

ECEC partnership from the Parents' Point of View in Finland

A Case Study with a Review of European Policies Emphasizing Austrian History, Current State and Needs

Author Tytti Sneck

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>There is a growing awareness of the importance of young children's education and care: they have an essential role in the development of the children, not to talk about better student outcomes. Studies imply also that parents' participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has positive effects on children's accomplishments. Consequently, in many countries the ECEC services had become an important part of social politics, and also verifying the quality of ECEC has become a priority.</p> <p>The purpose and objectives were thus to clarify parents' opinions about ECEC partnership, its' execution and participation in three small private ECEC units. One task was also to participate parents to think about ECEC partnership and their impact on it – along the new Finnish ECEC law. One objective is to compare the results to corresponding small, privately-owned ECEC units and use them when renewing and developing the practices and documents along the new Finnish law and new national curriculum guidelines in Finland.</p> <p>The research was implemented as a case study. Data gathering methods were a web-questionnaire for parents, two observation sessions and document examination (the curriculum of the ECEC unit), and the gathered data was analyzed by themes: parents' opinions, real actions and parental participation.</p> <p>In document examination the mutual trust, respect and ECEC partnership were highlighted, and the creation of ECEC partnership is ECEC staff's responsibility was emphasized. These objectives set in curriculum were verified in observations and in questionnaire: both real actions of parents and also the opinions of parents supported these objectives. From questionnaire also arise the importance of ECEC staff support towards parents as parents' wish. Parents did not seem to be interested in participating or did not know what it included – this is a main challenge when developing new practices.</p>		
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Tiivistelmä <p>Lasten kasvatukseen ja koulutukseen kiinnitetään yhä enemmän huomiota: niillä on keskeinen rooli lapsen kehityksessä sekä koulumenestyksessä. Tutkimukset osoittavat, että myös vanhempien osallistumisella varhaiskasvatukseen on positiivisia vaikutuksia lapsen saavutuksiin. Tästä johtuen monissa maissa varhaiskasvatuksesta on tullut tärkeä osa sosiaalipolitiikkaa, ja varhaiskasvatuksen laadun varmistamisesta on tullut prioriteetti.</p> <p>Tarkoituksena ja tavoitteena oli selvittää vanhempien mielipiteitä kasvatuskumppanuudesta, sen toteutuksesta ja osallistumisesta kolmessa pienessä, yksityisessä varhaiskasvatustyksyksikössä. Yhtenä tavoitteena oli osallistaa vanhempia miettimään kasvatuskumppanuutta ja heidän osallisuuttaan siihen – tulevan suomalaisen lain hengessä. Tarkoituksena oli myös verrata saatuja tuloksia vastaaviin, pieniin, yksityisiin varhaiskasvatustyksyksiköihin ja käyttää niitä asiakirjojen ja käytäntöjen uudistamiseen ja kehittämiseen.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutettiin tapaustutkimuksena, ja data kerättiin kahden havainnointituokion, vanhemmille suunnatun web-kyselyn ja varhaiskasvatustyksikön varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman tutkimisen avulla. Data analysoitiin teemoittain: vanhempien mielipiteet, osallisuus sekä käytännön toimet.</p> <p>Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmassa korostettiin molemminpuolista luottamusta ja kunnioitusta sekä kasvatuskumppanuutta. Henkilökunnan vastuuta kasvatuskumppanuuden luomisessa painotettiin. Nämä suunnitelmassa asetetut tavoitteet näkyivät havainnointituokioiden aikana varhaiskasvatustyksikön arjessa sekä kyselyvastauksissa. Kyselyvastauksissa korostui vanhempien mielipiteenä ja toiveena henkilökunnan tuki vanhempia kohtaan. Vanhemmat eivät puolestaan vaikuttaneet kiinnostuneilta osallistumaan eivätkä tienneet, millä tavoin voisivat osallistua päiväkodin arkeen – tämä nousee päähaasteeksi uusien käytäntöjen kehitellessä.</p>		
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1 Introduction to Early Childhood Education and Care

Due to mothers entering the working life, there is an increasing need for early childhood education and care. The mothers are also wanted as labour because of the growing retirement. There is also a growing awareness of the importance of young children's education and care: they have an essential role in the cognitive and emotional development of the children, not to talk about better student outcomes – social investments. Accordingly, studies imply that parents' participation in early intervention services and early childhood education and care has positive effects on children's accomplishments (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake 2009). Consequently, in many countries the ECEC services has become an important part of social politics, and also verifying the quality of early childhood education and care has become a priority. (Anttonen & Sointu 2006, 46, 118; OECD 2015, 322; Määttä & Uusi-autti 2012, 296; Karila 2016, 6, 18.)

Kahiluoto (2009) summarises that early childhood education and care has three different policies to observe:

- social policy: equal opportunities to mothers, fathers and children and early intervention
- employment policy and
- educational policy.

All of these policies are important and relevant but during the years the emphasis of the tasks has differed (Kahiluoto 2009).

This research is about early childhood education and care in Finland, now and in the past, with a review of current European situation and policies, emphasising Austria and its' history, current qualities and lacks in early childhood education and care. Finnish part is a case study including three day care centres intending to find out especially parents' opinions and views about early childhood education and care part-

nership with staff. The purpose is to use these findings to develop the practices in the early childhood education and care field.

First in this thesis I'm going to justify the choice of the topic, approach and those delineations with the purpose and objectives of the research. Next there is the definitions of the key concepts: early childhood education and care, early childhood education and care partnership and participation. After defining the concepts this thesis considers the framework of the research which includes the history of the early childhood education and care in Finland and in Austria. It also takes a glance of current states of European, Finnish and Austrian early childhood education and care cultures handling also the guiding laws of Finland and Austria. The early childhood education and care culture along the partnership are deeply defined then, and after the literature and theory part the methodology of the research is introduced with the results of the study. The last part of the thesis is the discussion and reflection of the research.

1.1 Choice of Topic and Approach

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have become more common. It now has an essential role in supporting families with young children, states Hujala's et al. article (2009). In addition, new understanding of significant cooperation between ECEC staff and families has arisen as an important issue of professional development and educational research (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake 2009).

Researches show strongly that parents' participation in ECEC and early intervention services has positive effects on children's accomplishments. (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake 2009; Johnston & Halocha 2010, 190; Developing support to parents through early childhood services 2009, 7.) Also the new ECEC law of Finland stresses the participation of parents: the bulletin of Ministry of Education and Culture (2015) explains that the parents have to have an opportunity to participate and effect on both child's ECEC but also the ECEC unit's actions, planning and evalua-

tion (Varhaiskasvatuslain ensimmäinen vaihe voimaan 1.8.2015 [The first stage of ECEC law in effect in 1.8.2015], 2009). Along the new ECEC law, also the National Curriculum Guidelines of ECEC in Finland are coming to effect next year (Vasu2017 – varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteiden uudistaminen [Renewing of the basis of the national curriculum guidelines on ECEC] 2016). That is why the topic of the study is current, has significance and social importance. This is also the reason why this research emphasizes the less studied parents' point of view (Developing support to parents through early childhood services 2009, 8). (In this research, by 'parent' it is meant to refer to main custodian of the child.)

This research is thus about early childhood education and care (ECEC) and is especially focusing on a one rising topic in the field of day care: collaboration between families and ECEC staff in ECEC units stressing the parents' opinions, views and thoughts. Collaboration between staff and families is commonly called 'Early Childhood Education and Care' partnership, ECEC partnership. Parents are always a part of ECEC: they can be silent, passive partners or active partners, says MacNaughton and Hughes (2011, 44). Thus there is many different ECEC systems and services depending on country's policies (e.g. Saraceno 2011), I am concentrating on studying the concept of early childhood education and ECEC partnership in ECEC units in two cultures: Austrian and Finnish. The Finnish part is a case study and researched by observing, examining documents and by an open-ended questionnaire to parents. The Finnish part also includes theory concerning ECEC and ECEC partnership to support the case study to be made. The Austrian part is going to be a theoretical overview about Austrian history and current state of early childhood education and care stressing the parents' point of view.

The partner society of this research is Jyväskylän Hoivapalveluyhdistys ry. It owns seven day care centres in middle-Finland and also other kinds of business units. The questionnaire was executed first in one day care centre and spread then to two other day care centres. The observation was done in one day care centre. The ECEC curriculum, examined document, was mutual to all of the day care centres. The exact names of the day care centres are not published due the anonymity of the parents and ethics of the research.

1.2 Purpose of the Research and Research Objectives

The purpose and objectives of this research is to **clarify** parents' opinions about ECEC partnership, its' execution and participation and involvement in three small private ECEC units in middle-Finland. This research is also **participating** parents to think about ECEC partnership and their impact on it – along the new Finnish ECEC law. One objective is to **compare** the results to corresponding small, privately-owned ECEC units – utilise them in researcher's own working place – and use them when renewing and **developing** the practices and documents along the new law and new national curriculum guidelines.

According to Punch (2004, 156) when doing a case study, the research questions can arise and sharpen during the early empirical work. Also Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 22) and Eskola and Suoranta (2008, 16) state that the research is a process: during the research it is natural to go back to previous stages and edit them. This also happened during this research, both when searching theory and executing research.

The main research questions are about how parents feel about the ECEC partnership, what kind of partners are they and how they implement it in practice. Other point of view is the participation of parents: what are their own efforts towards a good partnership with ECEC staff and how they participate in the actions of the ECEC unit and have they been encouraged to do so. Purpose is also to develop the practises of corresponding ECEC units regarding these results.

2 Key Concepts

2.1 Early Childhood Education and Care

Early childhood education and care is taking place in young children's ECEC services: day clubs, childminders homes or day care centres. It is aiming at promoting children' balanced growth, learning and development – these qualities are considered benefi-

cial. It is goal-directed and systematic, safe and nurturing, and there is collaboration and interaction between ECEC staff, children and their parents. (Heikkilä, Ihalainen & Välimäki 2004, 12; Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 133; Shaughnessy & Kleyn 2012, 1.)

In Finland's National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care written by Heikkilä et al. (2004, 12) it is said that the whole ECEC is based on a holistic view on children's development and learning and includes great amount of pedagogic knowledge, information, research and expertise on pedagogic methodology. To create this view, a central resource is competent, highly educated staff. (Ibid. 12; Heinämäki 2008, 8; Johnston & Halocha 2010, 190.)

There are many aims to achieve in early childhood education and care. Staff should offer a favourable environment, diverse activities and continuing and safe relationships for children to grow and develop. What is most important for this study, staff also has to support parents in educating children and their personal and balanced growth. (Figure 1.) (Järvinen, Laine & Hellman-Suominen 2009, 90.)

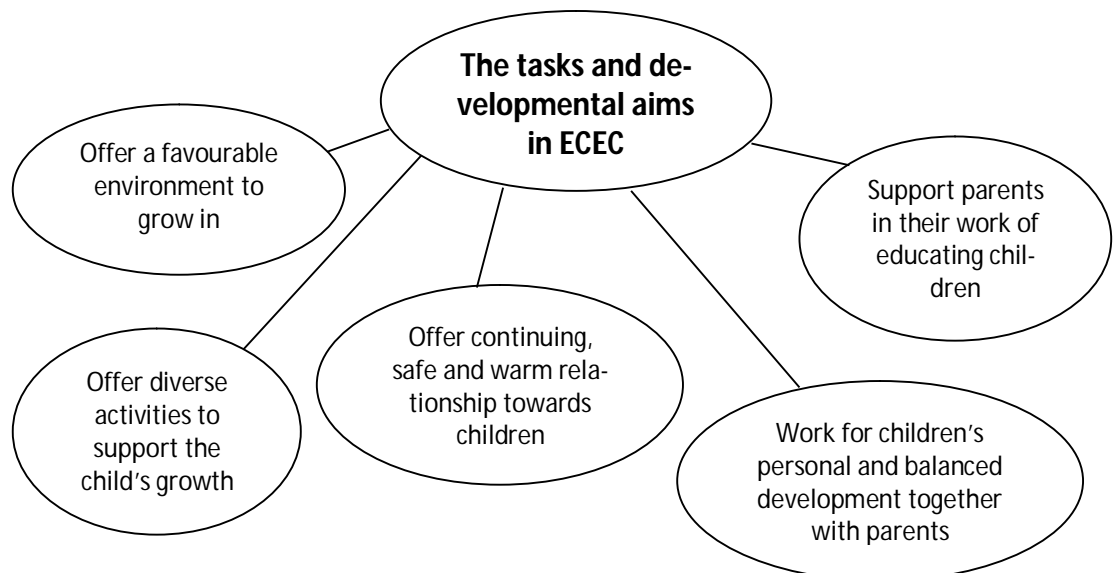


Figure 1. The tasks and developmental aims in ECEC. (Järvinen, Laine & Hellman-Suominen 2009, 90.)

