

The Curriculum Process - Case Turku in Finland

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The Curriculum Process

Case Turku in Finland

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Introduction

In Finnish early childhood education and care, many changes have been occurring in recent years (Figure 1). The Day Care Act was drafted in 1973, and things largely remained the same until 2015. On August 1, 2015, the new law, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), came into force. But before that, some small changes had occurred, which ultimately led to the reform of the law. In 2009, the Minister of Health and Social Services and the Minister of Education appointed liquidators to find out what arrangements should be done. Many municipalities had already transferred ECEC from health and social services to the education sector, and this was also recommended in the statement. It concludes that the management of day care should be transferred as a whole from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Culture and Education. This was done in 2013. In 2015, due to the new law, the term *day care* became *early childhood education and care* because services were allocated to support children's development, not simply to provide a service to enable the children's guardians to work.

In addition to the change to the law, attention was also paid to the development of content. The national core curriculum for pre-primary education was renewed in 2014. Pre-primary education providers had to prepare and adopt the local curriculum on August 1, 2016 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017b). At the same time, at the national level, the core curriculum for early childhood education and care was prepared with stakeholders. As stated on the Finnish National Agency for Education's (2016a) website: "The municipality, joint municipal authority or other service provider shall prepare and adopt a local curriculum compliant with this core curriculum at the latest on August 1, 2017" (Regulation 39/011/2016, 2.1).

In Finland, there has existed the subjective right to participate in ECEC since 1996. In December 2015, the Parliament of Finland decided to limit that right so that a child can participate in ECEC more than 20 hours a week if both of the child's guardians are working or studying.

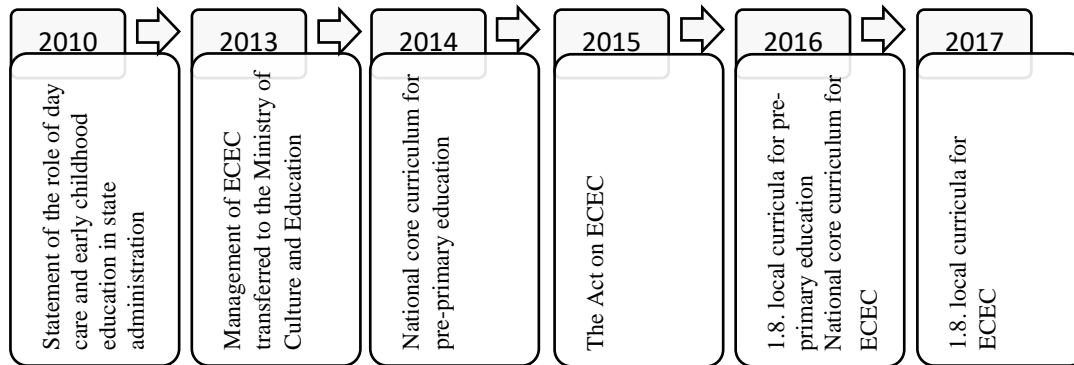


Figure 1. Recent changes in Finnish ECEC.

Also, the teacher–child ratio was raised from 1:7 to 1:8 in groups of children aged 3 and over. The changes to the law came into force on August 1, 2016. In addition to legislative and substantive changes, changes to day care fees have also been made. In Finland, lowering the fees is one way to get more children to participate in ECEC. That is very important, because the OECD's indicators of enrollment rates for ages 2 to 5 in early childhood and primary education in 2015 show that Finland is behind the OECD average (OECD, 2017). Only 70 percent of children aged 3 and over participate in early childhood education (OAJ, 2017). Pre-primary education is free of charge for 6-year-olds (four hours a day). During the autumn of 2017, the government gave the opportunity to volunteer municipalities to register for an experiment in which a 5-year-old's fee for four hours a day would be supported by the government. That means that if the 5-year-old child participates for only four hours a day, the guardians do not pay anything. It remains to be seen how this arrangement is influencing the participation rate.

Because of the changes mentioned earlier, it is time to concentrate on the substance of ECEC. What happens in ECEC is the most important thing for a child in spite of the Ministry or fees. That is why this article focuses on developing content, i.e., curriculum and the process, and how the local curriculum was formed. Before describing the process, the article introduces the Finnish education system in general and the organisation of the education section in the City of Turku.

