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Stability or change? The long-term construction of ECEC rationales on the governmental and parliamentary levels in Finland

Marina Lundkvist and Mikael Nygård

Abstract

In recent years, Finnish legislation on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been reformed several times as a way of increasing quality and enhancing children's learning and wellbeing. However, little research has been conducted on what this means in terms of ECEC rationales on a national level and how such rationales have developed over time. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse the political construction of ECEC rationales over time by conducting qualitative content analyses of government bills and minutiae from parliamentary debates relating to three recent reforms (in 2015, 2018 and 2021). We argue that although the discourse on ECEC rationales is mainly characterised by stability, there are also elements of change. Rationales relating to equality, lifelong learning and children's rights have remained more or less unchanged, while rationales relating to quality ECEC and parental involvement in ECEC have received a more prominent position since 2018.

Keywords: ECEC, ideas, rationales, Finland, discourse, social investment

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Finland has invested heavily in care services. Universal childcare services were introduced in 1973 as a way of reconciling work and family life for mothers while simultaneously enhancing gender equality. Since the 1990s, however, educative elements have grown increasingly stronger in Finnish childcare services, and in the 2000s the concept of childcare was gradually replaced by the concept of Early Childhood Education and Care (henceforth ECEC). In this article, ECEC refers to the entirety of systematic and target-oriented upbringing, education and care of children, and it has assumed an increasingly prominent role in Finland (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Eerola et al., 2020; Karila, 2012).¹ An important milestone was reached in 2015, when the Finnish legislation on childcare was updated in accordance with a modern ECEC perspective, on both a conceptual and an institutional level (HE 341/2014 vp). This meant that ECEC replaced 'childcare' as the main operative concept and that matters concerning ECEC were transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and

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Culture (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). However, the reforms did not end there, since the legislation pertaining to ECEC was amended again in 2018 and 2021 as a way to strengthen the quality and efficiency of ECEC, for example by improving professional competence criteria for individualised learning (Eurydice, 2021). In other words, the Finnish ECEC system has changed from a more care-oriented system to a more educational-oriented system during the recent decades (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2019; 2022).

To date, the bulk of research related to Finnish ECEC reforms has focussed mainly on the views of professionals (e.g., Heilala et al., 2022), political debates and the arranging of local ECEC services (e.g., Eerola et al., 2020; Fjällström et al., 2020; Paananen et al., 2020, 2023), as well as children's learning outcomes and rights (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2019, 2022), while less research has been done on how dominant ideas about ECEC have been used to advocate for and justify more recent reforms of the national Finnish ECEC legislation. To the best of our knowledge, the only articles addressing such issues focus on international and national policy ideals for parental cooperation within ECEC (Schmidt & Alasutari, 2023) and the Finnish ECEC reforms of 2015/2016 (Lundkvist et al., 2017). Therefore, this article contributes to the existing literature on the ideational drivers of ECEC reform by analysing the main ideas, or so-called rationales, relating to the 2015, 2018 and 2021 ECEC reforms in Finland. Such rationales provide ideational guidance for different policymakers and actors in the form of, for instance, desirable outcomes or the means to achieve such outcomes. More specifically, the article addresses the ways in which such rationales have been used and constructed in governmental bills as well as in the speeches held by Finnish MPs.

We focus on two research questions. First, what were the main rationales regarding ECEC used by the Finnish government and Finnish MPs in relation to each of the three reforms, and what were the main discourses underpinning them? Second, do these ideational constructions suggest stability or change over time? To answer each question, we performed qualitative content analyses of government bills and minutes from parliamentary debates relating to three recent ECEC reforms, in 2014/2015 (HE 341/2014 vp), in 2018 (HE 40/2018 vp) and in 2021 (HE 148/2021 vp).

In the next section, we describe the historical development of ECEC in Finland. In the third section, we discuss ECEC rationales using an ideational theoretical framework. In the two following sections, we present our data and methods as well as our findings. In the final section, we sum up and discuss our conclusions.

The development from childcare to ECEC in Finland

ECEC services constitute a mix of policies and objectives, such as learning, care or play (e.g., Sipilä, 2020). In an historical context, the forerunner to today's ECEC services can be traced back to the late 19th century and the evolution of kindergartens in the early phases of industrialisation. The first kindergartens were mainly located in cities and followed a dual tradition that sought to care for poor and working-class children, but also to use pedagogics for socialising children into bourgeoisie society (Välimäki, 1999). The activities were influenced by Central European ideas (for example, ideas by Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel) on allowing children to learn and to develop socially and emotionally in a free manner by combining play with learning. In the early 20th century, Alva Myrdal's ideas about the social welfare of children and ideas about child protection and children's rights also influenced the development of kindergartens and childcare services in Finland (Sipilä, 2020; Nygård, 2009).

