

**Play-based and phenomenon-based approaches in the Finnish Early  
Childhood Education and Care<sup>1</sup>****Educação Baseada no Brincar e Educação Baseada no Fenômeno na Educação Infantil  
Finlandesa**

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**ABSTRACT:** Since 2005, with the impact of the results of international educational assessments, Finland and its educational system has been the focus of interest for educators around the world and different aspects of the system's functioning and structure have been explored. This text presents two of the key elements in early childhood education and care, learning based on play and learning based on the phenomenon; and how these pedagogical approaches structure practices that support students' learning, and are articulated with the subsequent educational process. Going beyond the mere description of pedagogical practices and not repeat what other researchers have already narrated about the Finnish educational system, the developmental aspects of these practices and how they are articulated with the extensive training of teachers is evident throughout this text.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Childhood Education. Finnish Education. Play-based Learning. Phenomenon-based Learning.

**RESUMO:** Desde 2005, com a repercussão dos resultados de avaliações educacionais internacionais, a Finlândia e seu sistema educacional têm sido foco de interesse de educadores de todo o mundo e diferentes aspectos do funcionamento e estrutura do sistema têm sido explorados desde então. No presente texto, se apresenta dois dos elementos-chaves na educação e cuidado na primeira infância, a aprendizagem baseada no brincar e a aprendizagem baseada no fenômeno; e como essas abordagens pedagógicas estruturam práticas que dão suporte para a aprendizagem dos alunos, e se articulam com o processo educacional posterior. Para ir além da mera descrição das práticas pedagógicas e não repetir o que outros pesquisadores já narraram sobre o sistema educacional finlandês, evidencia-se ao longo desse texto os aspectos desenvolvimentais dessas práticas e como elas estão articuladas com a extensiva formação dos professores.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação Infantil. Educação Finlandesa. Aprendizagem baseada no brincar. Aprendizagem baseada em fenômenos.

## 1 Introduction

When talking about the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), it is commonly expected to see model-schools and very specific practices that could reveal the innovation behind the Finnish good educational achievements. Nevertheless, instead of pointing one specific case – daycare or preschool – that could supposedly be considered as

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innovative due to adopting groundbreaking practices, I find most relevant to discuss practices that can be found in multiple ECEC institutions, which compose the innovation of the ECEC as an essential part of the educational system. In this chapter, I present some of the key elements that underlie the practices implemented in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and I discuss how these practices differentiate the learning experiences and support the following schooling process.

The starting point of this conversation is the brief explanation of how the Finnish ECEC system is structured and functions. The idea of innovation is addressed here from the perspective that the success of the Finnish education is within the alignment of different components, such as the high-quality and continuous education for the teachers and other staff members, research-based solutions for educational challenges and experimentation with different learning methods, respect of the child's developmental process, and the analysis of current social demands. Further, I talk about two important pillars of the Finnish ECEC curriculum - play-based and phenomenon-based approaches. To advance from the mere description of theoretical concepts, activities and routines, and not repeat what previous colleagues have exposed already about the Finnish ECEC (HUJALA et al, 2016), I present examples of how these approaches can be identified in different practices, highlighting how the alignment between theory and practice builds the system of learning and development through education that can be recognized across the country.

## **2 The structure and functioning of Finnish early childhood education and care**

Finland is one of the Nordic countries in Northern Europe and home for over five and a half million people, which are favoured by the right to free of charge comprehensive educational system (from 1<sup>st</sup> grade of basic education to higher education) (for an extensive review on the Finnish education see SAHLBERG, 2015; NIEMI; TOOM; KALLIONIEMI, 2016). This comprehensive educational path supports the development of the individual until adulthood and is considered one of the reasons behind the success of Finnish education (SAHLBERG, 2015). ECEC is part of the educational system and considered an important stage of child's path of growing and learning, but the primary responsibility for children's education rests with parents or legal guardians (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018). Therefore, regarding the provision of ECEC, the situation is slightly different. Institutional ECEC (daycare centres and preschools) is charged gradually based on the parents' income and the

number of children in the family (ACT 1503/2016)<sup>2</sup>. ECEC is partially subsidized and structured in a way to assure equality, and encouraging families with lower income and, thus, in a less favourable economic situation to use the service.

The understanding of how the Finnish ECEC functions encompass recognizing the meaning and the importance of equality for this society. Equality is addressed broadly and crosses all social sectors and services, and is approached through the idea of equity. This means that it is not just a matter of offering services for all citizens, but to assure through different support actions that individuals have access to these services according to their individual needs. Thus, having equal opportunity to enjoy its benefits. The discussions on equality in Finland reach concrete actions and it has been widely recognized for the promotion and development of gender equality (RASSMANN et al, 2018), the maintenance of welfare state (ANTTONEN, BALDOCK, SIPILÄ, 2003) and the understanding of the impact of multiculturalism in different matters such as parents participation in children's school life (LASTIKKA; LIPPONEN, 2016). Additionally, marked by a history of wars, and still facing the challenges of current financial stagnation (WALKER, 2016), Finland understands the need to build the nation through valuing education and the ways to use it on promoting nation development (SIMOLA, 2005). Therefore, this broad understanding of equality supports the implementation of national policies that aim to guarantee access to high-quality education for all people, providing them with the same opportunities to live a fulfilling life in society.

