



Ensuring Warm and
Inclusive Transitions

WP2 – Local Policy Baseline Report Finland

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APRIL 2022



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



1. Introduction

The aim and focus of the report

This local policy baseline report describes and analyses the Finnish transition policies and practices. We will mainly focus on the transitions from early childhood education and care to pre-primary and furthermore to basic education. These transitions phases have recently been developed both at the local and national levels. In addition, the political attention has been focused on this phase and many policy reforms concerning this phase of the educational system have recently been piloted or implemented.

Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on:

- 1) the policy analysis of legislative acts and official guidelines issued by Finnish Parliament, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Agency for Education and Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
- 2) the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved at the national and local levels of administration and provision of ECEC services in Finland.

At the national level, 3 interviews were organized in August 2020.

At the national level, the interviewed officials represent

- The Ministry of Education and Culture (2 people in a joint interview)
- Finnish National Agency for Education (1 person)
- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2 people).

All interviewed officials have a significant role in the current or future policy reform.

At the local level, four interviews with the local administrators representing the ECEC and pre-primary services as well as the basic education services were organized in August 2020. Altogether, seven people from four municipalities were interviewed.

All interviews were conducted via Teams. The duration of one interview was an average one hour. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview themes were designed together with the InTrans -partners instructed and guided by the WP's coordinator University of Bologna. However, the themes were modified into the Finnish contexts. Thematic content analysis was used when analyzing the data.



The structure of the report

The report consists of four sections. First, we describe the Finnish early childhood education and care, pre-primary education and basic education system. That is followed by the description and analysis of the transition policies. The third section presents the main findings of the interview analysis. Finally, we conclude our findings and discuss them.

2. Finnish policy context and dynamics

One of the basic principles of Finnish education is that all people must have equal access to high-quality education and training. The same educational opportunities should be available to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or where they live. Education is free from pre-primary to higher education. ECEC service fees for publicly provided ECE are regulated by law and are heavily subsidized by the government. The fees are based on household income, family size and whether the child attends ECEC full-time or part-time. In addition, families are entitled to a discount if they have more than one child attending ECE services. There is no service fee for low-income families. (Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care 1503/2016.) Most institutions providing ECEC, pre-primary and basic education are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal consortia. Responsibility for educational funding is divided between the State and the local authorities. Most private institutions do not differ from those that are publicly maintained. They follow the national core curricula and qualification. (See more Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Agency of Education 2018 <https://www.oph.fi/en/statistics-and-publications/publications/finnish-education-nutshell>)

During the last decade Finnish Early childhood education and care and the Pre-primary system has been renewed in many ways. The administration has moved to the education sector and the ECEC legislation and national curriculum guidelines have been revised. The main aim of all these changes has been the revision of the function of ECEC and pre-primary institutions as well as their position in the whole national level education system of the country. Also, the basic education system has been developed but the changes have not been so broad than they have been in ECEC and pre-primary system. In the following section, we describe the national, regional, and local steering system of ECEC, pre-primary education and basic education in Finnish context. The education system is considered from the transition perspective.

Finnish education system and key steering documents

The foundation of the Finnish education system is on the early childhood education and care system for 1-5-year-old children. The next step in children’s learning path is the pre-primary education for six- year-old children. Finnish children enter basic education in the year they turn seven.

Table 1. illustrates the Finnish situation and presents the main legislation or steering documents at above mentioned levels.

TABLE 1. REGULATIONS AND GUIDANCE IN FINNISH EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Ages	0-5-year-olds	6-year-olds	7-year-olds
System level	Early Childhood Education and Care	Pre-primary education	Basic Education
Legislation	Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018)	Basic Education Act (628/1998) Basic Education Decree (852/1998)	
Curricula	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2022)	National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (2014)	National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014)

The main players that form the basis of steering for Finnish education system are Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Agency for Education, Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, Regional State Administrative Agencies, National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health and municipalities. We will clarify their roles and responsibilities in guiding, supervising, and evaluating early childhood education and care system (see Figure 1), pre-primary education system (see Figure 2) and basic education system (see Figure 3).