In the 1960s and 1970s, childcare services became an integral part of the modern Finnish welfare state. Consequently, the main ambition of the 1973 Law on Childcare was to increase women's and especially mothers' labour participation and enhance gender equality in a Nordic fashion (Karila, 2012; Välimäki, 1999). One characteristic of the Nordic welfare model was that childcare included a mix of different objectives. On the one hand, it became part of family and labour market policy, which aimed to promote gender equality and social equality. On the other, it became a part of the overall educational system, facilitating learning in combination with play, although remaining institutionally separate from the basic education

system (Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Karila, 2012). As a result of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, childcare services as well as other welfare services and educational services increasingly became committed to the safeguarding of children's rights and to securing their upbringing and participation in decisions concerning their own interests (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022; Nygård, 2009). Along with the investments in publicly provided childcare services, Finland also experienced a gradual increase in the private and non-profit provision of childcare services (Solbu Tratteberg et al., 2021). In this respect, Finland stands out in at least two respects. First, public childcare was combined with a system of cash-for-care benefits (the child home care leave and allowance) and later with a private-care allowance supporting parents' purchase of private childcare services. However, with respect to privately provided childcare, Finland's actions quickly became overshadowed by those of the other Nordic countries (Solbu Tratteberg et al., 2021). Second, the level of childcare and ECEC attendance among Finnish children has been lower than in other Nordic countries, which partly has to do with the existence and wide use of the child home care system (Sipilä et al., 2010).

In the 2000s, the educational element achieved an increasingly more prominent position in childcare services in Finland (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Karila, 2012; Lundkvist et al., 2017). In 2014/2015, after many years of discussion and preparatory work, the childcare legislation was updated, based on an ECEC perspective, to strengthen early education and care (HE 341/2014 vp). However, a couple of years later, in 2018, the name of the legislation shifted from Law on Childcare to Law on ECEC, and the legislation also incorporated policy elements previously covered by other legislation (HE 40/2018 vp). It also strengthened the professional qualification requirements and sought to strengthen children's rights (HE 40/2018 vp). The 2021 reform, in turn, represented an attempt to diversify the ECEC concept and to support weaker children through a three-step model (HE 148/2021 vp). The common denominator of these reforms was the desire to upgrade the overall quality and efficiency of ECEC services, but also using these for increasing social equality among children from different backgrounds (Eurydice, 2021; Sipilä, 2020).

ECEC rationales as ideas for institutional transformation

The ECEC concept has achieved an increasingly prominent position within European welfare states since the 1990s (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014). However, it has remained complex and seemingly in a constant state of flux as different aspects, or rationales, of the concept have been more or less emphasised over time and in different countries (Eurydice, 2021; OECD, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine such rationales and the discourses legitimating them.

A useful theoretical framework in this respect is the ideational framework (Béland, 2010; Béland & Cox, 2010). Put simply, one central assumption uniting this framework is that ideas matter in policy-making and that we can understand policy change by investigating the ideas and discourses legitimating them. Ideas have a cognitive and normative influence on how actors, such as politicians, understand and construct the social world and the policy recommendations they make to change this world (see Fisher, 2003). Schmidt (2008) has suggested three main categories of ideas: specific policy ideas, general ideas, or programmes, and 'public philosophies', or 'world views'. While specific *policy ideas* offer a recommendation or solution in relation to a certain problem, the more *general ideas* and 'world views' relate to larger ideational constructions regarding society, economics or politics, and they also offer a certain normative justification for specific policy ideas.

Based on this categorisation, we define 'rationales' as policy ideas (see Schmidt, 2008) that provide ideational guidance for different kinds of actors in the form of the objectives, means and gains relating to a certain policy – in our case, ECEC policies. Such rationales come in many forms and occur at many levels. For instance, they can occur in the form of policy recommendations by governmental or super-national bodies (e.g., Lundkvist et al., 2017; Penn, 2011; Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023), in the imaginaries or constructions of local practitioners or politicians (e.g., Eerola et al., 2023; Fjällström et al., 2020; Paananen

et al., 2020), or in the minds of ordinary citizens or parents (e.g., Simpson & Envy, 2015). Here, we use the European Commission's (2009) report on the main ECEC rationales as our starting point for developing a modified model of the dominant ideas nurturing and driving ECEC policy (see Table 1). The report is an independent report that gathers research evidence from the NESSE network (Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training) for policy makers throughout Europe. In that capacity, it serves as a valuable analytical tool for assessing how the rationales concerning ECEC are understood and implemented in national policymaking processes (see Penn, 2011). As pointed out by Penn (2011), such rationales, or policy ideas, are used to underpin policies regarding ECEC and to justify expenditure on them. However, she also argues that there is a paradox in using globally related rationales for constructing and advocating ECEC policies on a national level, since the ways we think about children, as well as ECEC, are deeply culturally embedded.