Regarding specifically to the Finnish ECEC, it is often described as universal, meaning that national and local educational policies, as well as practical arrangements are aligned to assure the provision of the service to all children. It is universal since it is defined as a subjective right of all children (PAANANEN et al, 2018), and it can be implemented in a variety of ways, such as the legal entitlement to an ECEC place, provision of free-of-charge service for several hours per week, or even distributed differently according to specific age groups (ALASUUTARI et al., 2020). Equality is also materialized by the integration of multiple services into what is known as early childhood care. For example, social services entailing free of charge health care, material assistance for all newborn and one of the most extensive parental leave in the world are included (KELA, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup>From August 2020 to July 2022 the predefined minimum fee per month is 27€ per child. The maximum fee per month is 288€ for the first (or only) child, 144€ for the second, and 27€ for the third child.

## 2.1 The decentralization and shared responsibility in providing ECEC services

The responsibility for organizing early childhood education and care for all 0–6-year-olds lays on municipalities. The service comprises care, education and teaching, constituting so-called Educare model. It is delivered as part of an integrated package of services (education, social and health) involving and crossing different agents, organizations and policies; a characteristic of the Nordic welfare model (KARILA, 2012), which works as a support measure for children whose developmental is at risk (PÖLKKI; VORNANEN, 2016).

A place in an ECEC centre or family daycare is a universal right, thus assured for all children in Finland (FINLAND, 2018). Public preschool is still the most common institutional ECEC setting but in some cases, the municipalities through the Social Insurance Institution of Finland can provide an equivalent cash voucher or daycare allowance for use at private<sup>3</sup> preschools or private family daycare services. As an alternative to institutional services, parents can choose to extend their parental leave and take the responsibility of their under-three-years-old child's education and care at home. In deciding for home care, parents are entitled to a child home care allowance that enables them to stay home or use other informal care options (PAANANEN et al, 2018). Offering parents a choice on how to provide education and care has been debated in depth within the Finnish context (for an extended sociological review see: SIPILÄ; REPO; RISSANEN, 2010), and is currently understood as one of the many actions to guarantee social equality and respect individual freedom of families regarding their children's upbringing. The central issue in this debate is to consider the particularities of each family and to provide the service that better suits the wellbeing of that specific child (for an overview of the ECEC provision strategies see SALMINEN, 2017). Evidently, the system has limitations, and one of them is in assuring that all children have the same condition to develop and learn despite the different how local enactments of ECEC policies might construct barriers related to the acceptability of the use of services (for further details see FJÄLLSTRÖM; KARILA; PAANANEN, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup>Private preschools are also obliged to follow the same Core Curriculum and guidelines for educational and care services, implicating in similar administrative and pedagogical practices (e.g., requirements for teaching staff, child/adult rate and salary are the same, as well as pedagogical goals) assuring compatible quality. The functioning of a private daycare depends on the demands of each municipality, thus the municipal officials regulate the number and the quality of the private institutions.

## 2.2 Teacher education and training, and research-based solutions for educational challenges in the Finnish ECEC

Within the institutional ECEC system, education has been rethought mainly by prioritizing high-quality research-based professional training and social-democratic stands (MORGAN, 2014). This means that the teacher education degree programs are in constant transformation, and the curriculum is designed driven by the research carried out in the field (MALINEN; VÄISÄNEN; SAVOLAINEN, 2012). The education of Finnish ECEC teachers is carried out inside the academic universities<sup>4</sup> or universities of applied sciences, through specific bachelor degree programs in Early Childhood Education and Care. Finnish universities have national legislation structuring contents, objectives and minimum credits but they are also autonomous to decide how the curriculum is going to be implemented, focusing on how to equip students with the necessary skill for an autonomous action as a teacher, instructor and educator (Act 794/2004, paragraph 18). The selection process is competitive, and high scores on theoretical (knowledge-based) tests are not enough to assure the right to study for this profession. In addition to standardized content-based assessment, candidates for ECEC teacher education (as well as for teacher education in general) can be submitted, for example, to interviews and group-work evaluation as part of the eliminatory selection process. The ability to work collaboratively in a multidisciplinary environment, to solve problems related to the ECEC's reality, and to show the intrinsic motivation to become a teacher for young children is as important as exceptional academic achievements. The studies to become a teacher demand a comprehensive understanding of sociological, developmental, pedagogical and political views of childhood, as well as skills to conduct multidisciplinary work focusing on the children's wellbeing.

Also, teacher education students are required to develop practical skills during supervised pre-service training in selected daycare centres and preschools in different stages of their education, and to conduct research. Conducting research is understood as part of the tasks the teacher education students must master to acquire the necessary skills to develop an autonomous practice. Additionally, in an ideal situation, it is understood that by engaging in research, students are also in contact with up to date theoretical approaches, findings,

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<sup>4</sup>The difference between the education and training offered by universities and universities of applied sciences is the extension of the programs, and the balance between research-based or practice-oriented approaches.

discussions, and working methods. It increases the possibility of research findings being incorporated into pedagogical practices and encourages the students to continue searching for new knowledge from reliable scientific sources (NIEMI; JAKKU-SIHVONEN, 2006).

This set of requirements compose the structure in which teachers are educated, develop their professionalism and teacher identity. According to Soini et al. (2015), it is the careful selection process and internally and intentionally orchestrated teacher-student behaviour (e.g., organizing opportunities to learn), as well as well-designed teacher education (i.e., externally and regulated activities in which the student is involved) that show to be key elements for quality in teacher education within this system. As a result of this process, the professionals working in the Finnish ECEC are trusted, socially respected, and have the freedom to conduct the work as they judge best within the parameters stated in the National Core Curriculum (TOOM; HUSU, 2016). The trust established between society and teachers became a trace of the Finnish culture and identity, which also supports teacher's participation in decision-making processes related to their field of work (PARONEN; LAPPI, 2018).