For its part, the European Union has also an aim that all young children can access and benefit from high quality education and care. Studies show that early childhood

is the period in child's life at which education can most effectively influence children's development (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 11; Tuononen 2015). Kronqvist (2011, 15) and Karila (2016, 7) summarise that there is a lot of study results that show the effectivity of ECEC: it is shown that children benefit by emotional, cognitive and social levels. High quality ECEC has a positive impact which effects till the child is at his teens and especially it is preventing impulsive behaviour. Of course this high quality ECEC is demanding a clear view of what, why and how we are executing it. (Kronqvist 2011, 15.)

Future is hard to predict. Though it is sure that children are the future adults in our society, and the upbringing of the children is an investment in the future. High quality ECEC is essential when educating the next generation; to pay attention to children's wellbeing and socialization is also an aim of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by United Nation. (Kronqvist 2011, 14.) Both Finland and Austria have been accepting the Convention. (Crepaldi, Pasquinelli, Castegnaro & Naaf 2012, 9.)

2.2 ECEC Partnership

ECEC partnership, the close and equal collaboration between parents and ECEC staff is needed when families and ECEC staff are forming a whole to support the child's growth. One of the tasks of ECEC staff has is to initiate a dialogue with parents, share information and ensure that parents play an essential role in the education of their children – participate – and understand its importance (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 133). Halme et al. (2014, 22) outline: partnership is noticing, hearing, receiving and discussing the parent's knowledge about the child – and also the ability to hear the child. To succeed in partnership, it requires mutual trust, respect and equality and also conscious commitment and shared understanding to support child's development and learning. Partnership is consisting of two views: parents' primary right and responsibility for their child's education and also their expertise in their own child and on the other hand ECEC staff's professional knowledge and competence of children and education in general. Both parents and ECEC staff are important influences in child's life: it is essential to find ways for fami-

lies and ECEC staff to work together. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 28; Kaskela & Kekkonen 2011, 11; MacNauhgton & Hughes 2011, 43; Johnston & Halocha 2010, 190.)

There are a couple of ways to describe the ECEC partnership and its' features, and in the next chapters three of them are introduced. There is also many ways to describe parental support in general (e.g. Crebaldi et al. 2012, 11, 12), but in these chapters the focus is on the special, mutual partnership in early childhood education and care. One way to describe the ECEC partnership is depicted in OECD Starting Strong and repeated in Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care Policy, Country Note for Austria (2006, 39). It is defining five different ways of working with parents:

1. Marginal engagement, where parents are used as fund raisers but there is no regular dialogue or real effort with parents.
 2. Formal engagement, when parent – staff meetings are held in compliance with official directives at regular intervals to inform parents for example about rules and to discuss child's progress.
 3. Informal organised engagement, when ECEC staff can tell parents about the child's experiences in the ECEC setting and listen to the thoughts of parents at drop-off and pick-up times or different kind of organized activities for parents.
 4. Participatory engagement, when parents are consulted on important decisions and the community and local groups are invited to interact with staff and to take a part in the programmes.
 5. Managerial engagement, when parents are legally engaged on the management board and work with the leader and ECEC staff regarding all administrative tasks.
- (Ibid. 39.)

ECEC partnership can also be divided in different sections presented by Kaskela and Kekkonen (2011). It can be seen as

- developing early childhood education and care,
- professional interaction,
- shared education and care between ECEC services and home,
- supporting child's and parent's relationship,
- hearing child's experiences and stories,
- participation of parents,

- education awareness of parent or ECEC staff and
- interaction through emotions of parent or ECEC staff.

According to Kekkonen (2012b) ECEC partnership contains of four chronological divisions: first the process where parents and ECEC staff are getting to know each other and start to build up the mutual trust, then to build up the dialogue. These factors improve the casual meetings towards committed partnership. The fourth important division is to share child's experiences and relationships – the ordinary life – and give positive feedback. (Figure 2.) (2012b.) Also Niikko (2006, 147) suggests that these qualities of ECEC partnership that Kaskela and Kekkonen (2011) and Kekkonen (2012b) found out are also important from parents' point of view – not just for ECEC staff's opinion.

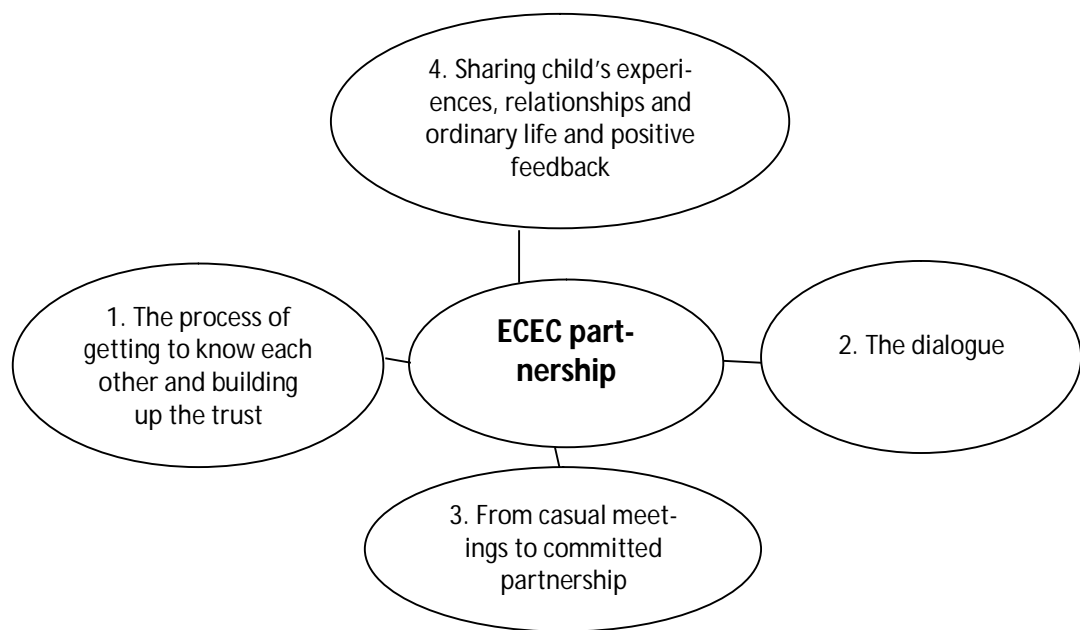


Figure 2. The ECEC partnership supports the child and parents. (Kekkonen 2012b.)

ECEC partnership is a rising topic in field of day care and that is why it is current to study. Most European countries emphasise the importance of ECEC partnership in their guidebooks, says Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014, 133) and a Eurofound workshop report "Developing support to parents through early childhood services" (2009, 7). In Austria home-learning guidance is arranged and in Finland the information sessions and bilateral parent-teacher discussions are organised yearly. Also a new law of early childhood education and care is about to come

into effect in Finland: the involvement and participation of parents is even more emphasised. In Austria the parent participation is not so common, and this is a difference between these two cultures (ibid. 134).

2.3 Participation

According to Raivio and Karjalainen (2013, 12), *participation* or *involvement* is a rainbow term which consists of different kinds of approaches. It can be seen as an objective and means to advance and increase the equality of the society at once. Halme, Vuorisalmi and Perälä (2014, 21) align that participation is part of human dignity: a right to participate in one's own life and a right to be heard, and as a result of these, also a right to be part of decision making. Larjovuori et al. (2012, 5) states that one way of understanding participation is to think involvement which aims to developing services and well-being of society. The means to develop can for example be to give feedback, to participate in public discussion or do actions towards increasing the well-being. This definition that Larjovuori et al. (2012, 5) give, is the one in focus in this thesis: these means are examples of how parents can participate or be participated in the ECEC services. One important quality in participation is that the actions should really change the practices (Larjovuori, Nuutinen, Heikkilä-Tammi & Manka 2012, 20)! (Adams 2008, 31.)

Assumption is that by increasing the participation, the well-being of a human grows and this can be seen as social durability, integrity and trust in society. Other, more practical and thus more interesting, advantages are the extend of the value of the service, increase the customer orientated approach (staff's appreciation and commitment towards it) and increase the staff's motivation and satisfaction when having feedback and a possibility to develop the practices. Increasing the participation in general is also one aim of Finnish government, European Union and OECD member countries. (Raivio & Karjalainen, 2013, 12; Adams 2008, 29.) Because of the European Union and OECD targets also Austria is emphasising the participation of citizens in many areas (e.g. Austrian Reform Programme 2011). Also in Finnish ECEC services

increasing the participation possibilities of parents in planning, execution and evaluation is one main quality objective (Kekkonen 2009, 163).

Participation does not necessarily mean attendance in societal tasks. Participation as a concept includes the feeling of involvement of the participant – it is very individual experience. In participation, the feeling of voluntary is very important: it cannot be an obligatory thing. Raivio and Karjalainen (2013, 15) also state that involvement is a process: the level of how much a person wants or is able to participate varies during life situations. Participation or involvement can be seen as an experience or a feeling, or on the other hand as performance and possibilities. (Raivio & Karjalainen, 2013, 14; Adams 2008, 33.)

In ECEC services the customers are children and parents or other relatives of the child. In this research the parents are at focus: the value of the service comes from the interaction between the customer (parent) and the provider of the service (ECEC service). For quite a long time the active role of the customer has been emphasised especially in social and health care field; although the practices which involve the customer have not been stabilized yet and thus not utilized thoroughly. The reason can be in the attitudes and lack of education in services: does the staff let the customers to participate, do they take the initiatives seriously? Also the customers are not used to this active role of service developers and should have time to adapt to the new role. (Larjovuori, Nuutinen, Heikkilä-Tammi & Manka 2012, 4, 8, 23.)

According to Venninen, Leinonen, Rautavaara-Hämäläinen and Purola (2011, 10) and Kekkonen (2009, 163) participation in ECEC services is best implemented and developed in ECEC partnership. (In addition, Karila (2016, 41) criticises justifiably that it seems that the only way parents have been participating is the bilateral parent-teacher discussion.) Partnership is emphasising the parents' opinions and gives thus the possibility to participate, empower and have an influence on to ECEC services – to improve the quality of the services (Venninen et al. 2011, 10). ECEC staff, as professionals of common child upbringing and as a customer servant, together with parents can create a participatory ECEC partnership (Venninen et al. 2011, 59). (Developing support to parents through early childhood services 2009, 7.)

3 The Past and the Future of Early Childhood Education and Care

3.1 History of ECEC

When researching global developments in ECEC policies and programs, national data and also comparative, international data are slight. Kamerman (2006, 57) finds though some similar factors of ECEC developments: for example the changing roles of women, the urbanization and the growing awareness that (early childhood) education is a child's right. According to these reasons, Anttonen and Sointu (2006, 46) state also that from 1990s's the prevalent thought has been that it is profitable to invest time and money to children – a social investment. These factors will be examined in the thesis through Austrian and Finnish histories.

Reviewing the history of ECEC developments in several countries, ECEC units (at that time day care centres and nurseries) were first established in the 19th century. One of the first steps of development was to separate “kindergartens” for educational purposes and day nurseries to provide care. Subsequent developments were slow, and the most important developments in Europe are from the 1960's: with the dramatic increase in female labour force participation rates led the parallel developments in child and family policies in Europe. In addition the conversation between care and development was a critical issue in the ECEC field. (Kamerman 2006, 3; OECD 2015, 324; Kahiluoto 2009.)