This model distinguishes between ten main rationales, or policy ideas, for ECEC. The first two rationales consider high-quality ECEC services as important for enhancing children's human capital formation and for targeting vulnerable children. The third and fourth rationales emphasise ECEC as a driver of social equality as well as life-long learning and social mobility. Allegedly, ECEC can counteract social inequality in a 'here-and-now' sense, but it can also serve as a social ladder for children through lifelong learning (see Siippainen & Pitkänen, 2024). The fifth and sixth rationales concern the gains from ECEC for gender equality and the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state, while the seventh rationale accentuates parental (and notably the mother's) participation as beneficial for both ECEC professionals and for their involvement with their own children. The three remaining rationales relate to population replacement rates, children's rights and ECEC as a way of counteracting childhood poverty. Although some overlaps do exist between the various rationales, they can be said to reflect important dimensions and objectives and reveal the ideational complexity related to successfully implementing ECEC in a European context (see European Commission, 2009).

However, as mentioned, the different rationales have been accentuated differently across time and space, and likewise the discourses underpinning them have varied. In Finland, for instance, childcare, and later also ECEC discourses have traditionally emphasised rationales relating to social equality and gender equality (Sipilä, 2020; Välimäki, 1999). By contrast, Anglo-Saxon or Continental European discourses, as well as OECD and World Bank recommendations (e.g., OECD, 1998; World Bank, 2003), have generally favoured rationales emphasising investments in children's human capital for securing favourable outcomes as well as other goals related to children (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014). For instance, the OECD's 'Starting Strong Series' (2001, 2006) has acknowledged the dual role of ECEC in creating fruitful opportunities for lifelong learning and supporting maternal employment.

The central idea uniting some of the rationales in Table 1 (notably rationales 1–6) is the assumption that ECEC contributes to growth and competitiveness on a macro level, that it increases children's future opportunities and wellbeing on an individual level, and that it increases gender equality (OECD, 2006; Penn, 2010, 2011; White, 2011). The various rationales also help nurture an (economic) investment discourse suggesting that public investments (in ECEC) are justified so long as they promise future returns, for example lower incidences of social problems or lower amounts of public spending (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2011). Previous research on local policy debates in Finland (e.g., Paananen et al., 2019) supports this assumption, but there is also evidence suggesting that ECEC Finnish policy discourses have become increasingly focussed on the use of evaluation and evidence as methods of seeking higher quality within ECEC (Siippainen & Pitkänen, 2024), as well as parental involvement in ECEC practices (Siippainen & Pitkänen, 2024; Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023).

Meanwhile, the other rationales shown in Table 1 adhere more to traditional ideas of parental responsibility for children's upbringing, pro-nativity, the children's rights perspective and the socio-political objective of reducing poverty.

Table 1. Main rationales of ECEC (adaptation of table 1 in European Commission (2009, p.26))

Rationale	Policy idea	General idea	World view:
1. Economic investment	Targeted interventions in quality ECEC (vulnerable children/families)	ECEC create human capital, enhances learning and life chances	ECEC and human capital is important for the economic productivity and the economy as a whole
2. High-quality ECEC	Targeted investments to increase and monitor quality of ECEC	High-quality ECEC is beneficial for all children but notably vulnerable children.	Quality important in all public services
3. Equality	ECEC is a tool for increasing social equality	ECEC benefits all children, but especially poor and migrant children by enhancing learning and socialization	All children, not only the most vulnerable, should be socially included
4. Lifelong learning and social mobility	ECEC promotes life-long learning and enhances social mobility	Lifelong learning is a way to improve life chances and use social mobility to reach goals in the future	Lifelong learning and social mobility is important for individuals but also for a thriving and competitive economy
5. Maternal emancipation	ECEC facilitates work/family reconciliation and labour market participation for parents, and notably mothers	ECEC removes obstacles for maternal labour participation and promotes gender equality	Maternal employment increases economic independence and self-fulfilment for mothers, which promotes gender equality
6. Maternal economic position	ECEC strengthens mothers' economic position	Working parents contribute to family incomes, contribute to tax revenues and lessen the need for social security payments	Working mothers contribute to the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state
7. Parental involvement	ECEC increases parental participation	ECEC services benefit from parental involvement, but also helps parents to engage in their children	Parental (and notably maternal) participation is a resource for ECEC services but is also important for the child
8. Pro-natalism	The availability of ECEC inspires parents to get children	ECEC is a 'family-friendly' policy that can help to rectify the problem of low birth rates	Welfare states need to secure its demographic reproduction
9. Children's rights	ECEC substantiates children's rights to care, learning, protection, and participation	ECEC enhances a child perspective and children's rights	Children's rights perspective (e.g., Convention on the Rights of the Child)
10. Child poverty	ECEC is a way of indirectly mitigating child poverty	Working parents have higher disposable incomes, which makes children less exposed to poverty	Child poverty undermines material and immaterial wellbeing and future prospects

The social investment paradigm emerged in the 1990s as a policy alternative advocating the need to activate ‘social investments’ as a way of creating a thriving economy and a financially sustainable welfare state (European Commission, 2009, 2011; Jenson, 2009; Morel et al., 2012). The paradigm also accentuates child-oriented investments as crucial for a ‘family-friendly’ society and for children’s wellbeing and development (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002).