Municipalities are also responsible for providing continuing education for in-service professionals. In this case, not only teachers but ECEC nurses, class aids, and other professionals working in 'organizational' level responsible for administration and network of schools. All staff in ECEC have the right to take part in periodical training focusing on different matters. The teacher training can address specific pedagogical contents and practices (e.g., digital learning in ECEC, inclusive practices and etcetera) or broader social issues (e.g., changes in educational policies and legislations, promotion of wellbeing in an educational environment, and many others). The training is organized by specific institutions that connect different municipalities from a certain area, providing courses, workshops, lectures tailored to the local needs and social demands. Overall, the staff are encouraged to carry on with their professional development, and although it is known that professional agency consists of several elements (PYHÄLTÖ; PIETARINEN; SOINI, 2015), the constant update in theoretical approaches, as well as the engagement in debates directly concerning education, supports teachers to develop a strong and high competent professional community.

Another important element of the Finnish ECEC professional education is the research-based and problem-solving approach. This topic can be addressed from different perspectives, but here what I would like to emphasize is how research is used to improve Finnish ECEC and how it is aligned to teacher education. Although the Finnish ECEC is seen

as a model, researchers in this field are continuously investigating the field and working towards developing its policies, environments, and practices. ECEC policies are constantly under a thorough analysis and critical review, especially when it comes to understanding how local authorities rationalize on the provision of the ECEC and how practices are implemented front of the current social demands. For example, a recent study analyzing the rationalities and precondition of access in Finnish ECEC revealed three different but intertwined rationales - equality of access for all children, a real need for ECEC, and the parents' choice (FJÄLLSTRÖM; KARILA; PAANANEN, 2020). The study discloses how the parents' position in the labour market, level of concern for the child, and the decision of the parent on their children's education and care work as preconditions for the child's access to ECEC, bringing new perspectives to the wider socio-political discourses concerning universal access to ECEC. Such critical approach supports the constant revision of the system and how it operates, making visible the elements that still need to be further developed and supports the alignment between the different actors involved.

Concerning practices, the main pillars of ECEC practices are frequently under scrutiny. For example, Kangas et al (2019) critically analyzed play-based learning from an operational culture and learning environment perspective and have argued for renewing cultural practices and structures and developing play to enhance not only instrumentalist knowledge and skills but the zone of peer-to-peer engagement. Interpersonal relationships, and particularly the possibility and ability to cooperate in group learning situations is considered foundational for children's survival and thrive in the later schooling process. Likewise, the participative approach (RAJALA et al, 2016) commonly adopted in the Finnish pedagogy is also tested and investigated. A recent study validated this approach by showing how participative practices are strongly connected to creative thinking in ECEC, especially among peers (NIKKOLA; REUNAMO; RUOKONEN, 2020). Such study informs teacher students on the benefits of participative practices, as well as reveals in which conditions and circumstances this approach needs improvement. What the Finnish ECEC informs us is that to achieve high-quality practices the educational system needs to be open to constant evaluation and analysis. Also, research needs to inform educational professionals, supporting the decision making in their practices.

### **2.3 The analysis of societal demands and children's needs during curriculum reforms in ECEC**

Additionally, teachers also take an active part in all the curriculum reforms made for the Finnish educational system (HALINEN, 2018). Educational reforms are conducted under a democratic, systemic and bottom-up process that intersects professionals from the field, researchers, stakeholders and policymakers (AIRAKSINEN; HALINEN; LINTURI, 2017). This structure allows the different views and ideas to be negotiated among all the parties, as well as supports better pedagogically driven financial-technical decision-making. As expected in any nation-wide educational reform, curriculum reforms in Finland are also challenged by the multilayer complexity that it comprises, and antagonistic positions and managerial views on how education should be transformed are also found among different agents of the process (e.g., school principals and chief education officers) (PYHÄLTÖ; SOINI; PIETARINEN, 2011). Nevertheless, Finland is a showcase of an effective democratic process, and according to different studies (HALINEN, 2018; HALINEN; HOLAPPA, 2013), it is the teachers' participation in national, municipal and local (school) levels discussions that guarantee their high-level commitment to implement the curriculum adjustments in local and school-based work.

The participation of teachers and other professionals working directly with children and families allows a broader consideration of current societal demands and children's needs within the curriculum discussions. Turunen, Uusiautti and Määttä (2013) argue that the changes concerning constructions on childhood influence the curriculum discussions and its implementation significantly. It is also argued that keeping track of such changes allows reflection and construction on how education is viewed and enables discussion about the desired future of early years education. For example, the last version of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018) emphasizes even further children's participation and agency in learning, evidencing how children's experiences should be considered for all activity planning. The professional competence and sensibility to identify pedagogical possibilities for fostering children's agency in different situations is an explicit requirement.

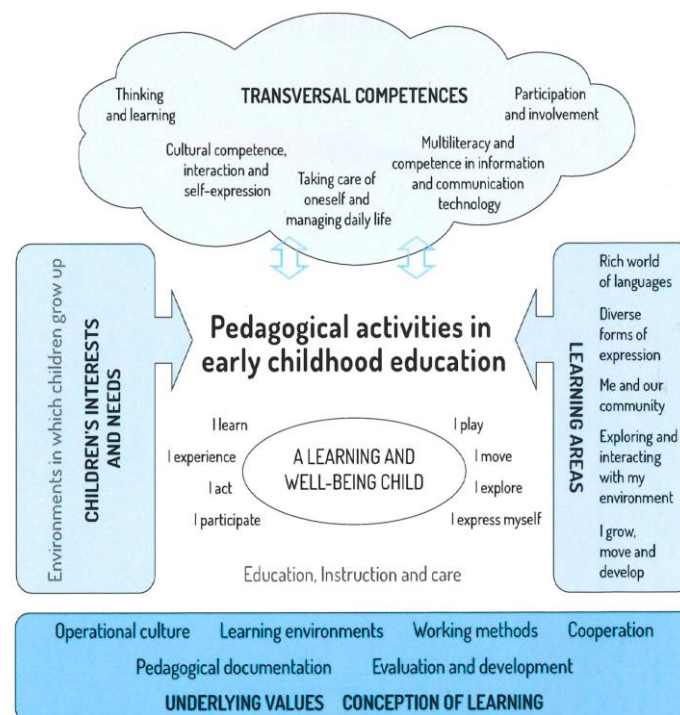
The ECEC curriculum places learning and wellbeing of children in the centre of the pedagogical activities. Both elements are equally important and ground the educational practices to support the incorporation of the child's interests and the multiple learning areas of