The Background of Finnish Early Childhood Education

Recently, the meaning of ECEC has been extensively examined. For example, new research about physical activity shows its importance for children's health and well-being. As it is written in *Joy in Motion*¹: “Three years of age marks the most crucial phase in terms of establishing a physically active or sedentary lifestyle. The patterns of behaviour and living that are established up until the age of three will stay with us into adulthood” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the new national core curriculum for early childhood

¹ *Joy in Motion* is a new physical activity and well-being programme for early childhood education.

education and care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016a) emphasises the importance of the years from 1 to 6. ECEC is part of the Finnish education system.

After the administration of ECEC transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in 2013, ECEC has strongly strengthened its position among education and teaching services under the mandate of the Ministry of Culture and Education. ECEC is seen as a basic part of the Finnish education system. The change has also made transitional phases easier, especially from pre-primary school to basic education. Though pre-school education has been defined by the Basic Education Act (628/ 1998) for a long time, it has been rather difficult to develop the common operational culture between pre-primary school and basic education. It can be seen that the curriculum reform in 2016 was a turning point in the concept of lifelong learning. The National Core Curricula for pre-primary education and basic education was renewed at the local level by both kindergarten teachers and school-teachers. By doing so, teachers learned to know each other's work, and that also increased their understanding.

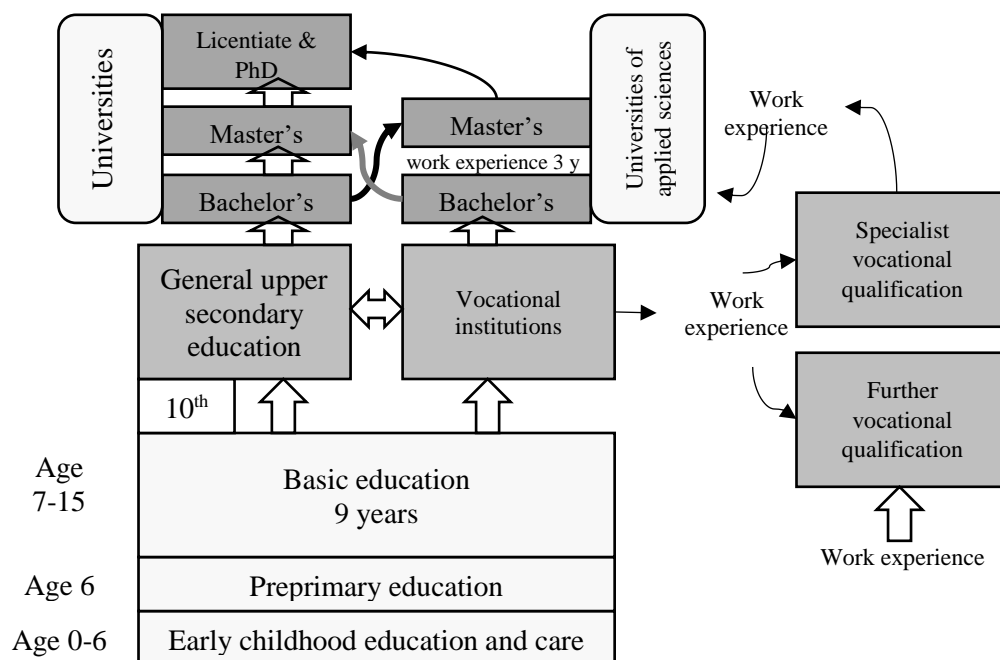


Figure 2. The Finnish education system (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017d).

In Finland, children go to school in August of the year they turn 7. This is why some of the figures or tables in this paper show the age of ECEC from 0 to 7 years. In Figure 2, there can be seen the great possibilities of the Finnish education system. After basic education, a child can choose either general upper secondary education or vocational institutions. The choice they make at the age of 16 does not prevent them from going to university later if they want. The path is different.

As mentioned earlier, after the reform of the national core curriculum for pre-primary education, the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care was also published in 2016. Pursuant to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (36/1973), the national core curriculum for ECEC is a national regulation and every provider has to make a local curriculum based on the national core curriculum. Compared to earlier, the curriculum is now the national norm. Every provider and person working in ECEC has to follow it.