Early Childhood Education and Care

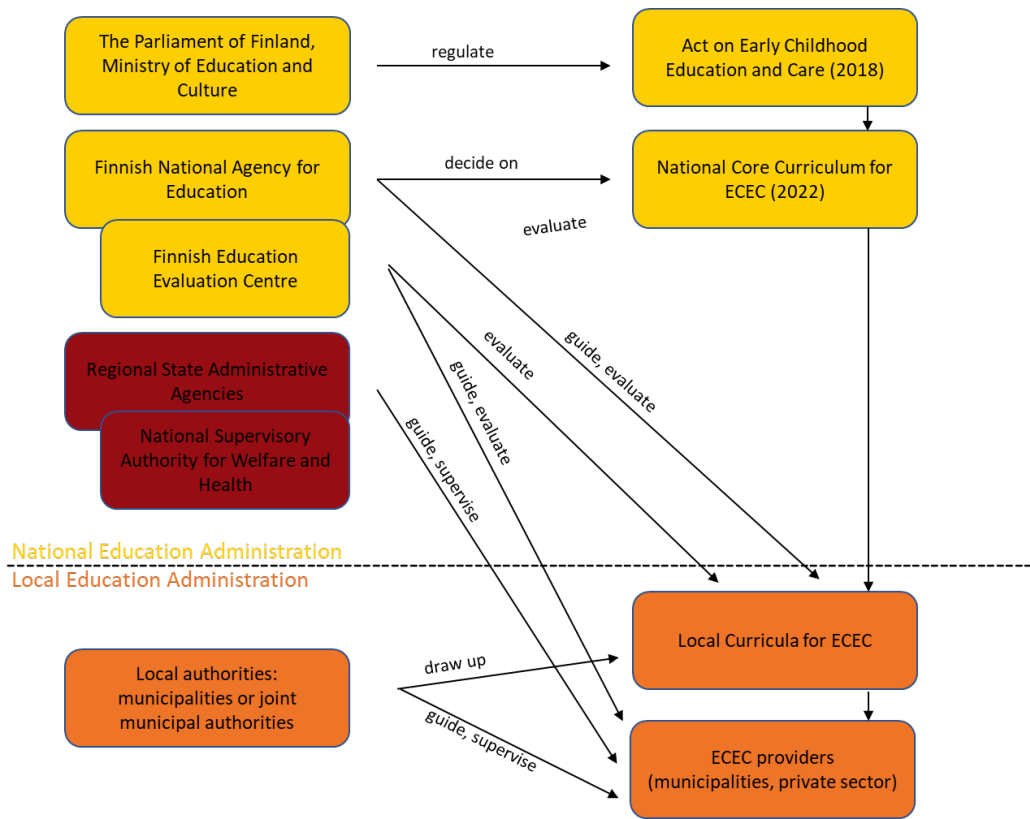


FIGURE 1. FINNISH ECEC STEERING SYSTEM (ADAPTED FROM REPO ET AL. 2018).

The national steering system of ECEC has undergone major changes in recent years. In 2013, the ECEC were switched from under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry on Education and Culture. Since then, ECEC services has been part of the Finnish education system and important stage of the child’s path of growing and learning (National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2022). The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the preparation of acts. A reformed legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018) was enacted the first time in 2015 and it contains provision on a child’s right to ECEC and the aims of ECEC.

Finnish National Agency for Education as an expert authority operate the steering, guidance, and development of ECEC and basic education. The Finnish National Agency for Education decides on the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (updated 2022) that is based on the Act on ECEC (540/2018). The mandatory core curriculum steers the implementation and development of ECEC. The National Agency of Education decides on the core curriculum for pre-primary and basic education. These current core curriculums were launched in 2014. The core curriculum for ECEC, pre-primary and basic education aim to form a consistent continuum and the fact that the Finnish National Agency of Education is responsible for curriculum development at all education levels ensures the continuity of

steering (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). New regulations and practices have been developed to support fluent vertical transitions from home to ECEC services and from pre-primary education to basic education. Also, the pedagogical and curricula continuities have been stressed in the curricula documents. (Karila & Rantavuori 2019.)

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent agency but operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. FINEEC is responsible for the national external evaluations of education from early childhood education to higher education. It also provides support for education organizers in their statutory task of self-evaluation and quality management. Recently, FINEEC has had very active role in developing quality steering in Finland (see more <https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/>).

At the regional level, the Regional Administrative Agencies (AVIs) are responsible for the regional tasks of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Together the Regional Administrative Agencies and National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health supervise the legality of ECEC services. In addition, AVIs provide guidance and short-term in-service training for teaching staff, for example one day training on the new steering document.

At the local level, responsibility for organize the ECEC services is on municipalities. Institutional ECEC is arranged or provided by local authorities (municipalities) or private service providers. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that private ECEC services meet the quality and standards of local ECEC services. The national steering system offers the municipalities broad autonomy. Municipalities and private service providers typically organize ECEC services at a day-care centre, in family day-care or as an open early childhood education and care services, like clubs and play activities. Local curricula are drawn up based on the National Core Curriculum. Municipality can make local elaborations to the local level curriculum, but the contents addressed in the national curricula cannot be rule out. Although teachers must follow the local curriculum, they have pedagogical freedom to plan and teach, use materials and learning environments in the way they find best (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). The children's individual ECEC plan is drawn up for each child at early education centers together by the staff and guardians.

Local authorities have great autonomy in organizing transitions (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). In most municipalities ECEC and basic education are managed by the same administrative branch, that facilitate the development of transition practices (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017).



Pre-primary and Basic Education

The year preceding the start of compulsory education children take part in pre-primary education. Organizing pre-primary education (minimum of 700 hours a year) for children became a statutory duty for the local authorities in 2001 and attending pre-primary education (4 hours a day) became mandatory for all 6-year-olds in 2015. Pre-primary education has become a transition year from ECEC to basic education.

Basic education is typically provided in comprehensive schools that lasts for 9 years and includes grades 1-9. Every child in Finland is obligated to attend comprehensive school to complete their compulsory education. Compulsory education begins the calendar year a child turns seven.

