff ratios: child-staff ratios are low in Finland: in full-time day-care centres, there should be at least 1 trained adult for every 4 children under 3, and 1 child nurse or kindergarten teacher for every 7 children over 3 years. In family day-care, the ratio is 4-5 children per day-care parent. In part-day services, the ratio is 13 children per one child nurse or kindergarten teacher.

Staffing and training

Lead educational staff in *päiväkoti* settings are trained as pedagogues (social educators) for over three years at tertiary level. Auxiliary staff have an upper-secondary qualification and are trained nursery assistants or paediatric nurses. Heads of centres generally receive further training. Family day-carers are not required to have a qualification, but they are well-protected with the same social benefits as other ECEC staff. At present, a vocational training qualification of 40 credits has just begun for them.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Finland were:

The possible negative effects of the prolonged child home care allowance: many of the children, whom policy-makers would like to see come early into the system, remain at home. The position of their mothers in the labour market is weakened, and domestic stereotypes are reinforced.

The weakness of provision for children outside school hours: the unconditional entitlement of children to day-care did not include afternoon care. Consequently, the majority of municipalities excluded out-of-school care from their list of responsibilities. The parishes (with trained personnel) and voluntary organisations often provide afternoon care, but the leadership and funding of the municipalities is needed.

The variability of in-service training: access to in-service training opportunities depends essentially on the interest shown by municipalities. A more stable base for training needs to be found.

The effective co-operation forged during the recent curricular reforms between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health /STAKES and the Education sector should be continued.

Further attention to the issue of monitoring the ECEC system and evaluating quality: the 1994 Local Government Act decentralised much responsibility for ECEC to the municipalities, generally with good effect. However, governmental and local authorities may wish to consider the need for a national steering system to orient municipal policy, monitor quality and remain in touch with the changing needs of Finnish children and families.