Table 1

Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 0-7 Years (Hujala & Puroila, 1998, p. 13, variations by the author)

Administration	Institution	“Programme”	Staff	Ratio
Ministry of Culture and Education	ECEC centres	National core curriculum for ECEC and local curriculum based on core curriculum	Director: 3 years, bachelor’s degree (from 1996) Director’s assistant: one of the teachers Teacher: 3 years, bachelor’s degree (from 1996) Nurse: 2 years vocational institute	0-3 years, 1:4 3-7 years, 1:8
	Family day care		Supervisor of family day care: 3 years, bachelor’s degree Family day care provider: Further qualification	1:4 plus 1 half-day child (age 6-8)
	Other forms of ECEC		Different educations	
	Pre-primary education	National core curriculum for pre-primary education and local curriculum based on core curriculum	Preschool teacher: 3 years, bachelor’s degree School teacher: 5 years/ master’s degree	1:13

The Contents of Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care

The main issue in Finnish ECEC is the creation of equal possibility for holistic growth. Pedagogy is apparent in the entity of education, instruction, and care. That’s why there are no discrete subjects or lessons, as the learning areas are included in the daily work. The target of ECEC is aimed at the personnel; therefore, the child’s individual ECEC plan lays out what the personnel should do to support the child’s development. This is a very significant shift compared to the previous procedure.

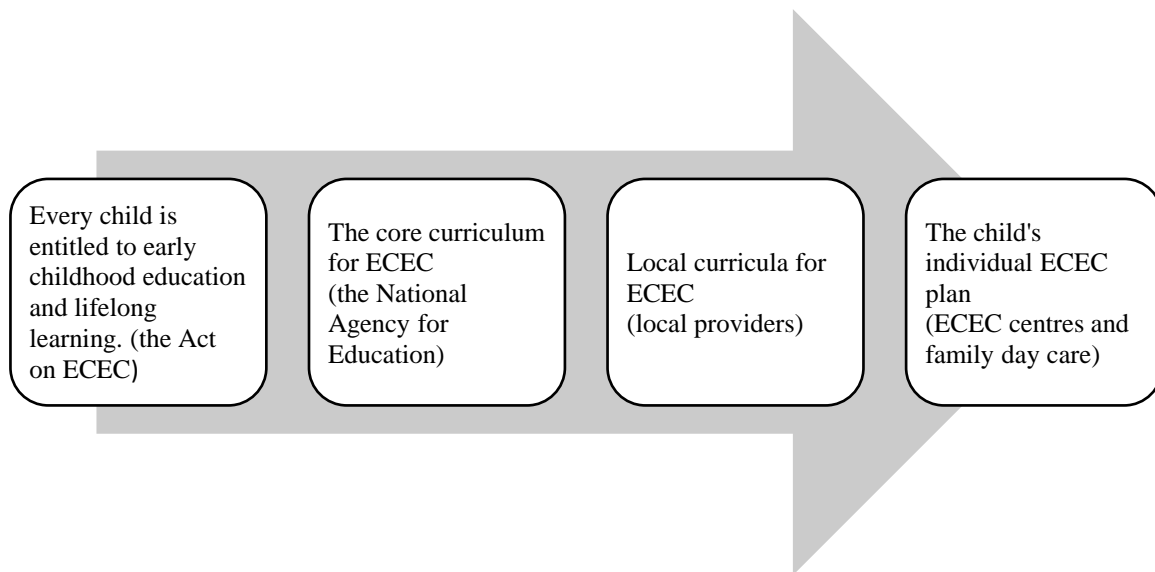


Figure 3. The idea of implementing the Act on ECEC at a practical level (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2017b).

According to the Act, the aim of ECEC is to:

1. promote the holistic growth, health, and well-being of each child as determined by his or her age and development;
2. support the child's prerequisites for learning, and promote his or her lifelong learning and implementation of equality in education;
3. carry out versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts, and cultural heritage, and enable positive learning experiences;
4. ascertain that the child's early childhood education and care environment promotes development and learning and is healthy and safe;
5. safeguard an approach that respects children and stable interaction relationships between the children and the ECEC personnel;
6. provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care, promote gender equality, as well as help the children develop their capacity to understand and respect general cultural heritage and each child's linguistic, cultural, religious, and ideological background;
7. recognise the child's need for individual support, and provide him or her with appropriate support in early childhood education and care if the need arises, in cross-sectoral cooperation when necessary;
8. develop the child's team and interaction skills, promote the child's ability to act in a peer group as well as guide him or her towards acting responsibly and sustainably, respecting other people, and becoming members of society;
9. ensure that the children get an opportunity to participate in and influence matters concerning them; and
10. act together with the child as well as the child's parent or other guardian to promote the child's balanced development and holistic well-being, as well as to support the parent or other guardian in educating their children.