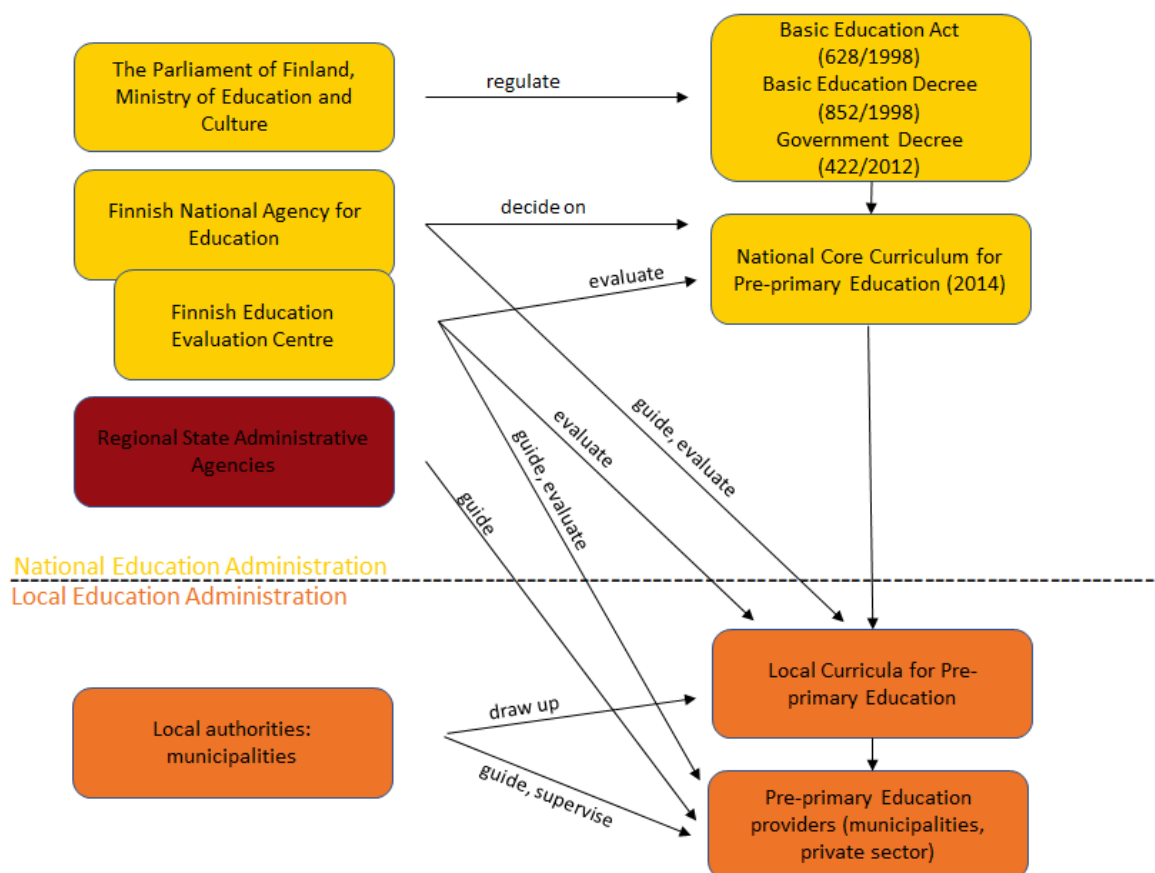


FIGURE 2. FINNISH PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION STEERING SYSTEM.