Ideas relating to the social investment paradigm became increasingly influential during the 2000s, also in the Nordic countries despite their long history of promoting social investment policies, such as childcare services (Hemerijck, 2017). For instance, as already mentioned, Nordic states made a conceptual shift from promoting childcare to promoting ECEC, stressing children’s early learning and human capital formation (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014). Moreover, ECEC curricula moved away from learning objectives that emphasised solidarity, well-being, play and practical work towards objectives stressing cognitive and language skills, as well as preparing children for school (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Krejsler, 2012).

We can sum up this discussion by concluding that childcare and ECEC services are changing and that the changing rationales constitute one part of that shift. The rationales, in turn, can be understood theoretically as ideas that are imperative for policy change. In the following section, we turn to the empirical question of what rationales were most operational in recent ECEC reforms in Finland.

Data and methods

To answer our research questions, we conducted qualitative content analyses (e.g., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of government bills and parliamentary minutiae relating to the 2014/2015 amendment of the Law on Childcare (HE 341/2014 vp), the 2018 Law on ECEC (HE 40/2018 vp) and the 2021 amendment of the Law on ECEC (HE 148/2021 vp). The main idea here was to investigate the role that the ECEC rationales discussed in the previous section (European Commission, 2009) played in the three reforms, and to what extent there was stability or change in these ideational constructions over time.

The data consisted of government bills related to the reforms, as well as ten protocols from plenary sessions in the Finnish Parliament (see reference list). The data was downloaded from the homepage of the Finnish Parliament (<https://www.eduskunta.fi>), and it was chosen for analysis because it provides detailed information on the background, objectives, ideas/rationales and discourses relating to three of the most recent ECEC reforms in Finland. Thus, the data can be seen as highly suitable for tracing ideational changes over time. However, the use of this type of documentary data also poses limitations on the range of conclusions that can be drawn based on the analyses. One such limitation is that the data only focuses on what is being said about ECEC, neglecting the actual changes or the outcomes of the reforms. Moreover, it should be noted that the way in which politicians make use of ideational guidance, such as the rationales provided by a super-national body like the European Commission, also includes strategic motives adhering to the views of citizens, or, more specifically, voters. Therefore, political constructions of ECEC rationales can be influenced by ideological interests or strategic concerns (see Penn, 2011).

We used a directed variant of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012), which uses theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. In our case, the ten rationales outlined in Table 1 served as guidelines when categorising and coding the data. The analytical process consisted of four main steps. First, it involved a general reading of the data to obtain an idea of the entirety and structure of the data. The second step consisted of coding and categorising the data. In the third step, overarching themes were created that revealed similarities, differences and even opposing viewpoints in the politicians’ statements, with the explicit purpose of finding out whether and, if so, in what way the MPs’ ways of talking about the ECEC rationales changed over time. Finally, the fourth step consisted of interpreting and discussing the results and drawing specific conclusions in relation to our two research questions.

The bulk of the analytical work was conducted by one of the authors, in cooperation with the other,

and during the coding process several briefings were held to recalibrate the analytical process, discuss any problems in interpretation, check inter-reliability and validate the results.

In the following section, the results of the analysis are presented together with textual excerpts from the documents to substantiate our interpretations. The citations were translated from Finnish or Swedish into English by the authors.

Findings

The analysis of government bills and parliamentary debates relating to the three reforms revealed an increasing political interest in ECEC services over time, and this interest focused mainly on five rationales: quality, equality, life-long learning and social mobility, parental involvement and children's rights. As depicted in Figure 1, the five rationales were present in all three reforms, which would suggest a high degree of stability in the political construction of ECEC rationales in Finland.