At the end of each chapter, there are issues subject to local decisions. Each provider has to write the local curriculum while following the instructions. Regarding the aforementioned aims, the Finnish National Agency for Education (2016a) states: "The local curriculum shall describe how the task and general goals of early childhood education and care described in

Chapter 2 (ECEC centres, in family day care, or as other forms of ECEC, such as club and play activities) are implemented in the different forms of ECEC services” (p. 28).

The underlying values of ECEC are “(a) the intrinsic value of childhood; (b) growth as a human being; (c) the rights of the child; (d) equity, equality, and diversity; (e) diversity of families; and (f) healthy and sustainable ways of living” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016a, pp. 21-22). Learning takes place in interaction with other children and adults, and children can learn when they feel secure and the emotional environment is supportive. In addition to the entities of education, instruction, and care, there are also *transversal competences*. *Thinking and learning* are developed through versatile and meaningful experiences. The personnel must create the contents with children so that the joy of learning will remain. Next, *cultural competence*, *interaction*, and *self-expression* are very useful skills when children are growing up among different cultures in a diverse world. By encouraging the children, the personnel also support their social skills. Another task of ECEC is to strengthen children’s skills of *taking care of oneself and managing daily life*. Children learn how to act responsibly and safely in learning environments and amidst nature and traffic. Additionally, the role of information and communication technology is constantly increasing. Children need multiliteracy as a core competence. Because of the previously mentioned factors, *multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology* are very important. Children have to interpret and produce various types of messages. Finally, *participation and involvement* are important to a child’s future. Active and responsible participation requires skills which can be learned in childhood by supporting the gradually developing ability of participation and involvement. When the personnel are sensitively present and listen to what children have to say, children learn interaction skills.

Each child has a right to systematic and goal-oriented education. An individual early childhood education and care plan is prepared for each child in ECEC. It is made together with the child and his or her guardians. Before getting together, the personnel observe the child at an ECEC centre or in family day care. When discussing the child and his or her needs, both the guardian’s and personnel’s views are taken into consideration. The plan is prepared in the child’s individual ECEC discussion. At this point, the child’s previous individual ECEC plan is evaluated. The child’s strengths, interests, and needs are the basis when writing a new plan. In that plan, there must be goals for activities and measures to achieve these goals.

The Act on ECEC also mandates the evaluation of the service. The provider has to take part in external evaluations. The external evaluation is made by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), which is an independent government agency responsible for the national evaluation of education. In the spring of 2017, FINEEC clarified the practices of quality management and self-assessment of early childhood education providers. Its report revealed that only 67 percent of providers had a systematic self-assessment approach, though the Act on ECEC has required evaluation since 2015 (Mikkola, Repo, Vlasov, Pananen, & Mattila, 2017). At this moment, FINEEC is creating a specific evaluation system only for ECEC. This is because the FINEEC thinks that common assessment frameworks (such as CAF and EFQM) cannot be useful for developing ECEC.

In Finland, it is normal for children to spend many hours outdoors playing and learning—even if it’s raining. The landscape near the ECEC centres is seen as a learning environment. There are, for example, groups that spend all day outdoors. These groups may have some kind of hut where the youngest children can take a nap when necessary.

Early Childhood Education in Turku

The current Education Division organisation model is described in Figure 4. The total number of children and students of the education division is 61,700, of whom 5 percent speak Swedish as their mother tongue. Eleven percent of all children and students speak a foreign language (other than Finnish or Swedish) as their first language. The total number of personnel of the education division is 3,600 (Communication team of the Education Division).