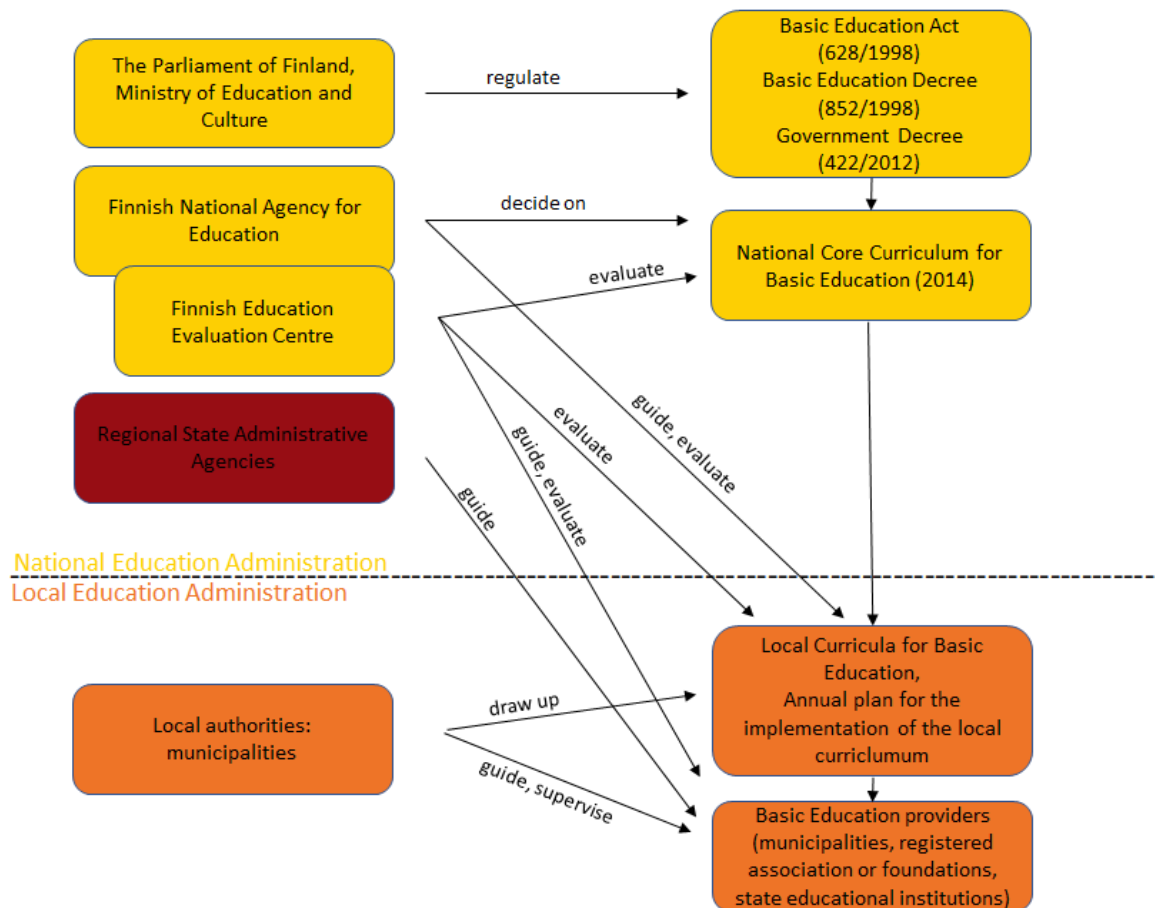


FIGURE 3. FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION STEERING SYSTEM.

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for preparing and amending the Basic Education Act (628/1998) that legislates the pre-primary and basic education. As noticed, ECEC and pre-primary education (as part of ECEC) are guided by different acts. ECEC is guided by the Act on ECEC and pre-primary education is guided by the Basic Education Act. Also, the Basic Education Decree (852/1998) and the Government Decree (422/2012) legislates the objectives and organization of pre-primary and basic education.

The Finnish Government decides on the common national objectives, the subject areas and the division on time used for teaching lessons in subjects in basic education and these are stated in the Basic Education Act.

Under the Basic Education Act, the Finnish National Agency for Education prepares and approves the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education and National Core Curriculum for Basic Education. The core curriculum sets out the objectives and steers the planning of content for pre-primary education. The Finnish National Agency for Education also makes decisions on the objectives and key content of the different subjects in basic education.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre have the same responsibilities in pre-primary and basic education as in ECEC.

The Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) role is to provide guidance on matters related to the legal protection of pre-primary and basic school pupils. AVIs provide also short-term in-service training for teaching staff, for example one day training on the new steering document or policy reforms.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to organize pre-primary education and comprehensive school education for all children in their area. Local municipal authorities organize and fund, with government support, pre-primary and basic education.

Local authorities may also purchase pre-primary education from a private service provider, for instance a private ECEC center. Private basic education providers and state educational institutions may also be granted authority to provide pre-primary education. (Basic Education Act 628/1998.) In basic education the Government may grant registered associations, foundations, and the State the right to organize comprehensive school education.

The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education forms the basis for local curricula. The local education providers, most often municipalities and/or schools draw up these local curricula and an annual plan for the implementation the local curriculum.

Local authorities decide where they organize pre-primary education, whether in an ECEC center or a school. Children attending pre-primary education are entitled to attend complimentary ECEC before or after pre-primary education.

The current situation – Transitions in the Finnish ECEC, pre-primary education and basic education context¹

In Finland, children encounter both vertical and horizontal transitions (see Vogler et al., 2008) during their early years. The best recognized types of transition are the vertical transitions from home to ECEC services and from pre-primary education to basic education. These are also the most frequently investigated types of transition (Ahtola et.al. 2011; Turunen 2012; Rantavuori et al. 2017). In addition, new regulations and practices have been developed to support fluent transitions in these situations. Finnish ECEC legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018) highlights the parents' role as the significant partners of ECEC professionals. Furthermore, the pedagogical and curricula continuity has been stressed in the curricula documents (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014 and 2022). Thus, these two types of transitions are well recognized in Finland.

However, a recent study (e.g. Hietamäki et al. 2017) has shown that children may also encounter other types of transition during their early years. Most of these transitions are so-called horizontal transitions, which occur on a daily or weekly basis. For example, the parents – besides using public or private services – may utilize grandparents as informal caregivers to minimize the daily or weekly length of institutional day care. Another reason for such arrangements may be the parents' aim to

¹ This section is partly based on Karila & Rantavuori 2019. Transitions in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care. In Kauko, Jaakko; Waniganayake, Manjula (Eds.) Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies. 10

reduce day care expenses. In Finland, such horizontal transitions may increase in part due to the various kinds of time-based fee systems local authorities have recently introduced.

Children may also experience horizontal transitions when they move from one location to another, for example in the context of pre-primary education. In many municipalities, the official 20 hours per week of pre-primary education is delivered on different premises from the early childhood education, meaning the children may have to move between buildings during the day. Naturally, such arrangements cause a daily horizontal transition (Kauppinen and Alasuutari 2017).

In addition, recent studies have interestingly described small-scale, daily horizontal transitions (Rutanen, 2012, 2017; Rutanen and Hännikäinen, 2017). These studies show how institutional daily life is full of transitions from one activity to another, which provide many opportunities to bring care, upbringing, and teaching together into an integrated whole in pedagogical practices. However, to manage this process, the professionals must be conscious of the transitions (Rutanen and Hännikäinen, 2017).

Role of parents

Finnish ECEC policy emphasizes the participation of parents. This is manifested both in legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018) and in the core curriculum documents (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014 & 2018). These documents instruct the parents and professionals to create together an individual educational plan for the child. The main principles regarding the parent-professional relationship include the idea of reciprocal partnership (Karila and Alasuutari, 2012).