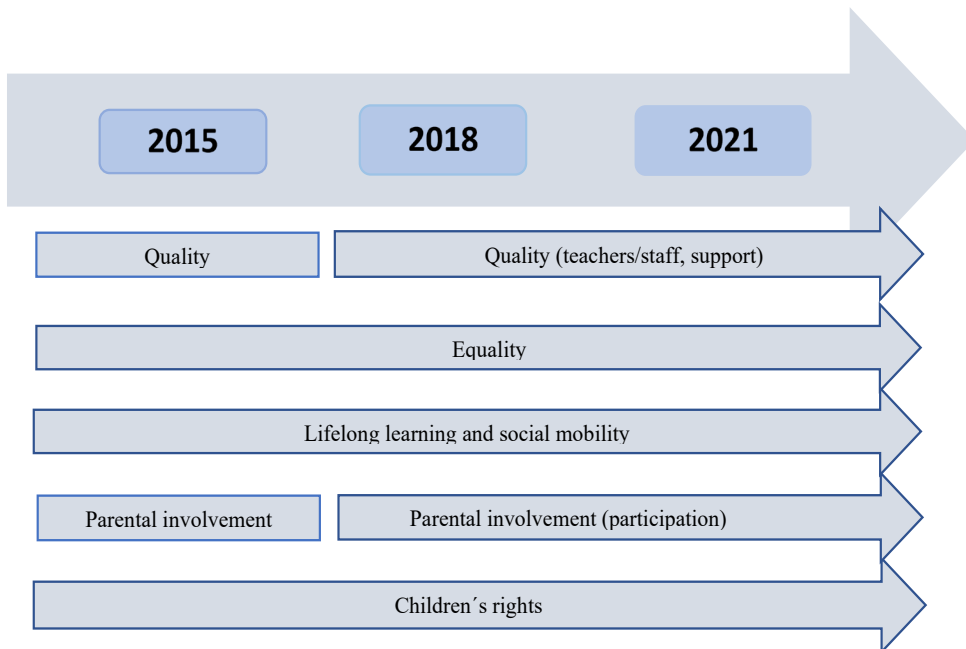


Figure 1. Stability and change in ECEC rationales 2015 to 2021

However, as indicated by the broken arrows in Figure 1, the discourse on ECEC quality shifted somewhat in meaning between 2014/2015 and 2018/2021, becoming more clearly related to quality in terms of higher qualifications for ECEC professionals. Previously, the quality discourse had focused more generally on high overall quality in ECEC services. Likewise, the parental involvement rationale changed between 2014/2015 and 2018, focusing more on the participation of both ECEC professionals and parents, whereas previously experts had viewed ECEC as more beneficial for parents' involvement in their children. In the following subsections, we take a closer look at how the rationales were embedded in the discourses used by the Finnish government as well as the MPs.

The quality rationale

In the bill relating to the 2014/2015 reform, government politicians emphasised high-quality ECEC services as essential for the child's development and learning (HE 341/2014 vp). In this bill, quality was most squarely related to the mainstreaming of national rules and practices within an educative framework, but also group sizes were seen as important for achieving quality. Politicians noted that high-quality ECEC services are crucial for preventing marginalisation, inequalities in ECEC and future learning difficulties. This rationale was also quite prominent in the parliamentary debates relating to the bill. The subject of education was given a central position in discussions on how to guarantee high-quality ECEC, for example by entitling every child, regardless of family background or geographical residence, to a pedagogical plan that establishes specific educational goals for different ages. However, the elements of care and play still retained a position in the discourse, since both the government bill and many of the MPs emphasised that it is important to look at the entirety of a child's upbringing, teaching and care. Moreover, the rationales pertaining to equality and quality were seen as interconnected objectives, since the levelling out of differences in ECEC quality would also help prevent marginalisation and reduce inequality.

“High-quality ECEC prevents marginalisation, diminishes inequalities between children [...] A total renewal of the law is important, because, at this moment, the quality of ECEC varies too much in Finland and across municipalities [...] we can reach this goal with, for example, the help of ECEC plans.” (Mäkisalo-Ropponen [SOCDEM], PTK 135/2015 vp, p. 20)²

Nevertheless, not all MPs were unequivocally happy about imposing demands for higher quality on municipal kindergartens. Centre Party representatives, for instance, expressed some reservations saying that attempts to achieve higher quality in ECEC services might impose on parents' rights to choose child home care as an option and hinder the role of parents in the upbringing of their children.

“The Centre Party highlights everyone's right to high-quality ECEC and the freedom of choice for parents. I fear [...] that this freedom is getting weaker in many ways.” (Puumala [CENTRE], PTK 135/2015 vp, p. 8)

The strong emphasis on high-quality ECEC remained central in the 2018 and the 2021 reforms, but this time it became increasingly associated with information, competence and notably the qualifications of ECEC professionals – things that were all portrayed as essential for ensuring the best interest of children. The government bill accentuated the need for professional qualifications, secrecy and providing reliable digitalized access to information about children (HE 40/2018 vp). In the 2018 parliamentary debate, most MPs regardless of party affiliation agreed that is essential to have well-trained professionals who can conduct educational activities with a strong pedagogical focus, thus ensuring high ECEC quality. This point of emphasis included university-educated Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers as well as other staff categories. Together, these professionals provide the educational activities needed in collaboration with other professionals in multi-professional teams.