pedagogical activities to promote children's overall development (see figure 1). The core curriculum also explicitly states that play is a source of development, learning and well-being, and by doing so it determines that providing children with opportunities for different kinds of play and games is a goal of ECEC. These focus areas of the curriculum development find support in a solid scientific research tradition in the field of ECEC (HYVÖNEN, 2011; KANGAS ET AL., 2019; MÄÄTTÄ ET AL., 2019).

The ECEC institutions had until August of 2019 to adopt a local curriculum following the new guidelines. The core curriculum offers a general guideline for implementing the ECEC services and provides general examples of how play should be a working method and the bases for the child's routine. For example, the curriculum signals that "drama, improvisation and fairy tales can be combined in developing plots for play and constructing imaginary worlds" (p.42) and that nursery rhymes, wordplay, songs should be incorporated in different activities to support learning and well-being. Therefore, play is clearly stated as the key method that allows children to develop critical thinking, language domain and social skills, and is associated with an increasing sense of community, positive emotional atmosphere, well-being and learning.

Figura 1 – The framework for pedagogical activities in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care



Fonte: National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, page 36, open access: [https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman\\_perusteet\\_2018.pdf](https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman_perusteet_2018.pdf)

To accommodate the complexity encompassed in a pedagogical plan, the curriculum provides the possibility for teachers to develop a versatile working approach by implementing several methods to address children's needs. This could be interpreted as a generic and superficial guideline. However, associated with high-quality teacher education the openness for different working methods is precisely what makes the curriculum flexible and adjustable to local demands. The curriculum also explicitly states that teachers should choose how they will work with the children based on what each child requires. Teachers must develop a sensibility to identify pedagogical possibilities in different situations and bring opportunities in children's play for the development of specific knowledge or skill. In this way, the curriculum creates space for multiple operational cultures<sup>5</sup> to co-exist within the ECEC system, characterizing ECEC centres as professional learning communities in which the personnel understand and assess the values, knowledge and beliefs underlying their actions (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018). Working with flexibility and individuality also requires a constant follow up of each child, which is done mainly by practices of pedagogical documentation<sup>6</sup>, allowing teachers' empowerment as professionals, better communication with parents and children, and a guided focus to the children's views and developmental paths (RINTAKORPI, 2016).

Lastly, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre – agency responsible for developing and implementing large scale evaluation processes across the country – has published their first guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of the Finnish ECEC (VLASOV et.al., 2019). The nation-wide quality assessment is unprecedented in Finland and currently still under construction. The methodology elaborated for such process foresees quantitative and qualitative methods based on institutional self-analysis and overall development of the learning environment, including the analysis of the continuous education of teachers and other professionals in the field. This method differs from assessment practices carried out in Brazil (e.g., CAMPOS et al., 2011). First, because although there has been already an initiative to implement such process through the national program *Avaliação*

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<sup>5</sup>Operational culture is defined as “historically and culturally evolving way of doing things” (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2016, p. 30). It can be understood as an entity comprising the principles and practices resulting from the interpretation of norms and goals, the affordances from learning environments and interactions within the organization.

<sup>6</sup>Continuous process of systematic documentation of observations, documents and its interpretation, which allows a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical planning, its different implementation strategies, and the evaluation and development of the activities.

*Nacional da Educação Infantil (ANEI)*<sup>7</sup> (CAMPOS, 2020), in Brazil there is not yet a nationwide quality assessment process. Second, because the quality assessment has been carried out through standardized procedures, utilizing a combination of scales to measure specific indicators of quality, and the assessment is performed by external evaluators.

### **3 Looking at the play-based and phenomenon-based approaches in the Finnish ecec**

Bearing in mind the overall structure of the Finnish ECEC system, the guidelines defined by the national core curriculum, and the observation of different practices, I introduce the play-based and the phenomenon-based approaches as two pedagogical key elements for developing an integrative education and care service. It is not the aim to discuss these approaches extensively, but rather present a general perspective and through examples from different Finnish ECEC practices highlight how the practices enhance children's development and learning.

#### **3.1 The play-based learning supporting children's agency and the construction of equity and well-being**

Play is a dynamic and complex interactive social form of embodied imagination (VYGOTSKY, 1978), which simultaneously requires different complex and symbolic constructions, social collaboration, and production of culture. Many scholars define a playful situation by solely looking at the activity the child is performing, ignoring the setting in which play happens, and this approach has been heavily criticized especially during the last decade (BESIO, 2016). It is equally important to analyze the motivation for play, the freedom to choose what to play, the active engagement for play, and the sequence of events in which this play is positioned in the child's routine (VIEJO; ORTEGA-RUIZ; ROMERA, 2018). Understanding the complexity involving play is the key element to understand the developmental opportunities that play allows, and consequently the path to constructing a pedagogical practice based on play.