At the local- and day care center-level, multiple practices have been created to make the transition from home to ECEC services as seamless as possible. The practices mainly aim to support the children, but they also assist parents and professionals. For example, home visits and meetings in ECEC settings are organized in the context of the first transition from home care to out-of-home care. The main goal of these meetings is to enable the children and parents to familiarize themselves with the new environment. In addition, the exchange of information between ECEC professionals and parents concerning the child's habits and the pedagogical practices in the setting is regarded as significant. If parents can do so, they may stay with their child for a few days or a week to help the child cope with the new environment. Similar practices, mainly taking place in the pre-primary education or basic education premises, are used before the child enters pre-primary education or basic education.

Role of teachers

Various kinds of transitions are included in the curricula documents, which stress the teachers' responsibility for implementing and developing fluent transition practices. Working at the boundaries between different institutions – for example, between pre-primary education and basic education – is challenging. Namely, it requires all professionals to learn new ways of cooperating, and such learning cannot be taken for granted. The recent Finnish studies (Karila and Rantavuori, 2014, Rantavuori, 2018, Rantavuori, Kupila and Karila, 2017) pointed out that both obstacles and resources for collaboration can be found in the transition context. In Finland, teachers and local authorities have



high levels of autonomy in deciding how to construct their everyday activities in terms of pedagogical choices, planning practices, and learning materials. This freedom challenges collaboration at the boundaries of pre-primary education and basic education because teachers in basic education have a history of teaching alone whereas pre-primary education staff are used to working in a team. Furthermore, the stronger power position of professionals in basic education was evident in the joint planning meetings examined in the study. Moreover, the knowledge of ECEC teachers was under-utilized in the cooperation (Karila and Rantavuori, 2014, Rantavuori, 2018, Rantavuori, Kupila and Karila, 2017).

National- and local-level governance of pre-primary education and basic education nowadays falls under the same administration, which can facilitate deeper collaboration in transition phases. In addition, the processes of constructing the local curricula offer opportunities for professionals to collaborate and create shared knowledge. However, these collaborative processes require high quality leadership that needs to be developed both in pre-service and in-service education. In all, these governance- and curriculum-related structural elements create a smooth context for everyday collaboration, and they help to enable pedagogical and professional continuity. In some municipalities, the local authorities have aimed to proceed further and have developed practices that aim to break down the traditional age and institutional boundaries between pre-primary and basic education. For example, they have tried to ensure fluent transitions by organizing joint lessons for children in pre-primary education and basic education. Such practices aim to take each child's individual development into account more effectively. However, as mentioned earlier, there are three different curriculum and legislation context in which the transitions take place.

The Finnish country note on transitions – an analysis of the situation

One analysis of relevant policy documents and description of the steering, planning, organization, and the objectives of transitions has been published in Finland's country note (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). The key points in this analysis are the following:

Policy Context

- In Finland, the planning of the transition phases and flexibility for children and families has always been valued. The aim has been that the transition from ECEC to school, for example, shouldn't be too "big of a step." Concerning the values and the participation perspective that has been emphasized over recent years, we have been concentrating more on children's and parent's transitions, in addition to developing co-operation between staff and different services. We have become more aware of the vertical transitions.
- In Finland we have become aware of the complexity of transitions. The pedagogical meaning of transitions has been highlighted and emphasized. Transition has been included in the curricula documents.
- Aims and practices of the transitions and the ways how transitions are evaluated are decided at the local level. It is important that the plans concerning local ECEC and basic education



have common guidelines about the practices related to transition phases. The practices are evaluated and developed through the personnel's cooperation. The feedback from guardians is considered on this development.

- One part of the good transition is the practices concerning data or information transfer procedures. General instructions are on Acts and curricula. It is important that the knowledge about a child's need for support and support received during pre-primary education is also transmitted to basic education. The educational organizers are responsible for creating and developing the practices for smooth information flow.
- Another level concerning transitions is home – ECEC – pre-primary education – basic education – after-school activities. In these transitions, tensions arise from the typical practices on each level and discussing and fitting them together. These tensions are perhaps caused by levels (staff, managers) not knowing each other's aims, practices and so on.
- There isn't specific in-service training for staff (ECEC, pre-primary education, basic education or between them) on transitions. In basic training the curricula are decided by the universities, where teachers are trained. In training of practical nurses there is a national curriculum approved by the National Board of Education but transitions as a theme do not have a significant role in the curriculum.

Professional Continuity

- Managers in schools and ECEC centers are responsible for policies concerning pedagogy and curriculum and for setting aims and practices for transitions. Managers are decision-makers in the matter of transitions and for the decisions also concerning individual children.
- The units of pre-primary and basic education work together to support the transitions. The operational practices are municipality specific. A ECEC teacher of pre-primary education can, for example, discuss the children's transitioning to school with the future teacher (if the parents have granted permission for this).
- In many cases, at the start of ECEC, there are things that the child can "practice" (smooth start / for example shorter time / day) while being at family day care or ECEC centre for several days before entering ECEC. Parents can also be present with the child. This practice phase is usually for a couple of days, but in some cases, it can last up to two weeks.
- The Finnish education system emphasizes support and wellbeing. We have a strong tradition of multi-professional cooperation in promoting children's growth, well-being, and learning. ECEC and school personnel (teachers, principals, heads of day care centres) cooperate with special needs education personnel and social and health care personnel to give the necessary support for each individual child.