OECD's Education at a Glance –report (2015, 324) states that in the 1970's and 1980's European governments encouraged couples to have children and made it executable for women to combine family and working responsibilities – this development can be seen in histories of both Finland and Austria.

3.1.1 In the Roots of Fröbel in Finland

In Finland the early childhood education has a long history, and the roots are strongly based on German Friedrich Fröbel's ideas about the education in kindergartens: emphasis is on playing – educate (Kahiluoto 2009). These ideas were introduced in Finland by Uno Cygnaeus, who visited Germany and Fröbel-kindergartens and established the first crèche and kindergarten in Finland in 1863. Cygnaeus thought it was important to integrate physical and mental education: to practise gross and fine motor activities was important, and mental education was spiritual and to train children's conscience. (Ojala 2005, 81.) In the 1920's kindergartens started to provide morning and afternoon activities for school-aged children (Ojala 2005, 84; Järvinen et al. 2009, 84; Lindon 2000, 79.).

In addition to the full-time early childhood education and care in kindergartens, later there was also part-time educational services which were provided mainly by the church. *Public playgrounds* outdoors (provided 4 -5 hours of actions including a free meal) began in 1910's, and it was planned for children over 4 years old. *Day clubs* started in the 1940's, meant for children who were cared at home. (Ojala 2005, 84.) There is not much written information about Finnish early childhood education and care from 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, but till 1950' the day care system in Finland was publicly funded and meant for poor families with working mothers (Anttonen & Soin-tu 2006, 47; Niiranen & Kinos 2001, 67).

The Finnish day care system started to develop strongly in 1960's mainly because of the same reasons than in Europe in general. When agriculture was not the primary employer anymore, families moved in to cities and female labour force was increasing: the social situation was changing. (Ojala 2005, 84; Lindon 2000, 83; Kahiluoto 2009.) In Finland the working mothers were considered as a social problem: they had to work outside their homes to improve their income. The main mission of day care was to secure the growth and development of the children, not any kind of partnership with parents. (Kekkonen 2012, 28.)

In Finland the day care system has been guided by laws since 1923. At the same time kindergartens were changed from under the authority of school to be part of social welfare (Ojala 2005, 84). In 1973 was the actual law, Act of Children's day care, created because of the urbanization: in the majority of Finnish families with children under school age, both parents are gainfully employed according to Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland (2000). Since the 1970's it has been reformed more than fifty times. One of the most important reforms has been 1984 – 1996, when the subjective right to have day care was added. The day care was not any more by means test, but any children's – or parents – right. Also the child-carer ratio was defined in this reform, and the parents' choice between homecare, private day care or public day care run by municipalities was made easier. (Alila & Kinos 2014, 12 – 14). Niiranen & Kinos (2001, 61) states that the development of Finnish ECEC services have four different approaches which go along with decades – it is interesting to see what kind of approaches of theories the future holds for us.

Another big reform was 1998 – 2006, when pre-primary education (pre-school) was transferred from day care system under basic education. Another important reform of this time was to define the amount of kindergarten special education teachers in municipalities. The latest reform was in January 2013 when day care and early childhood education was transferred to Ministry of Education and Culture from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 187). This was a concrete change: day care system is no longer a social service but a part of education. (Ibid. 12 – 14, see also Järvinen et al. 2009.) Actually the whole 21st century has been an era of administrative and structural development of ECEC services in Finland, combines Karila (2016, 6).

3.1.2 Various Eras of Austria

The beginning of care and education of children is closely linked with changes in the family structure that took place in Austria at the change of the 18th and the 19th centuries. When women first began entering the labour force (for example factories), children were largely left to look after themselves, which led to an increase amount of child neglect. Due to this social necessity, the first public institutions for caring for

children of the working class, such as foundling homes and orphanages for infants and very small children, were created. In addition, there were also private early education and care providers, such as nannies, employed by rich families. (Kromer & Pfoser 2004, 16; Lindon 2000, 25.)

Kromer and Pfoser (2004, 16) say that real institutional day care began 1828 when the first “Kinderbewahranstalt” was opened. Further nurseries began to expand starting in the mid-19th century. The children in the nurseries received not only instruction, but were also taught good manners and moral education: obedience and piety. Nurseries for infants (crèches) and the Fröbel-style kindergarten was founded in the mid 1800’s, approximately at the same time as in Finland. The first Fröbel-kindergartens were conceived primarily as an educational institution for the meaning of fostering children’s intellectual growth and development. Nurseries were designed for children from the lower social class, while educational kindergartens were for children from more privileged families. (Kromer & Pfoser 2004, 16; Lindon 2000, 25.)

Fifty years before Finland, in 1872 Austria decided – as one of the first countries in the world – to establish a legal framework for the kindergarten system and by that publicly acknowledged this form of early education and care. According to Lindon (2000, 26) from 1850’ several European countries created legislation specifically for ECEC. The Austrian ministerial ordinance outlined guidelines on establishing the kindergartens, as well as training staff, and remained in essence the prevailing legal framework almost for the next hundred years. The ordinance also required that the nurseries be gradually made into kindergartens. In addition to religious and private day care providers, a growing number of municipalities began establishing kindergartens. So-called “Volkskindergärten” (“people’s kindergartens”) featuring extended opening hours and requiring lower contributions from parents were also set up, giving children from working-class families easier access to kindergartens. (Kromer & Pfoser 2004, 17.)

The National Socialist regime is an important period of Austrian history and thus it is dealt in this research too. During the period of the authoritarian Corporate State (1934-1938) and primarily during the subsequent National Socialist regime (1938-

1945), there was not room for socialist ideals, democratic educational targets and psychoanalytical approaches, states Kromer and Pfoser (2004, 17). The kindergarten system created under the Nazi welfare system was expanded under National Socialism, and many kindergartens were set up in companies or factories. In the first few years after the end of World War II, kindergartens and crèches were very largely utilised. During this time discussions dealt on qualitative improvements in early childhood education and care, and several states (Länder) started to offer parental support. However, new regulations in legislation would not be passed until 1962: the kindergarten system was placed in the context of the educational system and declared a matter for the provinces. In the post-war era, special needs kindergartens and parent-toddler groups were set up for disabled children. Parent-toddler groups emerged in Austria aiming to create an alternative to public kindergartens. The childminder system was developed in the 1970s, when also a large governmentally funded project of parental education took place. (Kromer & Pfoser 2004, 17 – 18; Lindon 2000, 48; Kapella, Buchebner-Ferstl & Geserick 2012, 3, 5.)

Institutional day-care is increasingly common nowadays. Increased utilisation, mainly among children under three years old, is a part of the changing societal process. Former nurseries have been reformed into institutions with an essential social pedagogical approach, and they are highly relevant for the development and implementation of contemporary family policy. (Kromer & Pfoser 2004, 18; Early Childhood Education and Care 2015.) These improvements have been happening by the support of Austrian government: Family Package legislation in 1990 and Equality Package in 1992 improved women's status and made it easier to combine work and family (Starting Strong 2006, 11).

3.2 European Overview

When comparing two countries and their early childhood education and care policies, it is useful to observe the ECEC cultures in a bigger picture to obtain a wider vision of how ECEC is executed elsewhere. ECEC and its' development has also been a worldwide political interest during the last decade, says Karila (2016, 6). Here is a

European overview of ECEC policies, guidelines or agendas and their basis in international context focusing on Austria and Finland. The overview is about the United Nations, European Union, WHO and OECD countries.

Both Finland and Austria are members of *the United Nations* and they have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This is the most pervasive document which is guiding the child policies in all countries who has ratified this Convention. To meet the standards of the CRC, countries have to modify their legislation and practices to be convergent to this document. Governments also have to report on their progress to reach all the rights. (Convention on the Rights of the Child 2016.) ECEC systems in Austria and Finland are executing CRC when providing equal circumstances for development despite of families' economic or social status (Anttonen & Sointu 2006, 50). The United Nations and Unesco have also been executing a programme called Education for All which promotes educational rights for all children (Karila 2016, 21).

All countries in *European Union* have been ratifying the CRC, and the Convention is thus a basis for EU's documents concerning children. In European Union the European Commission is the executive and promotes children's interests among other things. (Rights of the Child 2016.) The Commission has published an EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child in 2011. The purpose of the Agenda (2011, 3) is to "reaffirm the strong commitment of all EU institutions and of all Member States to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies and to turn it into concrete results". All the Member States are obliged to design, execute and regulate all EU policies that affect children in a way that take into account the CRC. (Ibid. 3.) Speaking about early childhood education and care, the Agenda (2011, 9) states that when all children is given an access to ECEC, it would be the basis for lifelong learning process, later employability, social integration and personal development. These matters are also taken into consideration in the Official Journal of the European Union, which published an article 'Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow' (2011) based on the Agenda (2011) emphasizing furthermore that high quality ECEC has many short- and long-term benefits for both children and society (2011, 1).

The legislation of European Union rarely affects directly the execution of social services but is reared with recommendations, declarations and action programmes (Anttonen & Sointu 2006, 51).

Though the development of ECEC policies in European Union has been slow, now the high-quality ECEC has also been taken into consideration in European Union EU2020-strategy (Anttonen & Sointu 2006, 51). It is guiding European countries towards sustainable growth and well-being and it regards for example employment rates, research, climate policy and education. Considering these areas every member state sets its' own national targets. 'Barcelona objectives' (2013, 4) state that "Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age". (Barcelona Objectives 2013, Reiter 2015, 1.) These targets were achieved by some European countries, but challenges still – in 2013 – remain. Both Austria and Finland are falling behind from these objectives. (Ibid. 7, 8; Eurooppa2020-strategia 2015, 7.) Addition to Barcelona Objectives, there is also developmental work going on with quality: European Quality Framework on ECEC are in the making (Karila 2016, 23).

Crebaldi et al. (2012, 9) also criticize the EU policies to be quite one-sided regarding the emphasis of labour and family policies: while the objectives have been made there still is no awareness of parenting support or education which – according to Crebaldi et al. (2012, 9) – has to be part of the discussion, the guidelines and documents. A Eurofound workshop report "Developing support to parents through early childhood services" (2009, 8), criticizes the lack of research that has been made regarding early childhood services that offer parenting support. It would be an important area to study deeper and better and also to find good practices from different areas of European Union (Developing support to parents through early childhood services 2009, 8).

World Health Organization (WHO) and its' Early years, family and education task group has published a report regarding European Review of social determinants of

health and the health divide in the WHO European Region in 2013. There is an overview of European ECEC systems: almost every country in Europe has some kind of publicly subsidized and accredited early childhood education and care. There are differences in monitoring, responsible authorities and support levels. (Bruun Jensen et al. 2013, 17.)

According to Bruun Jensen et al. (2013, 17) there are two kinds of organizational models for arranging ECEC services in Europe: the two-stage model, where services are structured according to children's age (usually 0 – 3 years and 3 – 6 years) and the newer solid model for all children under preschool age. Latter model exists usually in countries which have a longer history of ECEC services, for example in Finland. In Austria both models coexist (Krippen/Kindergarten and mixed-aged groups). This report also states that in some European countries ECEC services suffer from lack of resources and regulation and thus also has poor quality. (Bruun Jensen et al. 2013, 17.)

The OECD Directorate for Education and Skills develop and analyse quantitative and internationally comparable indicators regarding educational aspects of member countries. OECD publishes reports, investigations and country-related reports based on international studies. (Karila 2016, 22.) The internationally comparable indicators are published annually in *Education at a Glance* –report, and the last report has been published in November 2015. Even though there is many different ECEC systems and structures in OECD countries, early childhood education and care is also taken into account on the thorough report. To decrease the variation in the definition of early childhood education and care between different countries, a new ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) level classification (level 0) has been created for early childhood education and care. (OECD 2015, 324 – 325.) As continuum of high quality well-functioning early childhood education, ISCED 0, is basic education. OECD measures the quality of basic education with PISA-testing (abbreviation of Programme for International Student Assessment): it investigates, how 15-year-old students have accomplished knowledge and skills needed in modern society (OECD 2016).