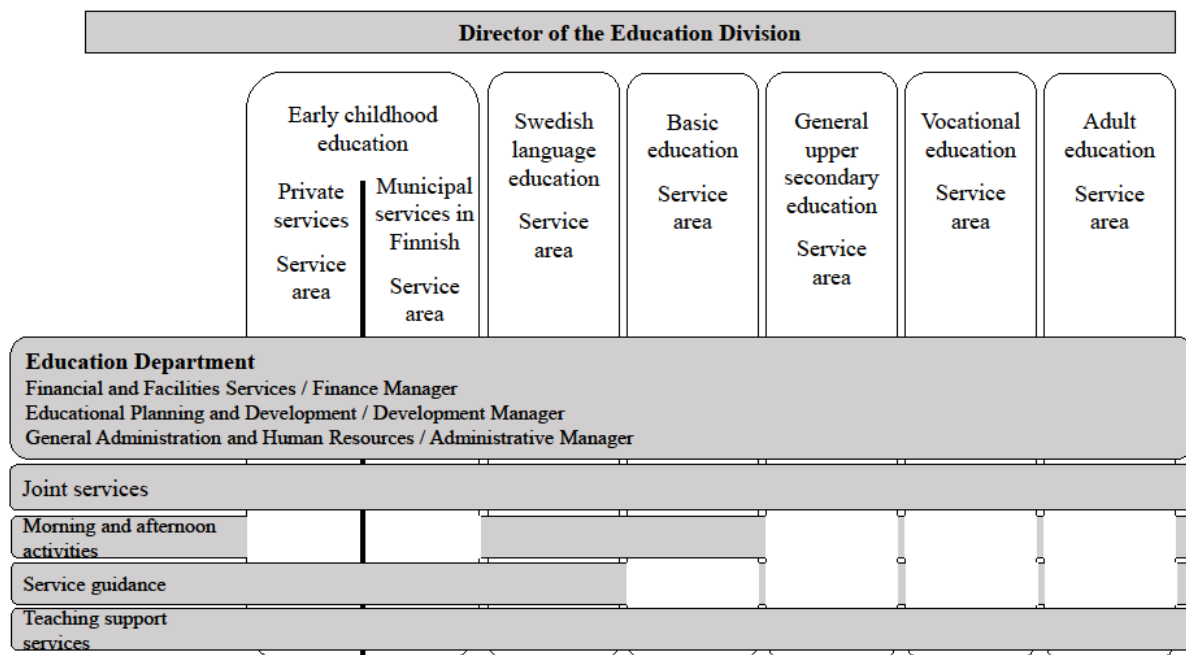


Figure 4. Education Division organisation in the City of Turku.

Following is the vision and mission statement of the City of Turku (Turku, n.d.):

The City of Turku provides diverse and high-quality educational services, based on the needs of the clients and society. The Board of Education strengthens the attractiveness of Turku and the Turku Region and promotes the well-being, life-management and activeness of its people. (para. 1)

The values of the City of Turku are customer orientation, know-how and creativity, responsibility, equality and justice, and internationality.

In Turku, ECEC was transferred from Social and Health Services to the Education Division in 2010. Since then, the organisation has changed. There was a purchaser–provider model from the beginning of 2011 until 2015. The current Education Division organisation model is described in Figure 4. There are three service areas that include early childhood education: municipal services in Finnish, municipal services in Swedish, and private services. According to the Act on ECEC, the municipality is obliged to supervise private services.

In addition, the ECEC organisation has changed over the years. Previously, there were many ECEC areas. Afterwards, due to the various changes, there were four ECEC areas (northern,

southern, eastern, and western). Since the beginning of August 2015, there are now only two areas: northern and southern (see Figure 5). The district chiefs of those areas are the managers of ECEC centres. Municipal ECEC in Swedish is a part of Swedish language education.