Pedagogical Continuity

- All three (ECEC, Pre-Primary and Basic Education) national curricula stress that it is important that early childhood education and care, with pre-primary education being part of it, and basic education form an entity that proceeds consistently in terms of the child's



growth and learning. Therefore, there are similarities in curricula. For instance, there are goals for transversal competencies in each phase of the educational path. The main difference is that ECEC is integrative/ holistic in nature and basic education is based on subjects.

- The pedagogical approaches typically used to draw on socio constructivist theories, specifically the work of Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987). In Finland there is a core idea that there can be different kinds of emphasis on certain alternative pedagogies (for example Montessori), but these must be founded and aligned on the national curriculum and so called “general pedagogy.” Teachers are free to use any pedagogical approach they feel is suited to reach the learning and developmental goals stated in the national core curriculum and local curriculum that is based on the national curriculum framework.
- The ECEC represents play and child-directed activities, such as being able to move freely and choose more freely what to do, whereas basic education represents more structured, adult-directed engagement and learning (Salmi & Kumpulainen, 2016). The physical and material arrangements also differ between ECEC and basic education. The child is also positioned in a more active role in the ECEC compared to basic education (Salmi & Kumpulainen, 2016).
- There are no national tests for pre-primary education (6-year-old children) in Finland. Children’s development is constantly monitored through ECEC and pre-primary education, but national tests are not conducted. Some tests may also be used but it is up to the municipality, the education provider, to make the decision on the tests.
- In the ECEC Act there are regulations on children’s and parents’ participation and influencing possibilities. Parents are an integral part of planning their child’s activities in ECEC and during the year in pre-primary education. Also, children’s views are considered.
- A child receives individual help according to his/her needs both in ECEC or in pre-primary education. In the Basic Education Act concerning pre-primary education the levels for support are mentioned: “general” support, intensive support, and special support. A child could also start the school year after (8 years, “late start”) the usual age (7 years) if that is needed. In that case the child is tested by a relevant expert and a written report/statement/ recommendation for a delayed start will be written for him/her. It is also possible that a child could start school one year earlier (6 years, “extended start”). Then the child will usually have two years of pre-primary education (5-7 years) and is usually handicapped.
- Collaboration, knowledge exchange practices, shared responsibilities between pre-primary education and basic education teachers, and the alignment of teaching practices and philosophies between the two institutional contexts are valued in the Finnish education system for ensuring children’s proper transitioning to basic education (Ahtola et al., 2011). In municipalities there are practices where staff on ECEC, pre-primary education and basic education work together to implement curricula and develop co-operation concerning transitions.



Developmental Continuity

- In National Core Curricula there are no specific guidelines on how to prepare children for pre-primary education or basic education. The Finnish “philosophy” consists of thinking that every and all activities in the setting prepares children for the next level, so to speak. Of course, the transition is being discussed with the child and parents. The aim of ECEC and pre-primary education is to support the child’s independence and self-acting and provide skills for children to learn.

At the national level the following main challenges has been noticed (country report)

- The main challenge is to observe and see the Finnish transition system in a holistic perspective, not only as individual parts of the system. It is essential to see the many horizontal and vertical transitions where the child and parents experience various levels of transitions (home – ECEC – pre-primary education – basic education – after school activities....). It is important to see that developing transition is a very large and multitasked theme, pedagogical, developmental, professional (staff, teachers, managers other authorities and stakeholders). One view regarding children transitioning to school from home is that the children’s age in ECEC varies from 1-year-olds to 5-year-olds. The child’s age has a large impact on the transition and its planning.
- Maybe in Finland we lack for the visible and clear national guidelines or policy programme for transitions. We also lack a network of research and good practices of the matter.
- The municipalities are in charge of the ECEC and basic education and the necessary multidisciplinary cooperation. In most municipalities, ECEC and basic education matters are managed by the same administrative branch. This has facilitated the development of transition practices.
- The transition practices vary locally, which is why the matter has been specified in curricula. However, there is still room for improvement locally, regarding the cooperation between the experts representing the different professional fields as well as the operational models. The information concerning the children is not always transferred as quickly and comprehensively as necessary. Further challenges are brought on by the fact that day care centres and schools are often in different buildings and may be located far away from each other. The more modern school buildings are now mainly designed to be community centres, where it is easier to develop a continuum.
- The school start of children from multi-cultural backgrounds should be further developed.
- In Finland, transition to school is often regarded as forwarding information from one institution to another, e.g. from pre-primary education to basic education. The needs of children and families can be overtaken if the focus is on the institutions. The main challenge is to bring the children and their families in the centre and subjects of the transition process.



Recently, shortage of labour in ECEC, concerning particularly teachers and special education teachers, risks the quality of ECEC and burdens the existing professionals working in ECEC. The government has allocated additional funding to increase the volume of ECEC teacher education in the universities.

The recent programmes and experiments to revise the education system and transitions

The inclusion and equality concerns are strongly involved in the current government programme (Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government 2019). As the implementation of the government programme, Ministry of Education and Culture has launched the Programmes for quality and equality in early childhood and comprehensive school education. (See more <https://minedu.fi/en/qualityprogramme>)

The justifications for the programme in ECEC are the following. ECEC lay the foundation for children's future learning; it also levels out differences in learning that stem from their family backgrounds. The objective of the programme is to find ways for more children to participate in ECEC. By enhancing pre-primary education and the first years of basic education, it will improve the early learning of basic skills and provide better support for such learning. The programme is called Right to Learn and its goals are the following: to create equal conditions for learning paths, to promote learning support, to create a more flexible start for learning, to improve the quality of ECEC.