A growing trend in OECD countries seems to be to extend their early childhood education. In some countries as a result of the trend is that the enrolment age of compulsory education has been lowered, the childhood education has been made free of charge and programmes that integrate formal education with care has been created. (Ibid. 323.) Generally speaking OECD recommends its' member countries to invest in early childhood and children well-being due to many approving researches, summarizes a Eurofound workshop report Developing support to parents through early childhood services (2009, 3).

Education at a Glance –report (2015, 322) offers some basic info of early childhood education and care for example of enrolment ages, funding and carer-child –ratios. Comparison shows that in Europe we relate to ECEC somewhat differently than in other countries. In a majority of OECD countries education starts for most children before they are five years old: among OECD countries the enrolment rate is 74 % among three years old children, and in EU countries which are also part of OECD, the rate is 80 %. (OECD 2015, 322.) In Europe the publicly funded ECEC is more developed than in non-European countries: because the subjective right to ECEC is a common way of thinking in Europe, the governments subsidise it also. In addition the carer-child –ratio is lower in European countries (1:13) than in OECD in general (1:14). (Ibid. 329.)

3.3 Current State of ECEC in Austria and Finland

3.3.1 Wind of Change in Finland

Though day care system, the guidelines and the Act of Children's day care have changed a lot during the last decades, it clearly needs to be reformed thoroughly. The law is too ambiguous and the basis of the law is still in the 1970's. After long and thorough preparations (started officially in December 2012) the first stage of a new law of early childhood education and care came to effect in August 2015. As already said, one purpose is to emphasize children's needs and rights and children's parents'

status: to stress the children's and parent's participation in ECEC. (Alila & Kinos 2014, 12 – 14.)

Ministry of Education and Culture has done many background reports regarding the new law of early childhood education and care. According to one of them, "Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen" [Participate in ECEC] written by Alasuutari, Karila, Alila and Eskelinen (2014, 35) parents feel that Finnish ECEC partnership is good: trustful and respectful. On the other hand, parents are not satisfied with communication: they feel that they are not getting enough information about their children's day (basic care or daily activities) in ECEC services. This report deals with the need to emphasize the participation of parents and children. (Ibid. 35.) This issue has also been dealt with in another background report, Kohti varhaiskasvatustakia [Towards the new ECEC law] (2014, 46). These results and assumptions are guiding the analysis part of this research.

Because of the bad economic situation in Finland the state of ECEC is decreasing in the near future. Subjective right to day care is going to be changed: if the parents are not working but for example unemployed or at maternity leave, their children are allowed to be in day care centres only 20 hours in a week instead of 8 hours per day. The Finnish municipalities can decide if they take the subjective right to ECEC away or not – it is now allowed by Finnish government. (Nieminen 2015.) Also the child-carer ratio is getting worse: now it is seven over 3 year old children per one carer but in the near future it is going to be eight children per one carer (Liiten 2015). Also this change is possible but not obligatory for the municipalities. These changes are coming to effect in August 2016 (Varhaiskasvatustakia ja päivähoitoasetusta muutetaan [Changes in the Act and the Decree of Children's Day care] 2015). It is interesting to see, are the municipalities going to limit the subjective right to ECEC services or increase the group sizes and what is the direction of the ECEC in the near future. (Seppänen 2016.)

According to Schweppenstedde et al. (2016) who are citing OECD report, investing in ECEC is one of the most important things when avoiding poverty and exclusion: countries which spend highly on children have lower poverty rates all in all. They are

concerned if negative long-term effects may follow – Finland may thus be facing challenges in the near future. (Schweppenstedde, Janta & Gauttier 2016.)

Although there is going to be these decreases in Finnish ECEC services, there is also developing work going on: new national curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care are being prepared and planned to be ready in October 2016, after the new ECEC law, emphasizing the parents' and child's participation. The ECEC units should have them in practice in August 2017. (Vasu2017 – varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteiden uusiminen [Vasu2017 – renewing of the basis of the national curriculum guidelines on ECEC] 2016; Vasu2017 – verkkokomentointi [Vasu2017 –web commentary].)

According to the Europe 2020 –targets children under school age are at home quite much compared being in ECEC services in Finland; only 84 percent of four to six year old children took part in ECEC in 2013. EU has set goals for the amount of children participating ECEC and Finland is thus falling behind, even though the participating in ECEC and its' availability have been continuously increasing in OECD-countries. The EU goal for participation rate is 95, and it concerns children at the age of four to pre-school. The average EU percent is 93 percent. (Tuononen 2015.) Finland is at least near to reach the objective of the older age category (Reiter 2015, 41).

3.3.2 Current State of Austria

Unlike Finland, Austria is investing heavily to its childcare and improving the quality in childcare till 2017: the Government is making a €350 million investment in recent years (Austria: Generous support for families 2015; Work programme of the Austrian Federal Government 2013 – 2018 2013, 24). Though, Austria has spent less than 0,5 % of GDP on ECEC services – the former European Commission Childcare Network recommend 1 %, and for example Sweden spends 2 percent (Starting Strong 2006, 9). According to Eurostat data (2011), only 85 % of Austrian children aged three to compulsory school age were in ECEC services, when only 9 % of children under the age of three was participants of ECEC services (Barcelona Objectives 2015, 7). Thus the targets of Europe 2020 –strategy (at least 90 % of children between three years

old and compulsory school age and at least 33 % of children under three years of age) are not achieved in Austria (Barcelona Objectives 2015, 4). In Austria the ECEC services are used mainly on a part-time basis (less than 30 hours) (Reiter 2015, 39).

According to European Commission's Eurydice-statistics (2015) ECEC services are well established throughout Austria, but there are still differences between rural and urban areas. There is less ECEC services in rural areas because of low population density. Though the number of children under three years of age in ECEC services has significantly increased in all federal provinces: there has been a considerable progress towards meeting the Europe 2020 –targets for the both age categories between 2005 and 2011. (Early Childhood Education and Care 2015; Reiter 2015, 39, 40; Education and Training Monitor 2015 Austria 2015, 3.) Another objective of Austria's family policies is to develop elementary educational facilities to create the best overall view for supporting families with a few emphasis points: to develop the care of under three years old children and to sharpen the national curriculum guidelines for ECEC units. (Work programme of the Austrian Federal Government 2013 – 2018 2013, 24.)

The current state of ECEC in Austria is not dramatically changing. There is still three types of centre-based services: *Krippen* (for under three years old), *Kindergarten* (for 3 – 6 years old) and *Hort* (out-of-school service for 6 – 10 years old). Adding to these there is also *mixed-aged groups*, *parent-toddler groups* and *family day care*. (Starting Strong 2006, 16.) In Austria the ECEC services belong to the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs and the Austrian Federal for Family and Youth, and both of them has their own responsibilities (Early Childhood Education and Care 2015.) Even though the ministries have their responsibilities, every federal province has their own required standards and goals (Lindon 2000, 48). Thus it is challenging to have an all-embracing picture of Austrian ECEC services.

Austria's Lacks and Needs and Development Regarding ECEC

According to OECD's Starting Strong –project's Country Note for Austria (2006, 64) there was no national framework for ECEC system in Austria. The federal level had not created a nationwide educational plan, and ECEC services thus did not have joint

values, philosophy and objectives of early childhood education. Regarding to the Country Note (2006, 64) a shared pedagogical view can be seen across the country, so the conditions for creating a national curriculum would be good. Nationwide Framework Curriculum for Austrian ECEC services (Bundesländerübergreifender Bildungsrahmenplan für elementare Bildungseinrichtungen in Österreich) was thus created in 2009 to steer ECEC services in their work and has twelve principles of learning process and six educational fields. (Early Childhood Education and Care 2015.) In another case study of European Commission, 'Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care in preventing early school leaving', Hartel (2014, 10) criticises that all of the provinces do not set up a legal basis to implement the Austrian Framework Curriculum. Though a new framework law for quality in ECEC services is planned to be developed (ibid. 7).

Another result of that Starting Strong –project (2006, 66) was that the state of ECEC study is – and has been – extremely poor in Austria. There also is not a strong culture of quality improvements, ECEC staff support or professional development (ibid. 67; Early Childhood Education and Care 2015). For example, there is a Eurofound publication called Parenting Support in Austria (Kapella, Buchebner-Ferstl, Geserick 2012), which deals comprehensively with parental support and its' various models in Austria, but there is no mentions about parental support or involvement in ECEC services. On the other hand, the report shows that there is plenty of parental support available in Austria even necessarily not in ECEC services (Crebaldi et al. 2012, 13).

With slight to none English information about national guidelines or any studies it is challenging for researcher to interpret Austrian's endeavours regarding early childhood education or importance of ECEC partnership (Teaching and Learning Austria 2015). The lack of English studies might refer that ECEC and ECEC partnership is not that important or acknowledged in Austria.

3.3.3 Finland and Austria: Comparison

The arranging methods and institutions of ECEC differ in different countries greatly, thus it's really challenging to do comparable statistics of ECEC and day care systems.

There is no single system for collecting information either, and in individual countries there might be many internal differences between regions in arranging ECEC. (Tuononen 2015; OECD 2015, 322; Lindon 2000, 42.) It is also noticeable that Finnish ECEC politics and discussion has been diverged from other European countries: when other countries (including Austria) discuss about investing in ECEC in the long period of time, in Finland discussion concentrates on short timespan expenses – ECEC is not seen as investment. Another way Finland differentiates is the disagreement about advantages and disadvantages of ECEC executed at home or outside home. (Karila 2016, 7.)

OECD does some significant work researching the field of education and also early childhood education and care. Education at a Glance –report (2015, 322) shows some differences and similarities between Finnish and Austrian ECEC services and enrolment rates in year 2013. As we can see in Figure 3, Finnish enrolment rates are 69 % (at three years of age) and 74 % (at four years of age). Austria’s corresponding enrolment rates are 71 % and 92 %. Finland is thus falling behind in both rates compared to OECD average of 73 % and 88 %, but Austria is keeping up the good work comparing to OECD and also to European average rates.

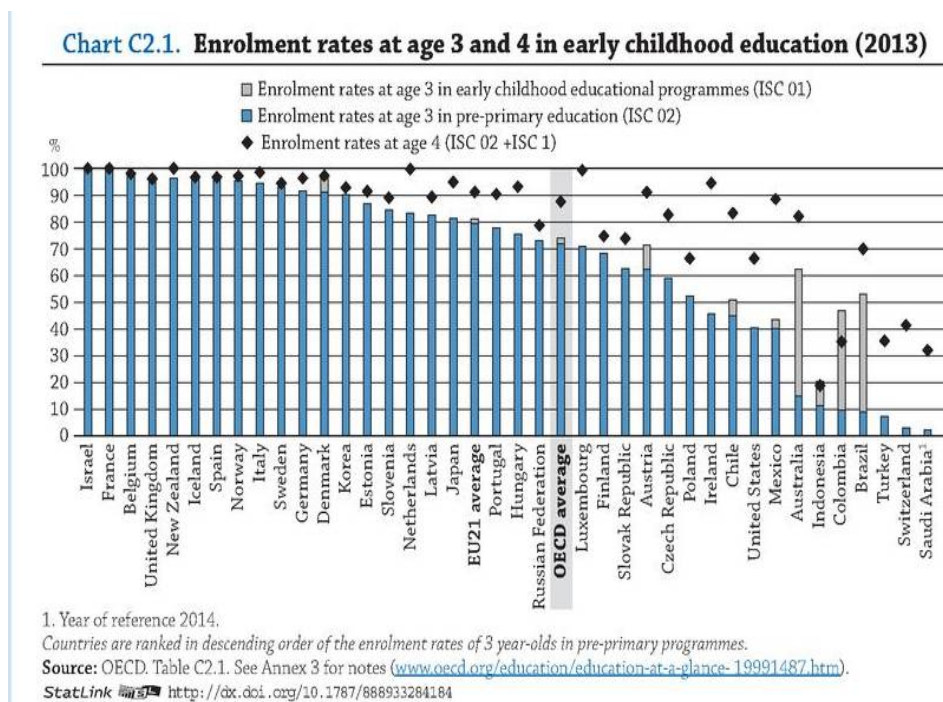
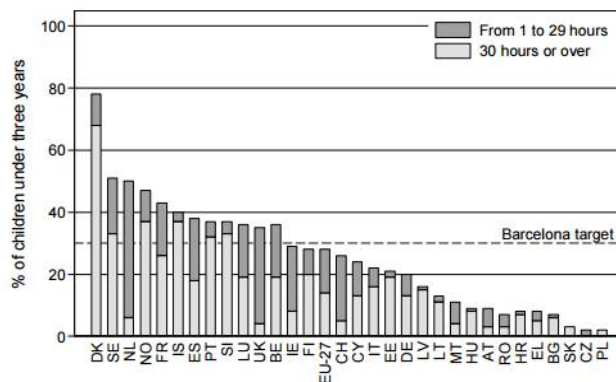


Figure 3. Enrolment rates at age 3 and 4 in early childhood education 2013 (OECD 2015, 322).