The play-based learning is conceptualized as a method (a way to engage children for learning) in which the pedagogical goals (e.g., specific contents, concepts, or skills) are addressed by the 'natural' way of children to interact in the world – by playing (LESTER;

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<sup>7</sup>Ministério da Educação. INEP. Avaliação Nacional da Educação Infantil (ANEI). Brasília: MEC/INEP, 2016.

RUSSELL, 2010). The theoretical bases that support play-based learning can be identified already in the XIX century with the works of Froebel (LIEBSCHENER, 1996), Montessori (1916) and Dewey (1956), passing through Piaget (1962), and Vygotsky (1978). The importance of play in children's learning and development was introduced and elaborated in depth by these and other authors creating a solid argument that children, in different phases of their childhood, use play to understand and communicate with the world, understand their existence and the action-causality relations in their interactions, learn and enlarge their cognitive repertoire, and develop as social-cultural beings.

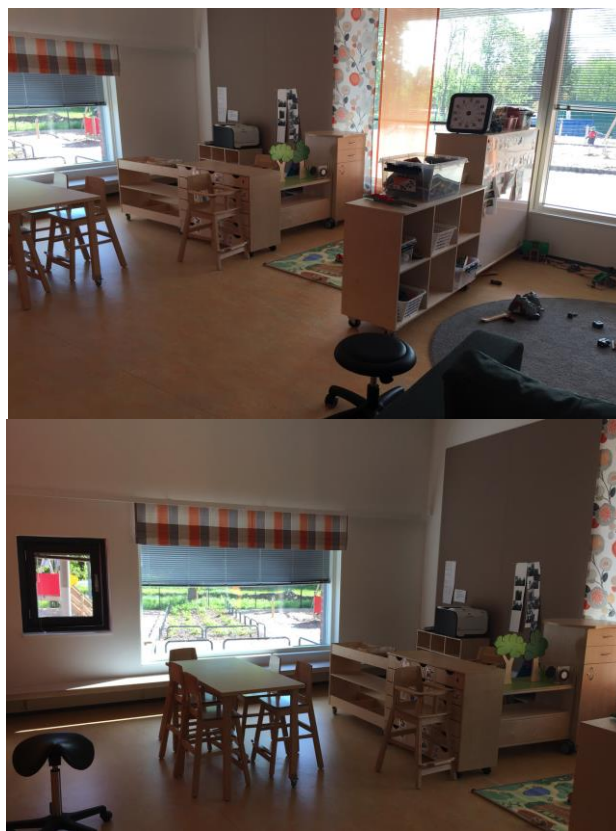
The studies involving play-based learning have evolved significantly and a variety of new knowledge has been constantly incorporated into this framework. Research carried out particularly in Finland has taken a social pedagogic tradition, focusing strongly on children's play and social development with an emphasis on children's agency (BENNETT, 2005). For example, during play, it is possible to identify how masculinity and femininity are evident in kindergarten practices and by working with gender-related issues already in early childhood it is possible to increase gender equality over time (NUGENT; MACQUARRIES; BEAMES, 2019). From a psycho-pedagogical point of view, studies have contributed significantly to understanding how guided-play enhances peer interactions among children with disabilities and children with typical development in inclusive early childhood context (FERREIRA, 2018; SYRJÄMÄKI; PIHLAJA; SAJANIEMI, 2018), and how through a longitudinal study using social network analysis it is possible to identify the incorporation of frequent free-play for supporting children's friendship ties to stabilized over one year (WANG et al., 2019).

Under this social pedagogic tradition, two elements in Finnish ECEC practices are particularly important regarding play. First, play structures the ECEC education, thus the organization of the learning environment is planned to provide as many opportunities as possible for play to happen; time and space for play are not necessarily predefined in children's routine. Second, teachers have a participatory but not directive role in learning; there is a balance between guided and free play, and grouping happens through a participatory process which takes consideration who the children want to play with and when.

Saying that play structures the ECEC services mean that the practices, the environment, materials, time-schedule, and institutional organization circle around the idea that providing the means for children to engage in different play will assure care, learning and development. It means that decision-making processes, which is fundamental for the

education and care to happen, will take into account the necessity of play, organized by teacher under the general guidance of the ECEC curriculum (PAANANEN; RAINIO, 2019). In this perspective, play happens in all spaces of the institution (e.g., classrooms corridors, lunch area, playground, preschool's surroundings and etcetera), thus the architecture of the ECEC institution has to be carefully planned to allow the mobility of children to different spaces composing the overall learning environment. The variety of materials and time destined to group activities takes into account the individual wishes and needs of each child and the possibilities for play in each environment, which are directly connected to the operational culture of each ECEC. Contrary to what many might think, high-tech and digital innovations, and overstimulating learning environments are not the priority in the composition of Finnish ECEC institutional settings. ECEC environments prioritize simple and functional spaces, composed of a variety of different types of objects (toys, materials and furniture) organized in a way to afford multiple experiences throughout different possibilities for play. A common structure for an ECEC group-rooms can be found in figure 2 below.

Figura 2 – Example of a classroom in the Finnish daycare centre.



Fonte: Personal archive of daycare centres in Tampere, Pirkamaan. The publication was authorized by the institution's administrator.

Regarding the time and space where play happens, the play-based learning implies that play is not just part of what children do during the day (e.g., playtime in playrooms or the yard) but it is through play in all the spaces available for children that the activities are organized. In figure 3 and 4 we can see two of the four areas offered for children's activities in a preschool in Pirkamaan area. The corridor in figure 3 is organized in a way that children can explore building blocks and other puzzles that teachers understand to be relevant for this group of children. In figure 4, children are utilizing a corner of the classroom for playing a pretend play with a miniature kitchen set (i.e., miniature stove, table, cabinets and kitchen supplies). Both play situations are happening simultaneously, in different spaces and with distinct arrangements; children are provided with different possibilities to engage in group dynamics, contents and actions.