The aim to increase the participation rate in Finnish ECEC has been one of the key ideas of the current and earlier Finnish Governments. In 2018 the Government launched an experiment on providing free of charge ECEC for 5-years-olds for the period 2018-2020. The experiment was extended and continued to the year 2021. The purpose of this experiment was to increase the participation of 5-years-olds and their siblings in ECEC and to promote their guardians' employment. It also aims to develop the pedagogy and service counselling of ECEC. The long-term goals are to strengthen educational equality in Finland and increase participation rate in ECEC. The experiment was evaluated by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (https://karvi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/KARVI_2421.pdf).

Ensuring inclusion and equality is addressed also in the Education Policy Report of the Finnish Government, published in 2021 (see <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-622-8>). The report introduces the government guidelines and the target state for the advancement of education, training and research, extending to the 2040s. One of the goals is to ensure educational equality and the realisation of the children's rights in ECEC, pre-primary education and basic education in all parts of the country. To strengthen the integrated learning path and to enable smoother transitions from ECEC to pre-primary education and basic education, the legislation of ECEC, pre-primary education and basic education should be reformed as a whole.



Discussions regarding two-year pre-primary education have also arisen in recent years. The present programme of Government (Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government 2019) propose to reconfigure pre-primary education and the first two years of basic education into a more coherent system that allows children to move flexibly to the next level after they have gained the required basic skills. As part of this approach, the government examine the possibility of providing pre-primary education over a two-year period for 5-6-years-old children in the years 2021–2024. The aim of this experiment is to promote educational equality by increasing the participation of 5-years-olds in ECEC, develop quality and impact of pre-primary education, investigate the continuums between pre-primary education and basic education, and investigate the impacts of pre-primary education to children's learning potential, social skills and development of healthy self-esteem.

In the summer 2020, the pilot legislation of two-year pre-primary education was on circulation for comments. Critical comments have concerned the necessity to extend the pre-primary education for 5-year-olds. In the criticism, it has been justified that the pre-primary education was developed to support children's learning before the beginning of basic education in a time when the daycare system was based on labor and social policy. Later, the ECEC system has become part of the Finnish education system, the ECEC act has been reformed and curriculum for ECEC has become mandatory. In its present state and extending the pre-primary education for 5-year-olds we maintain these institutional splits between different levels of education system although ECEC have developed to support children's learning and well-being.

In addition, the trial, especially the focus of the follow-up study of the trial, has faced criticism by several interest groups who made their statements concerning the pilot legislation. The follow-up study of this trial, at least at the current known phase, focus rather strong on children's learning outcomes. Traditionally, the mission of Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education has been to promote children's holistic growth, development, and learning, not to make children school ready. Also, many researchers have some concerns regarding to this element of the pilot project.

The National Agency for Education has prepared a pilot curriculum for two-year pre-primary education and it was in circulation for comments in November 2020. The curriculum has been prepared based on the latest research. The curriculum for two-year pre-primary education experiment will come into effect at the beginning of 2021. Then municipalities that are selected for this experiment draw up local curriculum for two-year pre-primary education. The actual experiment started on the 1st of August 2021. The experiment has also been criticized on its strict schedule. More information about the trial https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163006/OKM-twoyear_preprimary_booklet_webFX.pdf

3. Overview of the themes and key-issues emerged from the stakeholders' interview



Repeated policy reforms dominate the interview discussions

As described in the introduction section, many system levels changes have occurred during last decade in Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education system. These changes also framed the interview discussions. Revisions both in the ECEC legislation and the national core curriculum were often mentioned. As such, the comments regarding the aims of the reforms were positive. The revisions were considered to enable children's individual learning path by emphasizing the educational continuity from ECEC to pre-primary and onwards to the basic education. In this context, the unified administration both at the local and national level was seen advantageous.

However, the constantly changing direction of the reforms was regarded as frustrating and difficult to manage at the operative level.

Swaying, going back and forth is a problem. It produces uncertainty. (National level interview)

In such talk, the interviewees often referred to the changes regarding the subjective entitlement for ECEC. These changes were consequences of the Government's political structure and policy.

In addition, the speed of the changes regarding the policy reforms was criticized. At the national level, each Government, and its government programme was described having ambitious goals to improve certain elements in the education system, typically in a very short period. Recently, the focus has been on children's participation rate in the services. Despite the experiment on providing free of charge ECEC for 5-years-olds was still on progress, the new experiment regarding the two-year pre-primary education was started. Both experiments aim to increase the participation rate and lower the expenses the parents have. They also aim to improve the early learning of basic skills and provide better support for such learning. Regarding to the two-year pre-primary education pilot also some concerns were expressed as the following quotation illustrates.

How would we focus on developing the whole ECEC from one-year-old children until the end of pre-primary education? How would it be developed as a whole, especially focusing on the child's whole day and its wholeness? (National level interview)

The rate of change was considered at the local level from more practical perspective. Namely, the local level representatives referred to the difficulties they had in implementing the changes. They described the situation in which they just had managed to implement the most recent change when a new change had come into the agenda.