When comparing the enrolment rates in European Union level and mirroring to Barcelona Targets (33 %), Austria is quite falling behind on the behalf of children under three years old (Figure 4). Finland is at European average level but has not reached the target also. It is also noticeable that in Austria almost all of the formal care of children under three years old is part-time when in Finland most of the care is full-time. (Mills et al. 2014, 5.)



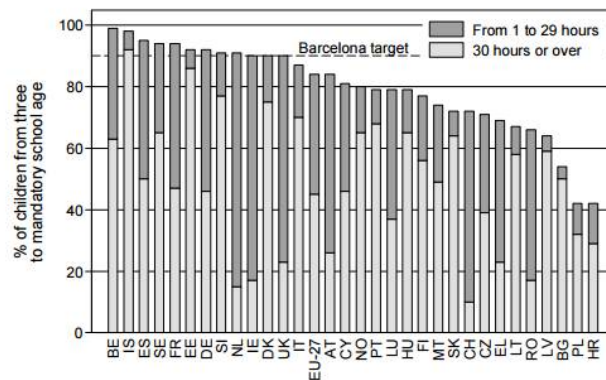
SOURCE: Eurostat, ilc_caindformal, extracted: 12 December 2013.

NOTE: Eurostat has flagged that for Finland (FI) there has been a break in the time series for both data points.

Figure 4. Percentage of children up to three years of age cared for by formal arrangements by weekly time spent in care, 2010 (Mills et al. 2014, 6).

When studying the children over three years old, the Barcelona target is much higher: 90 %. With this target, Austria is at European average level and almost reaching the target, but Finland is falling behind with 78 %. In Austria the rates seem to be increasing both in children under and over three years old age groups (Education and Training Monitor 2015 Austria 2015, 3). In this age group the division between part-time and full-time care is the same: in Austria the part-time care is more popular and in Finland the full-time care is more common. (Mills et al. 2014, 6.)

Figure 2: Percentage of children from three years of age to mandatory school age cared for by formal arrangements by weekly time spent in care, 2010



SOURCE: Eurostat, ilc_caindformal, extracted: 12 December 2013.

NOTE: Mandatory school age varies by country. See Appendix A for a summary. Eurostat has flagged that for Finland (FI) there has been a break in the time series for both data points.

Figure 5. Percentage of children from three years of age to mandatory school age cared for by formal arrangements by weekly time spent in care, 2010 (Mills et al. 2014, 6).

Also the guiding legislation differs. In Finland there is a bureaucratic system of national law, decree and curriculum guidelines of many levels (national, municipal, ECEC unit and child), which affect and define the ECEC very strongly. Every unit has to follow these documents and municipality authorities are regulating the work of ECEC services. (Early Childhood Education and Care Finland 2016.) In Austria the laws differ by provinces and there is no regulating national curriculum, only recommendations and steering documents. (Teaching and Learning Austria 2015.)

Finance policies differ also. Austria is investing heavily on ECEC and Finland is tightening the ECEC conditions to save money. Austria also has bigger enrolment rates in every age group, but great differences occur depending on area (rural or urban.) In 2011 the situation was that Austria spent less than 0.5 % of GDP to early childhood education and care, and Finland spent over 1.0 %. Austria is below both OECD average and European Union average, when Finland is above them both. In fact according to OECD studies Finland's ECEC expenses are the second highest of all (Tuononen 2015). It is interesting to see how these numbers change when Austria is investing in ECEC services and Finland is decreasing the investments in ECEC. (Sturm 2015, 43.) A known fact is that investments in ECEC profits 7 – 10 % per year (Karila 2016, 20).

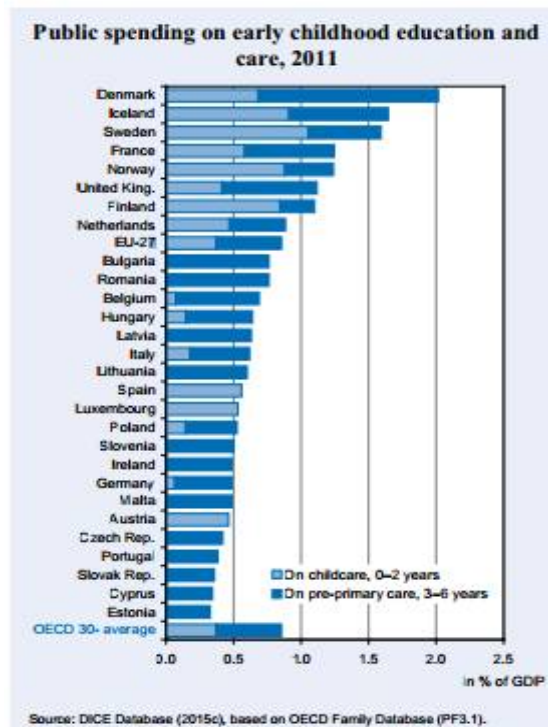


Figure 6. Public spending on early childhood education and care, 2011 (Sturm 2015, 43).

As said in the introduction of thesis, ECEC is the first part of life-long learning, and thus it is taken into consideration in for example OECD education reports – current studies and international comparisons show that high quality ECEC has positive effects in child's success at studies later on. According to OECD the pupils who have been at least a year in day care or in pre-school are succeeding in PISA-tests better than those who have not taken part in ECEC. The effect of parents' social-economic state was taken into account also. It appears that the longer children have ECEC the more positive effect it has on the PISA-results – with this indicator Austria is ahead of Finland (OECD 2015, 322). Finland has lower participant rates, but it has also always done well in international qualitative and quantitative comparisons. (Tuononen 2015.)

4 Guiding Documents and Laws

4.1 Finland

The whole Finnish ECEC system is guided by *the Act on Children's Day Care*. The law has been recently reformed and the new law was executed in August 2015. At the same time the name of the law was changed: now it is called the ECEC law. Some of the reforms were implemented in August 2015 – some with transition time – and some of them will be implemented in August 2016 (Lahtinen 2016). These reforms were already handled in earlier chapter of current state of Finland.

In Finnish ECEC system we also have a document '*National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care*'. It is a national guidebook which every ECEC unit is following according to the Act on Children's Day Care (now the ECEC law). The purpose of this document is to improve and guide the content of Finnish ECEC in practise. It is created by ECEC specialists in 2003 (in Finnish) and translated in English 2004. Because the renewing of the law, also this national version of guidelines is to be reformed. It is about to be ready in 2016, steering units and cities towards achieving the objectives set in the new ECEC law. (Vasu-asiakirja [National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland] 2015; Karila 2016, 35.) This document is meant to be the basis of cities' and ECEC units' own defined version of guidelines. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 2; Vasu-asiakirja [National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland] 2015; Kahiluoto 2009.) The transition time of the law is concerning cities' and ECEC units' renewed versions of curriculum guidelines: they have to be ready in August 2017 (L 580/2015).

Heikkilä et al. (2004, 9, 10, 29) aligns that every city has made their own *defined version of national guidelines* to meet city's own special values. Every ECEC unit has also *a specific curriculum* created to meet the unit's special emphases and values based on the national and the city's guidelines. This document is always in hand in ECEC units and parents should have an opportunity to influence its content and participate in its evaluation. All staff members and parents should be aware of its content and

principles which are effecting the daily life in ECEC unit. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 29; Kahiluoto 2009.)

One of the most important part of ECEC partnership in Finland is *every child's individual ECEC plan* which is based on the national guidelines and the unit-specific plan. It takes into consideration the child's experiences, interests, strengths and individual needs for support and guidance. In discussions with parents staff is undergoing the positive aspects of child's development. Concerns and challenges related to child's well-being are also brought up – to find possible solutions together with parents. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 29.)

This individual ECEC plan is created by the child's parents and the staff. It is made at the start of the care relationship and updated at least once a year in an official discussion between parents and staff. This discussion can be referred as bilateral parent-teacher meeting (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe 2014, 133). In the plan there is individual aims and goals for the child and the parent's views in arranging the child's care. With the plan staff can systematically observe the child's development and lead the development to the direction agreed in the plan. With the plan, the aims and the observation the staff can plan activities which lead the child towards his/hers goals. (Ibid. 29.) This plan is following the child even if the place of day care is changing – it is a document where the child's development and possible need of support is reported.

Although it is the most common way of implementing ECEC partnership through Europe (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 133), the official bilateral ECEC discussion is only one way to execute the ECEC partnership in Finnish day care system. It is demanded by the ECEC law and that is the reason why it is so important. Other methods to execute ECEC partnership are everyday drop off and pick up –conversations and home visits (which are optional and usually made at the start of the care relationship). In everyday conversations the partnership is created and developed even deeper and equal, and little pieces of information are shared every day concerning the child's development, activities or family's situation at the mo-

ment. These daily conversations might even be more important when developing the relationship between parents and ECEC staff.

The new ECEC law is an essential change in Finnish ECEC culture. The new, significant feature of the law is pedagogical emphasis: planned and goal-oriented upbringing, teaching and care. The basis of the new law is child's rights: ECEC objectives are considered from child's point of view. The international researches about educational equality and equal possibilities to ECEC has been taken into consideration in the new law to improve the effects of high-quality ECEC. (Karila 2016, 29.) ECEC partnership is described as supporting child's balanced growth and development together with parents and support parents in this task. (Karila 2016, 30).

Like mentioned before, also Karila (2016, 41) reminds that the new law emphasises also the participation of children and parents: they have to have the possibility to impact on planning, developing, executing and evaluating ECEC services. This possibility has to be arranged on regular basis. This means that new practices has to be created in partnership and cooperation, and in the creation the parents' participation is essential.

4.2 Austria

In OECD's Starting Strong –project's Country Note for Austria (2006, 28, 61) it is said that there is only provincial laws guiding the legal requirements for ECEC services: no nationwide standards exist. Provincial laws delineate the legal requirements of child care institutions (e.g. facility standards and the employment of qualified staff) – every province, *Bundesländer*, has their own "kindergarten law". Challenge is also that there is no obligatory nationwide framework on educational and teaching quality. Since each province monitors early childhood education and care independently, it is challenging to make research that is accurate for the whole of Austria. (Ibid. 28, 61; Crebaldi et al. 2012, 13.)

There is a National Framework Curriculum for Austrian ECEC services created in 2009 and implemented since gradually. It is not a legal document to follow, only steering the quality and describing and emphasizing some fields of education, for example emotions, social relationships, creativity or nature. Each province can modify and detail the National Framework Curriculum to meet their own standards and each child's special needs. In the National version of Curriculum there is no developmental goals for children either. (Hartel 2014, 12 – 13.)

When talking about ECEC partnership, the National Framework Curriculum of Austria is shortly qualifying the collaboration between ECEC staff and parents but not setting any requirements or goals for ECEC partnership (Hartel 2014, 13). On the other hand, certain aspects of parents' participation are regulated by provincial laws. For example the number of parent-teacher-conferences is legally regulated in 7 provinces (one to three conferences per year). In Lower Austria there is a legal obligation for individual conversations of the development of the child between parents and kindergarten teachers, in Styria for cooperation and in Salzburg for parents' councils. (Hartel 2011, 39.) In practice, various kinds of partnership is executed, for example pick-up and drop-off –conversations and parents' evenings (Hartel 2014, 13). Adding to parents' evenings and informal conversations with parents, also intake interviews, info boards and info letters to parents are the most widespread form of parental engagement. On demand, the ECEC providers also offer another kinds of ECEC partnership: developmental or counselling conversations and parents' councils – it also depends on the province. In Innsbruck parents' motions might even be financially supported when they are adapting the political goals and means. (Ibid. 17.)