Figura 3 – Free play with different materials



Figura 4 – Pretend play



Fonte: Personal achieve of daycare centres in Tampere, Pirkamaan. The publication was authorized by the institution's administrator

At this point you may be questioning: but don't all daycare or preschools include play activities? What is the difference here? Yes, it could be argued that the importance of play for children's development is commonly acknowledged, thus all institutional ECEC must, in one way or another, include such practices. Nevertheless, the ways by which play is incorporated in children's routine vary significantly and reveal different perspectives on how play and learning are understood and intertwined. A variety of ways of implementing play activities in ECEC are shown to happen when the time-schedule of the day is planned by the teachers following organizational and administrative demands and focuses on the pre-set flow of learning goals (KANGAS; BROTHERUS, 2017 apud KANGAS et. al., 2019). In such cases, play becomes another activity in children's time-schedule, and not accounted for in the

teacher's plan as an educational activity. Several studies have extensively pointed out the need for understanding play as the action that allows children to learn (KISHIMOTO, 2017; BRUNER; JOLLY; SYLVA, 2017). From children's perspective, learning is a process that happens by doing, by acting and enacting in the world, and it carries an idea that what they learn is important for the 'here and now' (FERREIRA et al, 2018). Therefore, what the practices implemented in the Finnish ECEC tell us is that play is a pivotal tool for the learning process. If the play is guided or free, if it happens inside or outside, or if demands specific materials and environments will depend on the teacher's assessment of the pupils' wishes and needs in everyday bases; will depend on the operational culture in each daycare center.

In the Finnish ECEC, the balance between guided play and free play is established by providing different activities to small groups of children and allowing them to choose which space they would like to explore and with whom they would like to play with. Children's participation in the decision making of their routine is assured by creating dynamics where they can express their wishes; one example is in the morning circles. During the morning circle, teachers ask from the children in which activities they would like to engage during the day, so decision making is shared with children on daily bases. This means that there isn't one unique and specific predefined simultaneous routine for all children; children have the information of the different spaces and activities they can choose from, and by answering to the teacher's question they are naturally dividing themselves into smaller groups according to their preference. Children's names are placed under the picture so that peers can identify where others are and they can negotiate the amount of the time spent in each activity.

The Finnish ECEC also clarifies the role of teachers when constructing a play. The teacher has a participatory role, creating opportunities for play and participating in it not only to support children's social and cognitive development but to assure equity and social justice (PAANANEN, 2017). The teacher, as well as other professionals in ECEC, are responsible for assuring that every child feels included, have space and time to express their opinions and wishes, and share with others the feeling of community. It is important to highlight, nevertheless, that operational culture can vary among institutions, and in some cases result in constrains for the implementation of participatory play-based learning. A study conducted by Paananen and Rainio (2019) exemplified how the implementation of national policies are constrained by local decisions. Therefore, to assure play practices in daily activities they need



“to be intentionally and carefully combined with other local policies and aims posed” (PAANANEN; RAINIO, 2019, p.200).

The expected impacts on children’s development are broad. Particularly, the play-based approach prompts the construction of specific elements that are related to children’s well-being and authentic agency for learning, influencing children’s capacity ‘to act independently’ in the following schooling years (JAMES; JAMES, 2008; MYKKÄNEN, 2016). Three of these elements described in Finnish literature are self-regulation, collaborative skills, and creativity. Kangas, Ojala and Venninen (2015) have shown that when teachers organize participatory play activities, the play provides opportunities for developing self-regulation through the negotiation in the interaction with others. According to the study, teachers supported children’s self-regulation through participation by ensuring children’s independent initiatives and creating opportunities for them to participate in decision making, which provided both social and cognitive support for self-regulatory activities. Self-regulation is one essential skill for formal learning, it supports the development of metacognition, strategic action, and motivation to learn, all which and directly connected to children’s learning outcomes (ZIMMERMAN; SCHUNK, 2011).

Likewise, the play also supports the development of children’s collaborative behaviours (RIIHELÄ, 2002), and creativity (REUNAMO et al, 2013). In Riihelä’s (2002) work, the children’s joint activity and their way of producing knowledge are analyzed extensively, and results show that through such joint plays, children can understand and elaborate complex patterns of human interaction (e.g., expressions, gestures, looks, and rhythms), which regulate social dynamics in learning situations. Collaborative skills are important resources for future peer learning, including interactive situations where children experience significant different developmental paths, such as in interactions among children with typical development and children with intellectual disabilities (FERREIRA, submitted for publication).

As for the development of creativity, the study of play activities in Finnish ECEC shows that the juncture of the freedom to choose and experiment different play environments and the participatory role of adults in play activities prompts children’s creativity. The adults and older children offer behavioural models for the creative process, which can be performed in a variety of ways and spaces (RUOKONEN, 2005). Reunamo et al (2013) also found positive correlations between creativity and personal features such as confidence and



independence, and skills such as concentration and participation. Thus, the study showed that children who are creative in pretend play and tend to be socially skilled and participative and often need less support in language communication, motor skills or metacognitive skills.