The big changes in the legislation was made first in one direction and then in the other one. It has been the most difficult matter from the perspectives of the organizer of the services. This ship does not turn as quickly as the politicians may believe when planning these changes. In whole, there has not been enough time for the changes. (Municipal level interview)

The Government's equality guidelines strongly supported by the interviewers



As mentioned earlier, the equality issues are well included in the Government programme and its Ministry level implementation. In the interviews, both the national level and local level authorities expressed their support for those goals and programmes. The government has funded local projects to implement the goals. Therefore, the municipalities have also had financial resources to develop their practices from this perspective. Various kinds of practices have been developed as the following quotations express.

We have had a pilot where we have hired professionals with the social science background. They work at the boarder of education and social services. They have had time to listen to the parents and their worries and give guidance to find the appropriate services to get help. We have noticed that various kinds of professionals are required. It is not enough that we have teachers but also other professionals. (Municipal level interview)

We have had this positive discrimination funding. We have had language and culture interpreters. People who know the children's language which is talked at home. They are the immigrant people who will be trained for this work. At moment, we have 16 language and culture interpreters in our units. Now, during the corona time, this system has been significant when continuously new instructions will come, and we must give information about how to act. (Municipal level interview)

The lack of national transition guidelines emphasized

The transition policies as such were not very often discussed in the interviews. Instead, the focus was more on the aim to build a coherent education system with various kinds of continuums. Regarding the transition practices, the local representatives described their aim to build new units and premises that also physically connect ECEC, pre-primary and basic education institutions. In addition, the aim to build such practices that enables each child to follow her/his individual pace in the pre-primary – primary -transition.

At local level interviews, the lack of national guidelines was pointed out. As the consequence of the lack, a kind of trial and error -proceedings were implemented. The local representatives also described that in the current situations they had had to observe the other municipalities' processes to learn from their experiences. Thus, the local officials considered the national guidelines very significant. Regarding to the established national- local level relationship this strong wish of national level guidelines is interesting.

In Finland, the autonomous and strong position of local level authorities have been one of the key elements in the administration for a long time. Obviously, the rapid and multiple changes in education policies have been challenging for the municipalities especially from the implementation perspective.

Support for special needs must be revised and unified



One reason for the wish to have national level guidelines related to the support for the children with special needs. In the pre-primary and basic education, the definitions and systems of the special needs' support vary. It may cause some problems at the local levels when they develop the smooth transitions practices. Now, the special needs' support system is discussed in a national level working group – as a part of the government programme. The aim is to develop a shared system for all three institutions, ECEC, pre-primary and basic education.

Parents' and children's participation in developing the transition practices

Even though the participation of parents has been officially stressed, there are still challenges regarding how the voices of minority or disadvantaged families are heard in the transition practices. The children's participation in developing transition practices could also be improved. (Karila & Rantavuori 2019.) This topic was rarely mentioned in the interview, which mainly focused on the education system and the professionals' cooperation in transition practices.



4. Concluding remarks

Finnish ECEC and pre-primary system has currently been in the huge transformation process. This fact seems to have some consequences. First, the policy reforms frame the discussions and seem to take most of the human resources both at the national and at the local level. As such, the interviewees were happy with the aims of the policy reforms but addressed criticism towards their speed. Thus, most of the energy had channeled to the system level changes and structural issues.

In all, the development of the first stages of the Finnish education system seems to follow the international trends and discourses that stress the benefits of high-quality ECEC and pre-primary educations for children's cognitive development, and for the positive outcomes in the future educational attainments of children. (See more Lundkvist et al., 2017)

Transitions take place in the broader education policy context, and this provides certain kinds of structural and ideological frames for transition practices. In Finland, the whole ECEC system has currently undergone a process of transformation in which pedagogical functions and the idea of lifelong learning have been highlighted (Karila, 2012; Lundkvist et al., 2017). Consequently, the pedagogical continuity as the main aim of transition from ECEC to pre-primary education and furthermore to basic education has strongly emphasized. This also means that the vertical transitions are mostly talked both in the steering documents and interviews conducted for this policy baseline report.

The Finnish ECEC system is often described as integrated. All children have a subjective entitlement to a full-time early childhood education (ECE) place either in center based ECE or in family day care. (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). However, the integrative aspect is not very strongly involved in the transition phase from ECEC to pre-primary and basic education. Therefore, in the daily life some discontinuities occur. Children, parents, and professionals must organize their daily activities in the context of three various institutions with their own legislation, steering documents like curricula as well as the qualification requirements for the professionals. Therefore, more focus on the horizontal transitions would be required. Also, the implementation of the vertical transitions should be more carefully analyzed.

The transformation in the Finnish educations systems and policies challenges the cultural and historical expectations of the parents' and professionals' views regarding ECEC and pre-primary services and their function. (See also Karila & Rantavuori 2019.) Previously, the function of these institutions was considered to prepare the children to be ready for the school. The current idea of the institutional and pedagogical continuities stresses the school's readiness to take every child and respond to their various kinds of needs.

The Finnish Country Note on Transitions in ECEC (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017) outlines some key challenges. One of them relates to the lack of visible and clear national transition guidelines or policy programmes. In addition, the document notes the local variation in transition practices and the lack of a network for research and good practices. This notion is strongly supported by the local



(municipal) level interviewees. In addition, the national level representatives seem to recognize this need.

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