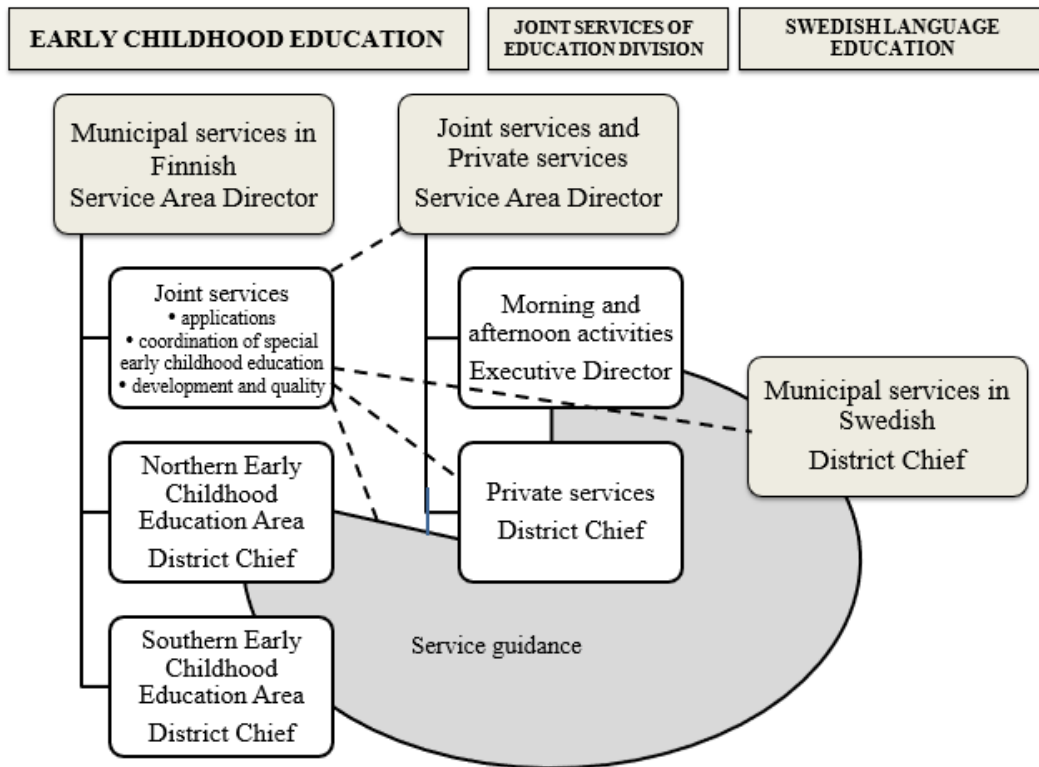


Figure 5. The organisation of ECEC in the City of Turku.

The organisation is very complicated, because there are joint services of the Education Department which also serve municipal services in Finnish and Swedish. Then there are the joint services of ECEC, which also serve municipal services in Swedish and private services. The situation is described by the dotted lines in the organisation model in Figure 5. Though service guidance belongs to the joint services of the Education Department, it serves all clients of ECEC.

In Turku, there are 48 municipal “units” of ECEC in Finnish, 4 municipal “units” in Swedish, and approximately 70 private providers. In addition, there are about 80-90 persons who offer private family day care. In municipal services, there are about 60 persons offering family day care. The unit means that there is more than one form of early childhood education, for example, ECEC centre and family day care, or ECEC centre and park activities (other early childhood education and care). ECEC centres may include special or integrated groups for children from 10 months to 6 years. Pre-primary education lasts 4 hours a day, and very often children take part in ECEC in addition to pre-primary education. There are also open day care centres for children and their guardians together. Very often in Finland one director has to lead many ECEC centres or different kinds of early childhood education and care. This is referred to as *distributed organisation* (Soukainen, 2013). The number of children participating in ECEC in the City of Turku can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

The Number of Children in Early Childhood Education and Care in Turku (31.12.2017)

	Early childhood education and care (ECEC centres, family day care)	Number in pre-primary education
Municipal services in Finnish	5,406 children	1,351 children
Private services	2,296 children	207 children
Other forms of ECEC, such as club and play activities	452 children	-
Total	8,154 children	1,558 children

The Curriculum Process in 2017 in ECEC in the City of Turku

In the City of Turku, the local curriculum for early childhood education and care was updated in 2013. Pursuant to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the Finnish National Agency for Education published the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care. Throughout the education system, the curriculum reform began in 2012 and is still ongoing. Though the local curricula have been in use since 2015 (pre-primary and primary schools), the changes in operational culture take time. This article focuses on the curriculum process in ECEC in the City of Turku. It started in 2015, just after the pre-primary curriculum process.