According to Hartel (2014, 17) in ECEC staff education partnership with parents is strongly stressed. Though experts say that ECEC staff is not well enough trained to work with parents. In practise there is some challenges to implement the partnership: lack of time and space (no office rooms) and sometimes poor training of staff make partnership challenging.

One way to execute ECEC services in Austria is parent-toddler groups, which are organized by parents. They are also pedagogically responsible of these groups. OECD

observers think that these kind of groups involve parents in a positive way in the children's early education and socialisation. These groups can be found in provinces of Tyrol, Vorarlberg and Carinthia. (Starting Strong 2006, 19.) This can be thought to be one way of parents' participating in ECEC services.

5 ECEC Partnership: Important Relationship between Parents and ECEC Staff

Next chapter is about ECEC partnership and its' special features in general: how mutual trust and respect is created and what kind of effect it has in everyday life of child in ECEC. There is also a glance to a European level of practices in ECEC partnership. A slight bit of Finnish development of ECEC partnership is also introduced based mainly on Kekkonen's (2012a) dissertation.

5.1 Good Qualities of ECEC Partnership in General

It is a great life change for the child to start in day care. These transition periods are significant events in children's and families' lives and they need to be prepared well (Johnston & Halocha 2010, 196). Karikoski and Tiilikka (2011, 78) say that there is a chance that there is no connection between child's different developmental environments (e.g. home, day care and school) or the connection is poor – also Kaskela and Kekkonen (2011, 15), Niikko (2006, 145) and Johnston and Halocha (2010, 190) emphasize the mutual trust and shared responsibility between ECEC staff and parents. This is a challenge to ECEC partnership: the child may meet different expectations or demands at home, day care, pre-school or school. With well-planned and active ECEC partnership these expectations should be discussed and met with every partner in ECEC partnership. (Karikoski & Tiilikka, 2011, 78.) Karikoski and Tiilikka (2011, 80, 85) state also that studies show that when a child first proceeds from home to day care the essential factors for a successful process are

- ECEC staffs' and parents' collaboration and the creation of a basis for ECEC partnership
- taking care of child's safe transition and hers/his safe attachment.

When starting in ECEC services an active, intensive and sensitive way of working and discussing with family creates experiences of respect which helps to achieve trust and confidence. (Karikoski & Tiilikka 2011, 80, 85.)

In the middle of ECEC partnership is the child: her/his interests, needs and rights. The child is best fostered when parents and ECEC staff combine their knowledge of the child. Niikko (2006, 145) although notes that parents are the main teachers of the child who define the values and aims for the upbringing of the child. This requires time, reciprocity and many discussions about family's – and ECEC units' – values, views, rights and responsibilities. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 28; Heinämäki 2008, 9; Developing support to parents through early childhood services 2009, 7.)

An important approach of ECEC partnership is to identify the child's possible need for support in some areas of growth, development or learning. It is also important to collaborate with parents to create a common strategy for supporting the child. When the interaction between parents and ECEC staff is equal and trusting from the beginning, it is easier to discuss also about more challenging topics. (Heikkilä et al 2004, 28; Niikko 2006, 145.)

Even if the functional and respectful ECEC partnership is commonly acknowledged and some studies verify that it is well implemented in practice, some opposite views also exist for example about the responsibilities of parents or ECEC staff (Niikko 2006, 146; Kekkonen 2009, 163; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante 2015, 68). Niikko (2006, 147) continues that even if the ECEC staff and parents are sometimes disagreeing of the details of the education of the child, several researches show that all the stakeholder groups consider ECEC partnership important. These results are equally volatile as the background reports of Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture published.

Most European countries emphasise the importance of ECEC partnership in their guidebooks. Many countries recommend also the types of support that day care

places should provide to parents. Different kinds of information sessions and bilateral parent-teacher discussions, including guidance on home-learning are the most common. Parenting programmes, specific courses for parents, or home visits are rarely organised. (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe 2014, 133.)

According to Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe –report (2014, 133) the most common form of ECEC partnership is through information sessions and bilateral parent-teacher meetings. These discussions should form a steady background for a daily dialogue between families and ECEC staff. Parents get information on their child's activities and growth and also can discuss their child's education with ECEC staff.

In Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care In Europe -report (2014, 135) it is claimed that as the topic of ECEC partnership has become increasingly important, several countries including Austria emphasize initial education and continuing professional development programmes for ECEC staff regarding especially collaboration with parents. Also a Eurofound workshop report Developing support to parents through early childhood services (2009, 7) recommends to emphasise parental involvement.

5.2 The Development of ECEC Partnership in Finland

In Finland Doctor Marjatta Kekkonen has been studying the ECEC partnership a lot. She (2012a, 27) says that as the societal changes have been made and happening, the ECEC partnership has developed beside it. Social, political and economic reforms have been changing the missions and the relations of family and day care. In Finland the real discussion about ECEC partnership has been possible not until the 21st century, says Kekkonen (2012a, 28.) Crebaldi et al. (2012, 13) add Mary Daly's view about parental support and societal change: public sector intervening this area of child upbringing, which used to be very private for families.

In the 1960's the mission of day care system was to support and complete home education in the framework of child services. The societal opinion didn't support working mothers but considered that their children leave without care and that is the reason day care system was needed. Further in 1970's there was not favourable atmosphere for ECEC partnership: working mothers and child's participation in ECEC was secondary to home education, and the weaknesses of parents has to be compensated by the professional early childhood education and care (ibid. 34). Even though in the 1980's the child home care allowance and the day care services were improved in Finland, there was still this confrontation between home education and ECEC in day care. They were considered quite opposite value judgments and excluded each other. (Ibid. 28 – 29, 33.)

In 1983 there was an addition in Act on Children's day care: the goal of day care was to support the home education of the children in day care services and work towards balanced development of child's personality. In this way the basis of ECEC partnership was created; although in this alignment the parents were the primary educators and partners but also still in the need of advice. Day care services had to absorb partnership with parents as a one operating model to really support the home education. (Ibid. 34.) Kekkonen (2012a, 29) says that despite of the new alignment, the confrontation continued till the beginning of the 1990's and was changing not until 1996 when the subjective right of day care was published. Then the child's participation to day care services was not any more dependent of parents being at work. (Ibid. 29.)

Gradually the ECEC partnership was taking shape in speech, practises, publications and studies. Still the ECEC partnership was based on the ECEC staffs' professional support and guidance towards parents: their knowledge was superior to parents' knowledge. This was the dominant way to execute ECEC partnership until 21st century – nationally and internationally thinking. (Ibid. 35.)

First national document which was stating the parent – ECEC staff –collaboration as ECEC partnership was the Decision in Principle of the Council of State Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2002.) It (2002, 9)

aligns that interaction and educational partnership between children, ECEC staff and parents is essential and the main job in ECEC services is to support the parents with home education (ibid. 12, also Kekkonen 2012a, 30).

National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (Heikkilä et al. 2004) continued to define the requirements, practises and goals of ECEC partnership, and it also states the responsibilities and principles of the execution of it. Now the emphasis is on equality and trust between parents and ECEC staff rather than the ECEC staff status as an adviser. (Ibid., also Kekkonen 2012a, 30.)

Currently ECEC partnership is seen as a dialogue: a shared effort where all information of the child and all available resources are used to achieve mutual goal: healthy, happy, balanced child. It is a central aim for ECEC staff to have a natural collaboration with parents (Niikko 2006, 145). This is the atmosphere in 21st century – attention is in the customer's status, rights and participation. Kekkonen (2012a, 38) says that family is in the centre of working: families are taken along to find out the solutions to problems regarding ECEC, but still the parents are in the need of guidance and advice in home education. Parents' expertise of their own child is seen very valuable. The core is shared responsibility. (Ibid. 38.)

Kekkonen (2012a, 32) also questions the attitudes towards ECEC partnership: when parents express different kind of values, questions, concerns, needs or attitudes about child's education, care and learning, how are they interpreted? Are they interpreted as ignorance or weaknesses, or as parents' initiatives to strengthen their own expertise of the child? ECEC partnership can also be seen as a discussion about the always moving borderline between family and day care services, their responsibilities and obligations. (2012a, 32.)

Kalliala (2012) gives another kind of criticism towards ECEC partnership. She states courageously that in Finnish ECEC services staff focuses primarily on ECEC partnership and parent-staff discussions, not on child education and care. According to Kalliala (2012, 91) the reason for this wrong emphasis is the past of ECEC services under the social services. She (2012, 91) also cites other researchers and experts who think

that the use of practices of child welfare and social services do not belong to ECEC services and diminish the value of education. The solution she presents is to guide parents to get help for their existing problems from the real professionals. (Kalliala 2012, 90 – 92.)

6 Methodology

In the next chapter the research method, data gathering methods, data analysis methods and verification of the findings are being introduced consisting of theory background and aims for this research.

6.1 A Case Study: an Approach Rather than a Research Method

This research is a qualitative case study. A case study is focusing on definite, contemporary social phenomenon in exact, real-life environment and the purpose is to study this phenomenon using versatile sources and research methods (data gathering triangulation) – a case study is not only a qualitative method but can also use quantitative data and information. The phenomenon should be defined quite exactly and holistically: usually the research subject is a social phenomenon. According to Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 22) a case study is not only a research method but also a data gathering and analysing method – it is quite a complex concept, an approach or strategy rather than a method. (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 181, 189; Yin 2014, 2.)

Saarela-Kinnunen and Eskola (2015, 181, 189) says that a case study gives an opportunity to get a deep and thorough view of one phenomenon or subject because of versatile use of data gathering methods. Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 7) and Punch (2004, 150) add that a case study is usually contextual: the researched phenomenon is a part of a certain environment. This deep view in a specific environment can also be a challenge: the results may be difficult to compare due to narrow sample. On the

other hand in case studies a holistic understanding of the phenomenon is more important than generalisation (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 185).

The reliability and the effects of the researcher are also a matter of criticism. Yin (2014, 76) reminds that usually the case study researcher already knows the issue or phenomenon beforehand and the understanding pushes the researcher towards the supporting evidence, away from the contrary. (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 182; Punch 2004, 150.) According to Bergman and Coxon (2005) the possibly limited subjectivity of researcher is also a natural matter which can be dealt with in various ways: the subjectivity can be accepted as an inevitable deficiency, it can be seen as a grievance that can be partially avoided through methodological reflection or the subjectivity can be adopted as a part of the research.

To be exact, this research is an instrumental case study, which is interested in issue questions (specific qualities) rather than information questions (practical facts) (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 23). Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 16) refer to Stake (1995) explaining that with an instrumental case study it is possible to understand something more than just the specific case – analytic, rather than statistical generalisation. (Yin 2014, 26; Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 185.) The original case is interesting due to common themes which are implemented through research questions. (Punch 2004, 152.)

In this study the purpose is to clarify parents' opinions and point of views about ECEC partnership and participation. ECEC partnership as social phenomenon is happening in real-life environment, and is researched in three day care centres. The phenomenon is approached through diverse data gathering methods to achieve a holistic understanding of these day care centres' ECEC partnership practices and participation especially through parents' eyes. Another objective about the comparison – and through that, to develop new practices and documents – is going to be achieved by choosing the researched ECEC units to correspond researcher's own working place. Even though the comparison cannot be made through statistics due to narrow sample, the other qualities of these three ECEC units are analysed to be alike and that is why some comparison can be made.

Research through Yin's Flowchart

Robert K. Yin (2014) is a "guru" of the case study method and has created a flowchart to clear out the process of case study. (Figure 7.) Also other researchers have been studying the concept of a case study and made their own stages of a case study process (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 22). In this chapter I'm going to explain my research through Yin's process.