“The early childhood education law under consideration is a huge leap forward. The best interests of the child are put first. Those early years are central for [establishing] the child's learning path, and it is really great that this bill improves pedagogical skills and improves the quality of early childhood education in kindergartens. Also in the future, multi-professional cooperation is the basis of everything. ECE teachers, social pedagogues in ECEC and practical nurses are needed, working together, but the interest of the child comes first.” (Sarkomaa [NATCOA], PTK 37/2018 vp, p. 4)

The same topics were reiterated in the bill and the speeches relating to the 2021 reform, but this reform put considerably more emphasis on helping (weaker) children and providing them with opportunities to receive support early in their upbringing. A three-step support strategy similar to that being used in basic education was seen as important for ECEC, since this strategy would facilitate children's learning paths. Also, such interventions would presumably help prevent exclusion, marginalisation and social problems later in the child's life.

“This government proposal stipulates the right of a child in early childhood education to the support they need and the structure of the support provided in early childhood education. We are talking about the so-called three-step support model. The three-tiered model involves general, enhanced and special support, and the support is strengthened according to the child's need for it. Currently, the ECEC Act does not include clear provisions on the obligation of the early childhood education organiser to implement support, and for that reason the practices are varied.” (Mäkisalo-Ropponen [SOCDEM], PTK 146/2021 vp, p. 1)

Although equality was a central issue of discussion during the analysed period, a slight change in the discourse was detected from 2018 onwards. Before 2018, discussions about high-quality ECEC pertained more to levelling out differences in municipal services, whereas the 2018 and 2021 debates focused more on enhancing staff qualifications and providing children with support.

The equality rationale

A fundamental idea within the Finnish education system is that all children should have equal opportunities to education regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, gender or place of residence (Sipilä, 2020). In the 2014 reform, as well as in the other two reforms, this topic was central, but it was also partly related to the rationale of quality (HE 341/2014 vp, p 1). Children's opportunities to develop and learn should not be dependent upon where they live or their family background. Similarly, MPs from different parties were quite unanimous in highlighting the significance and virtue of ensuring a high quality of ECEC services, but some did voice particular criticisms as well. In 2014/2015, some MPs raised doubts about whether the reform does enough to ensure every child access to high-quality ECEC and whether it fails to guarantee educational activities in the day care centres that promote children's learning and overall development. For example:

“Many [...] have already criticised this law for falling a bit short. In other words, how does the minister respond to the fact that the right to high-quality pedagogical education has not been defined very precisely and the concept of care and learning has been left at a rather high level?” (Niinistö [GREEN], PTK 135/2015 vp, p. 6)

A similar equality rationale was prominent in the 2018 bill and the related parliamentary debates. According to this, every child must receive sufficient support to facilitate their learning and to meet their developmental needs. The three-stage support strategy was seen as important for levelling out differences between children, both in terms of their opportunities to learn and in terms of learning outcomes. By using early interventions and different supportive measures, ECEC services would not only improve equality and prevent exclusion, but also the situation for children with special needs or medical diagnoses.

“[S]upport for children must be carried out in a way that promotes the child's interests and the equality of children [...] including those children who need medical treatment.” (Risikko [NATCOA], PTK 142/2021 vp, p. 2)

The lifelong learning and social mobility rationale

Similar to the equality rationale, the rationale relating to ECEC as a facilitator of lifelong learning and social mobility was clearly visible in the 2014/2015, 2018 and 2021 reforms. This rationale, which frames ECEC services as an investment that will sustain and improve future development and educational outcomes for children (Morel et al., 2012), remained fairly unchanged in all three bills and parliamentary debates. For example, the 2014/2015 bill claims that ECEC supports ‘the overall and individual development of the child and the prerequisites for learning [...] in relation to the child’s age and maturity’ (HE 342/2014 vp, p. 11). In the parliamentary debates, however, some politicians argued that lifelong learning and too much focus on educative practices at an early age is not necessarily a good thing, especially if it negatively impacts children’s play and their wellbeing. For example:

“It is very important to highlight the learning path, but at the same time remember that the learning path of a child’s early childhood education is learning through play, not going full-on into classroom habits.” (Lauslahti [NATCOA], PTK 135/2015 vp., p. 6-7/2015)

This criticism was not so visible in the 2018 reform, as politicians tended to agree that ECEC services play an important role in children’s future development and in fostering equality between them. In the bill, lifelong learning was strongly associated with the best interests of the child and with social inclusion, but it was also viewed as an integral part of the Europe 2020 strategy for sustainable growth (HE 40/2018 vp, p. 46). This theme was also emphasised in the parliamentary discussions, but not so strongly as in the bill. However, in the remittance debate in the Finnish Parliament, one MP called attention to the virtues of ECEC by stating that ECEC is ‘important for the whole learning path of children, for their future options, for their access to the labour market, for their success, even for their income levels, and in fact for everything’ (Mikkola [GREEN], PTK 37/2018 vp, p. 35). Politicians also noted that ECEC constitutes a natural stage in the child’s holistic learning path. For example:

“The law strengthens early childhood education, develops it as part of our education system. [...] Today, based on research data, we understand the importance of the early years even better, and therefore, there is a great need for this law reform.” (Grahn-Laasonen [NATCOA], PTK 37/2018 vp, pp. 2–3)

The 2021 reform portrays ECEC as the foundation for children’s lifelong learning and their all-round development, but here also different kinds of early support measures rose to the forefront in discussions. A stable foundation for learning and sufficient support are prerequisites for counteracting exclusion and for increasing a child’s ability to benefit from the teaching and education. Special education teachers in ECEC are given a central role as professionals possessing the knowledge and competence required for calibrating and evaluating the so-called three-level support provided to children, especially those having special needs or suffering from some type of sickness (e.g. Risikko [NATCO], PTK 142/2021 vp, 9).

The parental involvement rationale

One rationale receiving a changing frame over time was the parental involvement rationale. Although the emphasis on parents’ role as the primary guardians remained intact, the 2018 and 2021 reforms more strongly accentuated the crucial role of parents or guardians in the actual planning, implementation and evaluation of ECEC activities together with teachers. Even if the 2014 government bill acknowledged the need for parental involvement and criticised previous childcare legislation for not emphasising this point enough, this rationale received a more central position in the 2018 and 2021 reforms. For example, the 2018 bill associated parental involvement with the sharing of knowledge between ECEC professionals and

parents (HE 40/2018 vp, p. 1), whereas the 2021 bill focused especially on how to calibrate the support that children need (HE 148/2021 vp, p.23). This point was also voiced by MPs in the different of political parties.

“The opinions of the child and parents or guardians are listened to. Support is realised in the desired way through the successful interaction of home and early childhood education workers.” (Kinnunen [CENTRE], PTK 142/2021 vp, p. 6)

However, some MPs also criticised the 2016 restrictions placed on ECEC services for families where parents did not work full-time (see Lundkvist et al., 2017) as counterproductive to both the provision of high-quality ECEC services and the successful cooperation between the ECEC centres and homes.

The children’s rights rationale

The fifth central ECEC rationale, the children’s rights rationale, was consistently emphasised in all three reforms. Accordingly, every child has a right to learn, develop and feel good about their education. This position was also underscored by the minister presenting the bill:

“The child’s right to early childhood education [...] would mean a planned and goal-oriented whole, consisting of education, teaching and care, which is given in day care and with a special emphasis on pedagogy.” (Minister Kiuru [SOCDEM], PTK 135/2015 vp, p. 1)

Similarly, children’s rights to a safe learning environment in early childhood pedagogy was also emphasised in the 2018 reform. They should also be protected against violence, bullying and harassment. In the parliamentary debate, some MPs argued that the interests of the child must be considered in relation to the individual child as a part of a group. For example:

“The focus of the reform is the child’s interests. [...] [W]hen planning, organising and deciding on early childhood education, the best interests of the child must be considered first and foremost. The best interests of the child must be considered on a case-by-case basis, both for the individual child, for the children as a group and for children in general. In addition, the law should stipulate that the child must be protected from violence, bullying and other harassment. It is important that kindergartens deal with the first signs of bullying. Day care should be a safe environment for the child, where no one is bullied and no one learns to be a bully.” (Grahm-Laasonen [NATCOA], PTK 37/2018 vp, p. 1)

Similarly, the 2021 reform mentioned the child’s right to early support interventions as especially important, since such support constitutes an essential part of the education system. Support is given in ECEC, pre-school education and basic education according to the same principles and creates a totality that is important for the child’s development and learning.

“It is a long-awaited law to be brought in for the first time ever: children’s right to support, to the so-called three-step support in early childhood education. It is a long-awaited and expected change in this regard. Now, we should go through the way in which support is to be given, the implementation of the support, the assessment of the need for support and the notification of special support. You always start from the individual need, and now that you are in favour of this three-stage support, that is, general intensified and special support, it will be, in the same way as in pre-school education and basic education, [provided] in an inclusive manner. And we have also

discussed that perhaps it should also be at the second stage in the future.” (Ollikainen [SWEDES], PTK 146/2021 vp, p. 2)

Children’s opportunities to influence their everyday life in ECEC was viewed as a basic right. However, this right was connected to the right of the child’s parents to be heard in matters that specifically affect their children, but also in matters concerning the planning and implementation of educational activities with a particular focus on supporting the child’s development and well-being.