#### **4 The phenomenon-based learning in ECEC and the possibility to engage in the world of knowledge and meaning-making through the local community**

The second key point in the Finnish ECEC curriculum is the emphasis on “real-world phenomenon and the environment as a source of learning” (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018, p.48), here referred to as *phenomenon-based learning*. This approach to learning prioritizes creating experiences rather than addressing or exposing the child to one specific knowledge; it uses children’s agency and curiosity, and the idea of complexity as starting points (MEYER-DRAWE, 2008). It can be identified not only in the Finnish ECEC but throughout the Finnish educational system, but it has informed ECEC much earlier than it has been integrated into the core curriculum for comprehensive education. It is important to highlight that the phenomenon-based approach is not clearly indicated as a conceptual framework in the Finnish ECEC Core curriculum. The approach comes implicitly stated in different parts of the document, translated as the intersection between the child and the community. It can be transformed into praxis through the operational cultures in each daycare centre and evidenced particularly within the practices that enhance children’s agency. For example, practices of listening to children’s ideas, perspectives and wishes related to learning, or actions to support environment exploration and collective activities, which exposes children to the real-world environment (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018).

Beyond the idea that children should be exposed to the outside environment and their education and care should be integrated with other social spaces, the Finnish ECEC understands and incorporates the relationship between the child and its community to promote the development of cultural awareness and competences, ethical thinking, multiliteracy and competence in information technology, and participation and involvement. In this sense, neither teaching nor learning can be fully instructed; the task of the ECEC is to provide children with the “capacity to observe, analyze and understand their surroundings” (OPETUHALLITUS, 2018, p. 49), by exploring and interacting with the environment. Children are guided to explore and act in the natural and built environment, understanding the basic principles of its sustainability and collecting the elements they want to further learn

about (REUNAMO; SUOMELA, 2013). Children are also encouraged and supported to develop the ability to describe their observations, which can be examined by the actions of one's body or different devices and images. In other words, the pillar of the phenomenon-based approach is identified by the constant remarks on the importance of the expansion of the child's interest in specific natural phenomena and events happening in its surroundings, and in the guidelines for the transformation of one's perceptual experience into the systematized analysis of different elements that constitute the phenomenon. But how can this practice look like in children's daily life in ECEC?

Children are invited to explore their surroundings on daily bases. This can mean going for long guided walks around the neighbourhood, forests or parks, a visit to a museum, library or cultural exhibitions, or receiving the visit of someone from the community in the school. The important remark here is that these activities are part of children's routine, organized to strengthen children's relationship with its community and ability to act responsibly towards a sustainable way of living (OPETUSHALLITUS, 2018, p. 50). During the exploration children can raise interest in a specific phenomenon, or a situation they have noticed relevant. This situation is extended to the classroom environment and treated as a subject under investigation. Once again, the way children will experience this activity depends on the operational culture of each daycare centre. In the summary below, an example contextualizes how this complex practice can be carried out, highlighting how teachers support children's independent thinking and collaboration.

It is February and children are walking in the forest, exploring the premises near the school. One of the four-year-old in the group gets particularly interested in the ice formations attached to the trees and asks the teacher how can the ice be hanging from the tree's branches. The teacher calls children's attention, and raises the question to everyone else in the group, enhancing participation and checking to see if other children would have the same interest. Children are challenged to think about how this phenomenon happens, recall if they have encountered this event previously, what information have they received on this matter, and where else could they find similar happening. The teacher calls attention to how cold that morning is, and to what is happening to the water in the pond nearby. The teacher also prompts children's memories on how the lake freezes in the winter, and how water can also get very hard, so hard that they can walk on it. Children get excited about the phenomenon and start making different connections between what they were experiencing that morning in the forest (sensory experiences), and other events they have lived in different contexts (e.g., ice skating on the lake, playing with the snow). Back to the classroom, the teacher brings the conversation once again to children's attention – accessing the interest and gathering children's perspectives on what is

important about the event. Children seem to be still interested. They ask questions and propose activities to further interact with the outside environment. Children bring different content to the conversation; some are interested in how the ice can go up there, others want to bring the ice to the classroom. A couple of them have heard that you have to be careful with ice on the tree because it can fall on your head. And one child wants to see if it is the snow that is falling from the sky that is making the funny shapes of ice on the trees.

Further developments are elaborated and in the following days the teacher proposes different activities to inspire the children to investigate the type of natural phenomenon, why, when and for how long does it happen, and to reflect on how this particular natural phenomenon is part of their lives. Once more children present different levels of interest and come up with distinct explanations for the raised questions. According to children's interests and proposals, the teacher organizes different activities such as another walk to the forest to take pictures of the trees, handcrafting the ice figures, using ice cubes to explore the sensation of ice, playing outside and further exploring textures and shapes of snow. Children can choose from the different activities and the teacher mediates the small groups assisted by the other two professionals in the classroom (teacher's aide and the educational nurse). The explanation of the different phases of water and the interference of temperature variation during day and night is not the focus of the teacher's mediation. The focus is placed on the observation of how their surroundings look different depending on the time of the year (how the seasons and its specific weather influences the living matters in the school surroundings), how children can interact with snow, water, or soil and the different plays you can create. The teacher also raises questions on how should children behave in the forest, why is it important that we visit nature and how can we every year, in all seasons we take care of that specific place.

Continuing the activities in the classroom, the teacher asks the children if it would be possible to create the same type of structure in their yard, and what are children's ideas on how that can happen. Children that were not previously actively participating in the discussion have another opportunity to join, collaborate or even enlarge the analysis. Ideas and wishes are considered and the group, supported by the teacher, test the possible ways to recreate the phenomenon. (Description from one of the visits in a daycare centre in Nokia, Pirkamaan)

In the situation described it is impossible for the teacher to directly explore the phenomenon (formation of rime ice) in its entirety, but it is possible to study its concrete articulations in the real world that is part of the child's life. The teacher raised children's awareness of what happens around them and how their actions can interfere, create or modify that environment. The efforts demanded here are located in the alignment between the levels of knowledge construction and how the teachers support its development. The innovation consists precisely in articulating all the elements that are necessary to support the child's

holistic development and active participation in the construction of meanings in the learning process.