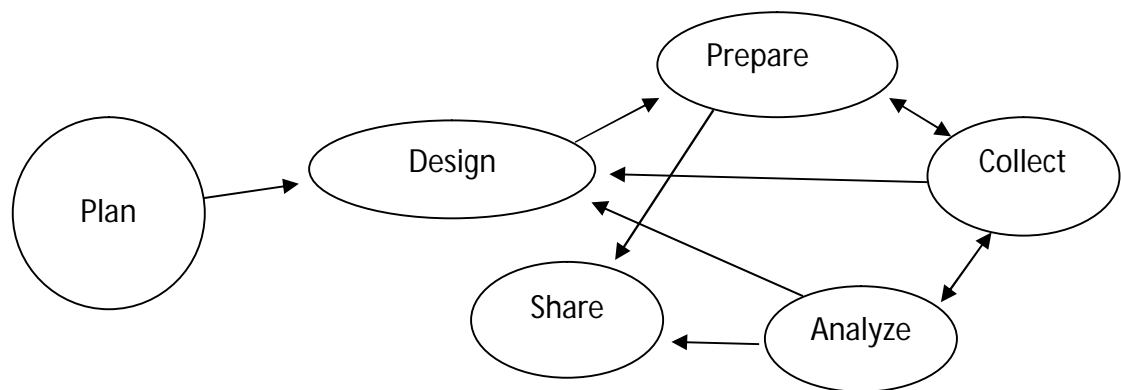


Figure 7. Yin's figure of process of case study (Yin 2014).

First step of case study is to *plan*. The most important thing is to identify the relevant situation, compare the research methods and to understand the two essential qualities of a case study: investigating contemporary situation and data triangulation. (Yin 2014, 2.) The purpose of this research was to study the social phenomenon of parent participation in three private day care centres. The idea is to accomplish current, thorough information of contemporary phenomenon through "how" and "why" questions with three different data gathering methods explained later. (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 182.)

According to Yin (2014, 26) next step is to *design*, when the cases are defined and theory is developed. The encompassing theory review and ground of this study makes it easier to do possible generalizations and conclusions of the gathered data. In this stage it is also important to define the 'case': set bounds to the case and examine the quality of the study through construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. (Yin 2014, 26; Punch 2004, 153.) These qualities are going to be examined later in this thesis.

After designing it is time to *prepare* (Yin 2014, 70). In this phase the researcher is training for the certain case study and developing a protocol for the study, choosing the final cases and managing a pilot case study. Before the real study, the questions of this research were tested by many pilot answerers and colleagues and the protocol of the study was conducted.

In Yin's (2014, 102) flowchart the next step is *collecting* – consisting of four principles. First one is data triangulation from different sources which enriches the study (e.g. Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 30; Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 181). Data gathering methods used in this research are questionnaire with open questions, observation and inspection of ECEC documents. After gathering the data creates a database where to return when needed – Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 31) also recommend this. Thirdly it is important to sustain chain of evidence and the last principle is to be careful if using data from electronic sources. (Yin 2014, 102.)

Important part of process is to *analyse* (Yin 2014, 132). In this stage the data can be classified and demonstrated in different ways, promising patterns and models can be looked for and analytic strategy can be developed. Competitive interpretations must stay in mind the whole time. Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 33) state that analysing is the most difficult part of the study: even the purpose of the research and the research questions are under evaluation again. Remler and Van Ryzin (2011, 75) also remind that analysis often happens simultaneously with the data gathering. Analysis part of this research is introduced later in the thesis.

Last part of the flowchart is *sharing* (Yin 2014, 176). Identifying the readers for the versatile, explicit report which contains enough evidence for the audience to accomplish their own implications is an important part of the process. Yin (2014, 176) recommends that the report is to review until it is well done. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 40.)

6.2 Data Gathering Methods

When doing a qualitative research, written or spoken representations are studied. In a case study, the data triangulation is an important demand for the research reliability (Punch 2004, 190). The versatile use of different sources allows researcher to possibly generalise the studied issue or phenomenon in a more reliable way (Yin 2014, 120). To make this research more valid and reliable, there are three different kinds of data collection methods used: observation, questionnaire and data examination. (Punch 2004, 174.)

According to Punch (2004, 192) when choosing the data to be examined, there are four different things to maximise the quality of data: to plan the data collection, to pre-test any instruments, to make sure that data collection approaches are professional and ethical and to train the collection methods. These procedures are examined later on in this chapter.

6.2.1 Examining Documents

One way to do qualitative research is to *examine existing documents* (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 62; Punch 2004, 190). According to Yin (2014, 106) the documents are stable and not created because of the case study and due to these reasons, they are trustworthy. In this case study the purpose is to examine the curriculum guidelines of early childhood education and care in these day care centres – especially the ECEC partnership and participation part of the curriculum – and assimilate it to the observations and field notes made in drop-off or pick-up –situations and the web-questionnaire. The units' curriculum is a public document for anyone to see, and can be found in internet. The values and objectives concerning ECEC partnership and participation are introduced in curriculum and thus it is essential to mirror the parents' thoughts and behaviour to the objectives in curriculum. The document is going to be examined page by page and every mentioning about parents, ECEC partnership and participation is going to be taken into consideration.

6.2.2 Observation

According to Punch (2004, 185) in a qualitative research *observation* is a data collection technique used in an unstructured way. Researcher usually does not categorise or classify the observations but makes them in a natural, open-minded way. (Punch 2004, 185; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 102.) The research questions can also become more precise due to observations. With unstructured observation larger patterns can be examined and that supports the holistic nature of a case study – contextually (Yin 2014, 106). Then, as a disadvantage, the analysing of the data can be more demanding. (Punch 2004, 185.) Challenge is also that observation can be subjective when the researcher notices matters only from her point of view – some relevant matters may not be noticed (Eskola and Suoranta (2008, 102). This was also the case in this observation: the research questions about parental participation and developing practices steered the observation sessions but also other matters were noticed – intentionally or not. In addition, naturally, researcher's own point of view effected the sessions.

The chosen technique for this research is unstructured observation completed with field notes to accomplish a more holistic view of ECEC partnership and parents' participation especially through their actions – to achieve a deep understanding of the phenomenon. The observation is going to be complete and unobtrusive, so the people in the setting – the parents in the day care centre – were not engaged with it. (Punch 2004, 187; Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 71, 73.) Two observations were made for this research in one day care centre: one in drop-off situation in the morning inside the day care centre and one pick-up situation in the afternoon in the play yard outside. Both situations lasted over an hour and included many parent-staff-child encounters. The purpose was to be unobtrusive: just to be present and make notes about parents' behaviour and communication between ECEC staff and parents in these situations – not to participate in any way in day care centre's actions or the encounters. Parents did not ask about my presence – they were informed earlier and had the chance to refuse to be observed. If the parents greeted, they were answered with a greeting or a smile. Majority of the parents did not pay attention to researcher – children did, but not when their parents were present. Thus it did not impact on the observations or writing the field notes.

6.2.3 Questionnaire

Questionnaires or surveys are one common way to collect data in both quantitative and qualitative studies (Hirsjärvi 2009b, 193). With a questionnaire a wide data collection can be made quite effortlessly, but there are also disadvantages: uncertainty of the respondents' attitudes and of the reliability of the questionnaire have to be considered beforehand (ibid. 195). According to Remler and Van Ryzin (2011, 216) there are various types of questionnaires, surveys and polls but in this study the questionnaire is a web-based questionnaire (ibid. 221) with open-ended questions (ibid. 227). The researcher has to be careful when designing a questionnaire with open-ended questions: the questions have to be very clear and there cannot be too many questions which tire the respondent (ibid. 227, 228). Also the analysis of the answers can be time consuming (ibid. 228).

In this study the hyperlink of the questionnaire is sent to parents of three ECEC units' via e-mail with an explaining cover letter. Parents are reminded of the questionnaire a couple of times – both written and spoken reminders. The Finnish questionnaire consists of six themed, open-ended questions and some background questions. The questions, their order in questionnaire, their interrogatives and the themes have been considered and designed thoroughly and pretested, as many professionals recommend (e.g. Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 214, 224; Hirsjärvi 2009, 198). It is done with Webropol-software which is a software for creating various types of questionnaires and analysing the results – user-friendly for both the researcher and respondent. The purpose of choosing open-ended questions is that they allow the respondents to ponder the issues more carefully and thoroughly, giving deeper and more precise answers to the questions and really show what the respondents consider important when with a close-ended or structured questions the answers can be perfunctory – open-ended questions serve better the idea of a case study. (Hirsjärvi 2009b, 201.) The original idea of researching just one day care centre did not work: the response rate of the questionnaire was low, so two other ECEC units of same private owner was taken along to achieve the saturation point – that is when no new questions or issues are not arising anymore (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 75). The at-

tainment of the saturation point is dealt with later. The objective is to clarify parents' opinions about ECEC partnership and participation through the questionnaire.

6.3 Thematic Analysis

The purpose of analysing qualitative data is to make somewhat dispersed data distinct – maybe produce new information about the researched issue (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 137). Punch (2004, 199) says that the complexity of qualitative research means that there are various ways of analysing the qualitative data – the choice of analysing method depends on the purposes of the research. Although the chosen analysing method has to be described, systematic and disciplined (Ibid. 200). Braun and Clarke (2006, 7, 9) state that analysis method has to be explained to allow evaluation of the research and possible comparison to other studies, and all of the choices need to be made explicit and discussed.

Eskola and Suoranta (2008, 161) state though that usually the analysing methods blend together when doing research. Hirsjärvi (2009c, 223) and Remler and Van Ryzin (2011, 75) add that analysis can – and should – be made both during and after the data gathering. Even before the data gathering the researcher can create preliminary themes that can be used during analysis part – this was done also in this research. Remler and Van Ryzin (2011, 75) introduce three steps of qualitative data analysis, and Braun and Clarke (2006, 16) add their own views regarding especially thematic analysis:

- preparing and organizing the data – getting familiar with the data
- reducing the data – coding the data along the previous choices of theory-driven approach, searching the themes, reviewing, defining and naming them
- presenting the data – producing the report.

The purpose for this research is to understand the studied phenomenon of ECEC partnership. In this case study the gathered data is a basis or tool for interpretations made through thematic content analysis (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 145). The purpose is not to code the data freely afterwards but to use beforehand designed themes

(Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 150, 174). The themes have been selected following the research questions about **the parents' opinions** (which the questionnaire clarifies), **the real practises** in day care centres (which are examined through the observation sessions) and **the participation of parents** (which is taken into consideration in the ECEC unit's curriculum and implemented in practise in the observation) and they capture something essential about the researched data (Braun & Clarke 2006, 10). Instead of a thorough description and interpretation of the whole data, the purpose in this study is to pick the researched themes beforehand regarding interesting matter of a parental point of view (Braun & Clarke 2006, 11; Joffe & Yardley 2004, 59). These themes are taken into consideration when creating the questionnaire, doing the observations and examining the curriculum guidelines of ECEC units – and when analysing the gathered data finding patterns and differences.

Thematic analysis is a method for analysing and reporting themes within the data. It organises and describes the researched data in detail – it also interprets aspects of the researched topic. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 6.) It is not combined to any pre-existing theoretical framework so it can be used within many frameworks – that is why it is essential to make the theoretical position of the research clear. Thematic analysis can be a realist method which reports experiences of the participants – like this research – or it can be a constructionist method which examines the ways in which experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. Along with these two explanations it also can be a contextualist method combining these two approaches. Therefore thematic analysis can be a method which both reflects reality and unveils the surface of reality. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 9.)

Braun and Clarke (2006, 5) remind that through the theoretical freedom of thematic analysis it provides a useful and adjustable analysis tool: it can potentially provide rich and detailed data concerning many theoretical frameworks. An absence of clear guidelines around thematic analysis has emerged critique of qualitative research – there is no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how it is to be done. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 5.)

In this research one purpose of the study was to compare the results to corresponding ECEC units – analytic induction. The results are developed from the data and then raised to a higher level (Punch 2004, 201). Analytic induction can also be seen as studying evidence that challenges the results: noticing also the exceptions of the assumptions and results (Punch 2004, 202; Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 76). This is also what Eskola and Suoranta (2008, 139) consider as more modern way of doing qualitative analysis: rather than searching for similarities among the data, seeking of differences or complexity of data is more interesting.