Luckily, two persons from the ECEC of Turku were invited to a multiprofessional working group in the Finnish National Agency for Education to “create” the core curriculum. The Finnish National Agency for Education created the “roadmap” (e.g., timetable and process) to help providers develop the local curriculum. Two representatives from the ECEC of Turku took part in this work at the national level. As such, in Turku, the administration of ECEC was well aware of the current state of the process. The Finnish National Agency for Education organised four workshops. The themes to be discussed in the workshops varied. Participants were invited to the workshops in accordance with the topic to be discussed. The workshops took place in late 2015 and early 2016, and the themes were the following: (a) the role and general principles of ECEC, (b) early childhood operational culture, (c) the basics of transversal competences and principles of implementing pedagogical activities, and (d) the content of ECEC and principles of implementation. The timetable was very tight, with the work starting at the national level at the end of 2015 while the core curriculum was meant to be ready by the end of 2016. It wasn’t any easier at the local level: the providers had to enact the local curricula on August 1, 2017.

By working at the national level, the important aims of the workshops were easily implemented at the local level. In Turku in February 2016, the steering group was set by the director of the Education Division. The leader of the curriculum process was the service chief, who took care of development and quality. The service chief made a process plan, and also a form to assist the discussion in ECEC centres. The themes for that discussion came from those workshops at the Finnish National Agency for Education. Such proaction in the process in Turku helped a lot. The personnel had time to discuss the themes that had not been in the curricula before. These themes included participation, child-initiated pedagogy, and

guardians' involvement. A OneNote platform was opened. The memos of those discussions in ECEC centres were meant to be saved on that platform. The deadline was the end of February 2017. Figure 6 outlines a simple description of the process.

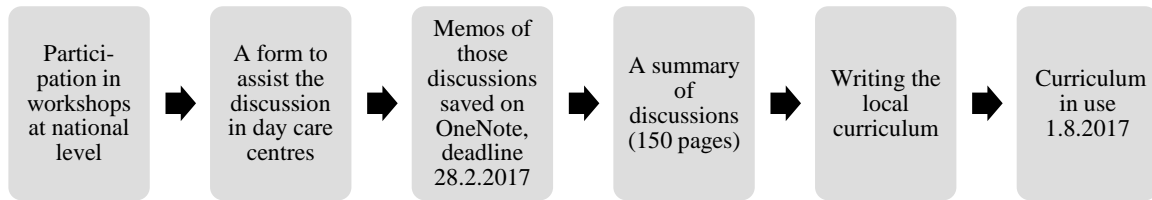


Figure 6. The curriculum process in Turku.

Access to the OneNote platform was also granted to personnel who worked in private services. Meetings took place around the city during the autumn of 2017. In those meetings, the service chief, who led the process, introduced the contents of the local curriculum. One person in the development department drew up a visual expression of the local curriculum. This picture can be seen in Figure 7.