“The opinions of children and parents or guardians should be listened to. The support should be realised in the desired way through the successful interaction of the home and early childhood education workers. [...] The child needs and has the right to receive the support required for their individual development, learning and well-being as soon as the need for support arises. Support is offered at the lowest possible threshold for all those children who need it.” (Kinnunen [CENTRE], PTK 142/2021 vp, p. 6)

It does not come as a surprise that the children’s right perspective received a central role in the political discourse underpinning recent ECEC reforms in Finland, as it has been a dominant idea influencing not only ECEC services but also other aspects of the welfare state, such as child protection reforms (e.g., Nygård, 2009).

Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this article was to analyse the political discourse on ECEC rationales over time in a Finnish setting (see Penn, 2011). It addressed two essential questions. First, what were the main rationales regarding ECEC, as highlighted by the Finnish government and Finnish MPs, in relation to the 2014/2015, 2018 and 2021 reforms on ECEC services, and what were the main discourses underpinning them? Second, can we see a pattern of stability or change over time in terms of the ECEC rationales?

Based on our analysis, two main conclusions can be drawn. First, we found five main ECEC rationales that were central to and more clearly visible in the government bills and parliamentary debates over the studied time period. They included a quality rationale, equality rationale, lifelong learning and social mobility rationale, parental involvement rationale and children’s rights rationale. However, while the second, third and fifth rationales remained stable over time in the political discourse, the first and fourth rationales became increasingly highlighted over time. Accordingly, the Finnish political discourse on ECEC became increasingly linked to staff qualifications and the degree of support offered to children with weaker cognitive and social capacities. Similarly, parental involvement in ECEC practices received an increasing amount of attention as a way of supporting children but also as a way of strengthening education by providing sufficient data and input to the staff. This shift in emphasis in part aligns with previous research demonstrating the central roles of discourses pertaining to ‘a real need for ECEC’ and ‘parental choice’ (Fjällström et al., 2020; Paananen et al., 2020) and that the rationale of parental involvement has been crucial for Nordic ECEC (Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023). However, our results also suggest that the educative elements as well as ideas about the centrality of children’s rights and participation have retained a crucial role within Finnish ECEC services (see Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2019, 2022). Also, rationales adhering to the social investment paradigm (e.g., Morel et al., 2012) have been central to the Finnish ECEC discourse, for example by emphasising investments in children’s lifelong learning.

Second, although there was some disagreement on the role of ECEC in 2014/2015, we could detect a growing convergence in the ways that Finnish politicians understood and thought about this service over time. For example, in 2014/2015 some right-wing MPs expressed concerns that the enforcing of ECEC legislation would impose on parents’ rights to choose whether or not to make use of municipal ECEC/

childcare services and threaten to undermine their role as parents. This finding supports previous research on the ideological centrality of ‘parental choice’ in Finnish ECEC discourses (e.g., Fjällström et al., 2020; Paananen et al., 2020) and the politicisation of ‘parental involvement’ in ECEC (Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023). Likewise, the increasing emphasis on ECEC quality in terms of professional competence as well as parental involvement was predominantly supported by MPs on the right. Nevertheless, MPs from all parties agreed that high-quality ECEC as well as preschool education both support children’s lifelong learning and help prevent future social exclusion and marginalisation. They also expressed an increasing concern for vulnerable children by accentuating the need for more support being offered to weaker children as well as those in special education.

The five main rationales identified here aligned strongly with the social investment paradigm, served to promote higher quality in ECE and emphasised stronger parental involvement. While the socially investing ideas suggest long-term stability in the Finnish ECEC discourse, the latter two rationales suggest change. As already mentioned, socially investing ideas gained greater emphasis in Finland during the 2000s, and the results of this study show that such ideas still hold sway. However, it is also clear that educative elements, such as demands for higher staff competence, have grown in importance over time. Consequently, highly competent teachers and other staff members is seen as increasingly important for implementing the objectives of ECEC, which include instilling a desire for lifelong learning and contributing to the long-term prospects of children as well as supporting the learning and need for equal opportunities of more vulnerable children (see Fjällström et al., 2023).

It is fair to say, therefore, that the rationales for Finnish ECEC remain ambitious and promise to deliver high-quality services that foster learning, human capital and social competence. However, an achievement of far-reaching and ambitious objectives pertaining to children’s learning and development does not hinge on discourse alone, but also needs to be underpinned by sufficient resources, for example by ensuring that staff/child ratios remain sustainable, that vulnerable children receive enough special attention, and that teachers and other staff receive competitive salaries. Otherwise, we may easily reach a situation where we throw the child out with the bath water, that is to say, a situation in which the reality does not match the stated objectives.

Endnotes

1 In Finland, ECEC services are separated from pre-school and basic education.

2 The following party abbreviations were used: SOCDEM (Social Democrats), NATCOA (National Coalition), CENTRE (Centre Party), GREEN (Greens), the Finns Party (FINNS) and the Swedish People’s Party (SWEDES).

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