Such practices go beyond the mere integration of children's interests into the topics addressed in classroom activities; they provide children with the possibility to develop the experience with the phenomenon they are interested in, test their thoughts, and to actively enact with knowledge construction, laying the bases for the development of critical thinking. The experiences afforded by what is referred to here as phenomenon-based learning in ECEC builds a solid base for the autonomous learning process, allowing children to be aware of their interests, and most importantly, how to gather information, reflect and incorporate the experience with a specific situation in their lives.

The investigation of natural phenomena is a practice widely found in the Finnish ECEC and is considered to be a strong a solid ground for more complex and systematized learning processes later on children's educational life (REUNAMO; SUOMELA, 2013). According to Finnish ECEC curriculum (2018, p. 49), exploring and interacting with the environment from an early age supports mathematical thinking, environmental and technology education, all which will be important in the following years of elementary education (LÄHDEMÄKI, 2018). Preparation for the phenomenon-based learning that children will experience in the future years in school (SYMEONIDIS; SCHWARZ, 2016). In a broad perspective, we can see an alignment between education and care in the early years and elementary education.

Likewise, discussing the elements that are close to children's experiences, and supporting them since an early stage to take their ideas into account, contributes to children's overall participation in the construction of their learning paths, better equipping them to act in necessary changes of tomorrow (REUNAMO; SUOMELA, 2013). Corroborating with Reunamo and Suomela (2013),

If we want children to be equipped to cope with the fast-paced environmental changes in the future, children need to experience their impact on the environment. Children need to practice seeing how their ideas evolve into action. Children need to practice sharing their initiatives with others and see that their initiatives affect the shared environment. [...] By helping children to bring their ideas and motives out into the open for others to work on makes it possible for children to develop their participative skills. By helping children to experience the impact of their initiatives, we help children to develop dynamic ideas that can have real effects on the environment. (REUNAMO; SUOMELA, 2013, p. 100)

As a last remark, the role of the teacher in this approach demands sensitivity and the ability to mediate (bridge) the phenomenon of interest and the diverse conceptual elements that can be explored with it. It demands a rather particular way of engagement, and flexibility in the pedagogical planning, challenging the teacher's professional competences and imposing new perspectives in the teacher-student and student-student relations. When combining the play-based and the phenomenon-based approaches to teaching and learning, the pedagogical practice reinforces the element of **action** and **agency** for learning in ECEC, and children's embodiment and active participation become central features of the daily activities. The sense of agency is understood as a desirable outcome of the educational process and a measure of the quality and intensity of children's engagement (HILPPÖ; LIPPONEN; KUMPULAINEN; RAINIO, 2016). As previously argued, assessing what education does to children's awareness of their possibilities for action is crucial for understanding the quality of the educational process, and teachers play a fundamental role on identifying and acting on this matter (see also LIPPONEN; KUMPULAINEN, 2011; RAINIO, 2010; MARKSTRÖM; HALLDÉN, 2009).

### **Final considerations**

In this chapter, I briefly informed how the Finnish ECEC is structured and operates, and presented two main features of the practices carried out in the Finnish daycare centres. Certainly, the Finnish ECEC can be addressed through various perspectives that take the discussion on innovation to different paths and levels. With this presentation, I made a point that the innovation in the Finnish ECEC is found in the alignment of its structures and operational cultures, guaranteeing practices that support children's holistic development and their preparation for the future educational process.

The Finnish ECEC is already a world-wide well-recognized system, serving as a reference for other countries to reflect on their institutions and services. Applying the ideas and practices of play-based and phenomenon-based learning, children and adults shape the culture of ECEC to what it is today - an environment that allows children to explore different development opportunities, shifting from a static and adult-centred practice to open space for children's participation and awareness of their learning. The achievements established by the Finnish ECEC through its consistent and coherent curriculum, research-based and problem-

solving education, high-quality teacher education and training, and the integrative view of child's development attract international visitors and delegations from different parts of the world. Finnish experts and researchers take part in a variety of international research collaboration, consultancy on teacher education, school curriculum reform, and implementation of Finnish perspectives for international schools. Finland as a showcase, explicit the complexity involving the implementation of a nation-wide high-quality system. From a macro-level perspective, the Finnish system shows the need for coordinating social policies, teacher education pre and in-service training, investments in infrastructure and the constant follow up with research. In a micro-level perspective, the practices implemented in the daily-life of daycare centres, particularly the play-based and phenomenon-based learning serve as a reference for other countries to reflect on the possibilities to enhance children's participation and agency in learning.

The Finnish story is not to be idealized or copied if much it is set to inspire educators globally who are on their journeys to revolutionize education and improve their schools. To be precise, I do not believe that simply modelling Finnish practices in some other socio-cultural contexts would produce the same results, especially in terms of social transformation. The main features of the Finnish ECEC discussed in this article are supposed to provide an informed insight into the system as a whole, and perhaps widen the discussion on the best possible ways to achieve high-quality ECEC. For example, if we consider the current arguments made by many educational experts in Brazil (e.g., FRANÇA, 2018) defending standardized guidelines, materials and pedagogy as the only solution for national educational development and growth, Finland is a showcase of an opposite approach. Nevertheless, it is fundamentally important to consider all the elements that make this approach possible. The decentralized structure, high-quality teacher education and training, and clear understanding of how pedagogical practices can enhance children's holistic development and broad learning experiences, not to mention all, are core part of it.

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