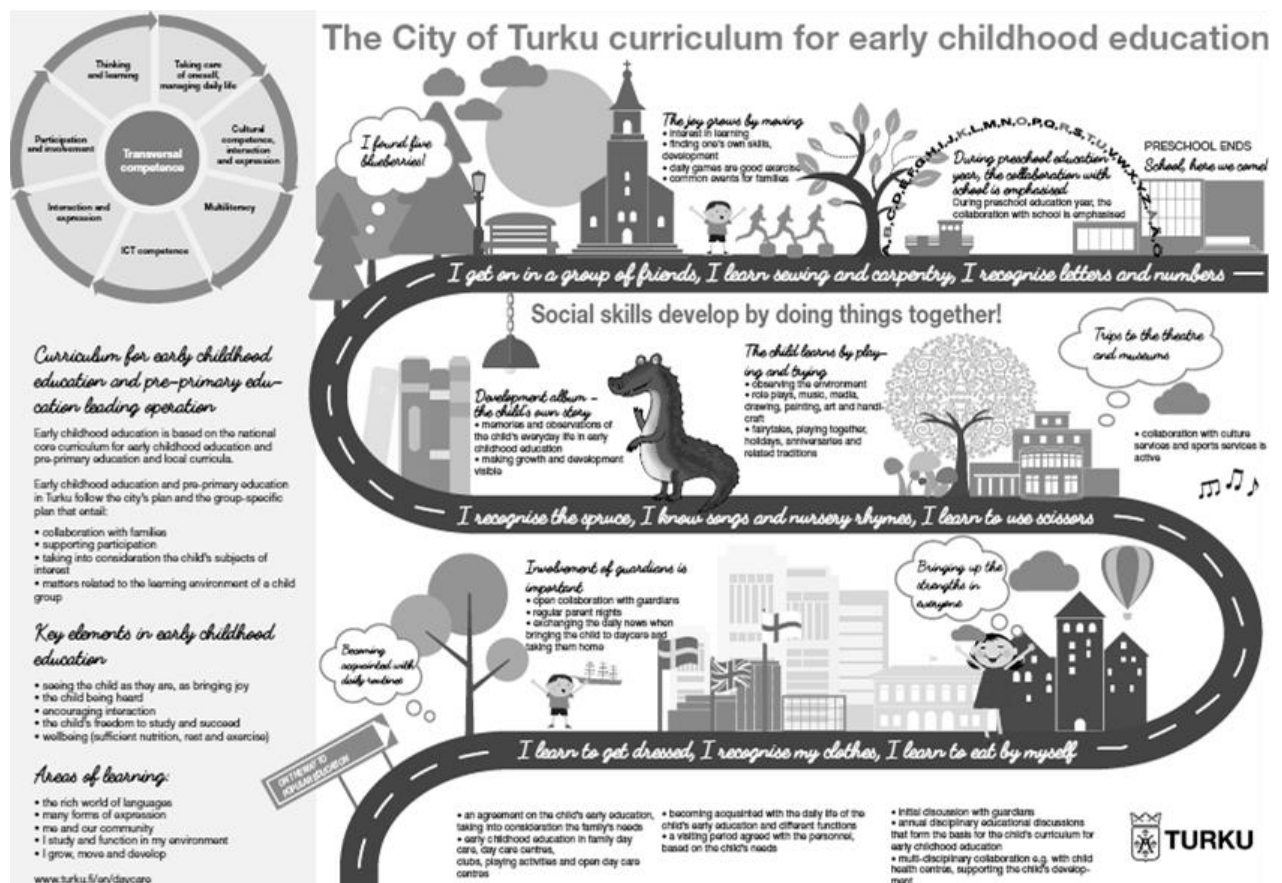


Figure 7. Visual expression of the curriculum of ECEC in the City of Turku (Turku, n.d.).

The following text describes the text in detail:

ECEC is a very important stage on the child's path of growing and learning. The City of Turku is an environment filled with history and culture with churches, museums, parks, forests, the river and suburbs.

A child can learn different things through playing and trying: how to get dressed, how to learn to eat by him- or herself, how to draw, how to know different songs and how to use scissors, as well as recognizing letters and numbers. Open collaboration with guardians is important, as is exchanging the daily news when bringing the child to the ECEC centre or family day care and taking him or her home. Children become acquainted with daily routines. ECEC is also meant to bring up the strengths in everyone: Every child can! Social skills develop by doing things together. The areas of learning according to the national core curriculum for ECEC are: (a) the rich world of languages, (b) many forms of expression, (c) me and our community, (d) I study and function in my environment and I grow, and (e) move and develop.

Discussion

The curriculum reform process was carried out within a short period of time, both at the national and local levels. At first, the idea of this kind of model or process seemed very hard to implement. After all, this wasn't an entirely new thing, because the process of preprimary education had just been finished. The discussion of values and learning concepts had just been completed. And there was the previous curriculum for ECEC from 2005. The difference was that the old curriculum was not based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. There are many differences if we compare the new curriculum with the old one. The main difference probably lies in the goals for ECEC, and also that the curriculum is a norm. By assessing the ECEC at the local and national levels, personnel in ECEC in Finland can develop both the operational culture and their way of increasing the participation.

I have described the ECEC as the starting point of lifelong learning. The starting point differs from basic education in many ways, though the curriculum reform has also followed through all the levels in Finnish education. In ECEC, the child's individual plan is made for every child together with her or his parents. In that plan, the personnel do not evaluate the child as in basic education. In ECEC, the aims are laid to the learning environment, the methods the personnel use, and the context of ECEC. In ECEC, the participation of the whole family is different from basic education. The personnel work as teams and the activity is child-initiated. I—among many others—think that basic education has something to learn from ECEC.

Ulla Soukainen is a trained Kindergarten teacher. She has served as the director of a day care centre (both Kindergarten and family day care). She received her doctorate in early childhood education leadership in 2015. Currently Ms. Soukainen is a service chief in Early Childhood Education in the City of Turku, where she develops the contents of ECEC and pre-primary school and supervises the quality process.

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