On the other hand, Braun and Clarke (2006, 12) introduce theoretical thematic analysis which is more researcher-driven and provides less a rich description of the data overall and a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the research data. This criteria indicates that this research of ECEC partnership is somehow theoretically analysed in addition to inductive analysis. Theoretical approach is also good when searching answers for a quite specific research questions as in this study.

Another disjunctive element Braun and Clarke (2006, 13) and Joffe and Yardley (2004, 57) explain is the difference between semantic, explicit level or latent, interpretative level. This study concentrates on latent level: it introduces assumptions and underlying ideas going further than just a semantic description of the data. Latent level of analysis tries to give the designed themes forms and meanings – interpretations of the data.

Documents can be analysed in special way according to Punch (2004, 231). The analysis of documents always has to be done in their social context, one point of view, and the knowledge of the context always has an influence on its interpretation (Punch 2004, 231; Atkinson & Coffey 2004, 73; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 142). In this research the examined document is the curriculum guidelines of the researched day care centres. They have the same owner, so they have the same curriculum. It has to be remembered that this document does not represent alone or thoroughly the practices of the ECEC partnership of these day care centres but is an essential tool of understanding the values, expectations and practices that these day care centres

has. The other data gathering methods – observation and the web-questionnaire – supplement this data triangulation. (Atkinson & Coffey 2004, 58.)

The biggest challenge of the qualitative analysis are the interpretations. To verify the interpretations from the people involved, to interpret and analyse texts and large amounts of data and the false interpretations between the researcher and examinee cause challenges in the analysing part of the study. The acknowledgement of the study and researcher's decisions is essential. (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 145; Braun & Clarke 2006, 7.) Other challenging matters might be poor quality or obvious lack of analysis or the themes, unconvincing analysis or false conclusions or mismatching the theoretical framework and analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 25, 26).

6.4 Verification of Findings

The issues concerning reliability and validity are essential: the objectivity and credibility are based on them (Peräkylä 2004, 283). One way to improve the credibility of the findings is to explicate and argue the research process thoroughly. In qualitative research (especially in a case study) the reliability and validity are somewhat variant and unclear due to unique nature of the studied issue but needs still to be assessed. (Hirsjärvi 2009a, 232.) In this study the construct validity and reliability are more essential than internal and external validities.

Construct Validity

Construct validity describes how well the study reflects the concepts of being studied – in this case the parent participation in ECEC partnership in day care centres (Yin 2014, 238, Hirsjärvi 2009a, 232). Data triangulation – in this research the document examination, the observations and the questionnaire – strengthens the construct validity of the research. The multiple sources of evidence develop convergent evidence: the research findings will be supported by more than just one source. (Yin 2014, 121.) If the questionnaire response rate or the amount of observation volunteers appears to be low, it of course thins the construct validity.

Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to the internal logic and coherence of the study (Punch 2004, 259). It means how well all the parts of the research fit together, and if the results have internal consistency. The main quality for internal validity is to show the absence of misleading relations between the results and the elimination of wrong hypotheses. (Punch 2004, 260; Yin 2014, 239.)

External Validity

According to Punch (2004, 260) the *external validity* is about the generalisation of the findings: how and at what extend can they be generalised (see also Yin 2014, 238). In this research the purpose is not to generalise but compare. The challenges related to this verification are about the theoretical diversity, the thorough description of context and the level of abstraction of the concept. (Punch 2004, 261). In this research the theoretical basis is somewhat thin: the concept of ECEC partnership is not very common and only studied thoroughly in Finland. In Finnish studies the point of view is usually on the ECEC staff, not parents. That can diminish the external validity of the study. On the other hand, the concept of ECEC partnership is widely known, acknowledged and respected in Finnish ECEC units (Niikko 2006, 146) and also getting to resonate abroad (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake 2009). The context – the day care centres – is chosen to correspond researcher's own working place (location, size, private owner) and the purpose is to compare the results to it at some extend.

Reliability

The term *reliability* refers to the coherency and repeatability of the research process (Yin 2014, 240; Hirsjärvi 2009a, 231). Questions to think about with the reliability issues are about the data stability over time and internal consistency of multiple data. Challenges in this study is about the possible divergence of the findings – although the data triangulation increases the construct validity. (Punch 2004, 257.) Another challenge about the reliability is the English translation and interpretation: the research is made in Finland and the used language thus Finnish, so the translation might cause problems with reliability. On the other hand the questionnaire is made in Finnish, so it is easier and more spontaneous for the respondents to answer deep-

ly and thoroughly. Also the choice of the researched day care centres is made considering the reliability: with another, not familiar, day care centres it is simpler to have an objective view about the ECEC partnership.

Also the reliability of the researcher has to be considered. Yin (2014, 76), Saarela-Kinnunen and Eskola (2015, 182) and Punch (2004, 150) state that usually the case study researcher knows the studied phenomenon: the understanding may push the researcher towards the supporting evidence. Although this limited subjectivity is a natural matter according to Bergman and Coxon (2005). In this research it is accepted as an inevitable deficiency but is meant to be partially avoided through data triangulation.

6.5 Ethics of the Research

In qualitative research various ethical issues can be arisen, and in this chapter those ethical issues concerning this study are taken into consideration (Remler and Van Ryzin 2011, 85). The key principles of ethics of the research are informed consent, voluntary participation, not causing harm to subjects and potential benefits (ibid. 482, 483; Punch 2004, 281, 282). Punch (2004, 282) also stresses that researcher has to consider the ethical issues throughout the whole research, from planning to publication. In this research the ethical points have been considered throughout the research, from the choice of the studied ECEC unit to writing process and the publication of the thesis.

When presenting qualitative results, the *anonymity* of the people in the research can be in danger especially in case studies, where the purpose is to have a deep, thorough understanding of the researched issue (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 85; Punch 2004, 282; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 57). In this research, the anonymity is taken into account: in the web-questionnaire the names are not gathered at all and the names of the day care centres is not revealed so the identity of the respondent is challenging to trace.

Doing the observation, the parent participation was *voluntary* which is a one key element of an ethical study (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 86; Hirsjärvi 2009d, 25; Punch 2004, 282). Parents knew beforehand when the observations are going to be arranged, and they had the opportunity to decline. Due to no declinations, the conclusion was that parents agreed to be under observation. According to Eskola and Suoranta (2008, 102) observation can be quite subjective: the researcher is observing from her point of view and may not be noticing all of the relevant matters.

7 Results

In this section the data triangulation is dismantled. First the curriculum of the day care centre is taken into consideration – that is the rearing document for the principles and values of the day care centre. The parents' real actions and opinions examined by observations and questionnaire can then be dealt with the basis given by the curriculum. The themes introduced earlier – parents' opinions, real actions and participation – are also taken into consideration while examining the results. Like mentioned before, the results and discussion of the research are on latent level: assumptions and interpretations are given to deepen the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 13; Joffe and Yardley 2004, 57).

7.1 The Curriculum of the Day Care Centre

The curriculum of the day care centres can be found on internet. It contains of general information of early childhood education and care, these day care centres' views, values and basis of the ECEC and information concerning multicultural families and special needs children. (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 2). The curriculum (ibid. 7) is raising the ECEC partnership as one of the most important values of its actions. In this chapter the focus is on the ECEC partnership part of the curriculum: how is it implemented in this rearing document? Is the partnership or involvement of parents mentioned in other

connections? This curriculum has been renewed in spring 2015, so it is current document to be studied.

For the first time ECEC partnership is mentioned when the child's individual curriculum is introduced (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 5). Heikkilä et al. (2004, 29) state that the creation of child's ECEC plan in bilateral parent-staff meeting is an important part of ECEC partnership – not to forget the evaluation and updating of the set objectives together with parents. Also the child's individual interests or needs has to be considered. All of these objectives are found in the day care centres' curriculum also. In the curriculum is mentioned also the possibility of parents to tell about their views of arranging the ECEC – involvement of parents is taken into consideration. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 29.)

The parental partnership is mentioned also when telling about the general values of the day care centre: ECEC is meant to be goal-directed and planned with essential partnership between parents and staff. Also respecting families' cultural or religious practices or values is mentioned. (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 6). These are the qualities that are recommended in many guiding documents or studies (e.g. Heikkilä et al. 2004, 12; Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care 2014, 133; Karikoski & Tiilikka 2011, 78; Kaskela & Kekkonen 2011, 15).

There is also an actual part in the curriculum that considers ECEC partnership. The curriculum (2015, 8) states that the best requirements for children to grow are accomplished when combining the strengths of families and ECEC staff. Again the values of respect, equality and trust are emphasized – objective is to create an atmosphere, where also challenging topics can be discussed with parents as early as possible. This is also what is recommended in The National Curriculum Guidelines by Heikkilä et al. (2004, 29). Also the parents' expertise of their own child is mentioned, which was also the standpoint of many researchers (e.g. Heikkilä et al. 2004, 28; Kaskela & Kekkonen 2011, 11).

The involvement of parents has been mentioned once again including both planning and executing the ECEC to support child's growth. The mention of supporting parents' mutual interaction and networking can also be seen as improving parental involvement. (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 8). Even though the ECEC partnership is stressed in the curriculum, the participation of parents is skipped by a couple of mentionings. Maybe the part of parental participation is emphasized differently when the new national curriculum guidelines in Finland are coming to effect.

The curriculum states that the ECEC staff has the responsibility of creating the partnership with parents. Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe (2014, 133) states similarly that the creation of partnership is staff's task. There is also a brief examples of where the ECEC partnership takes place in their day care centres: in drop-off or pick-up situations, in bilateral parent-staff discussions once a year or more often and in parental evenings or in other family happenings. In parental or family events the parents can also interact with each other. (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 8). The ECEC partnership with multicultural families or families with children with special needs is dealt separately.

One part of the high quality ECEC partnership is a child's and family's good start in ECEC unit and that is also stressed in the studied curriculum – alike many researchers (e.g. Johnston & Halocha and Karikoski & Tiilikka) emphasize also! In the curriculum there is a well prepared procedure what should be done when child starts in day care centre. It contains of *a starting conversation* where child, parents and staff get acquaintance to each other in the day care centre or at child's home, *writing agreements* and *child and parent getting to know the day care centre and the staff*. The curriculum stresses that at the beginning of the ECEC there should always be a familiar staff member to welcoming the child. The purpose of the good start is to launch ECEC partnership with building mutual trust, which is highly recommended by studies also. (Tähtipäiväkotien varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma [The curriculum of the Tähtipäiväkodit] 2015, 9). These transition period has a significant meaning in chil-

dren's and parents' life and needs thus to be prepared well (Johnston & Halocha 2010, 196) – in this curriculum the transition is taken into consideration.

7.2 The Observation of the ECEC Partnership Situations

The observations and interpretations of them are based on the field notes made in the two observation sessions in the researched day care centre – naturally researcher's own experiences set assumptions to the observation sessions and steered the notices, memories and interpretations made based on these. The research questions of parental participation steered the observation sessions, but also other matters were noticed during them. The purpose is to take these assumptions into account and instead of avoiding them, aiming to acknowledge them as natural matter.

The atmosphere of the day care centre and the encounter situations seemed very friendly, informal and leisurely: both sides were outgoing and seemed to be equal and the parents did not rush away from the situation – neither did the staff create an atmosphere of hurry. Both sides had time to chat which indicates that they are interested in child's daily life, sharing it and discussing it – developing mutual understanding of child's growth and upbringing. The qualities of succeeded partnership – mutual trust, respect and equality – seemed to be created like both many researchers (e.g. Heikkilä et al.; Kaskela & Kekkonen; Johnston & Halocha; Niikko) and the curriculum of day care centres (2015, 8) recommend and emphasize strongly.

Naturally the differences in personalities were shown: some parents were more talkative, some of them were more concise or shy. Some were more interested in child's day and actions, when some were satisfied to hear that day has gone well, without details. The staff did not pressure the parents to change their actions, and the atmosphere seemed to be approbative. Parents acted independently, they did not wait for staff's directions or permission but participated – this implies that the situation is familiar. Majority of them had adapted the manners of the day care centre and seemed to understand the reasons behind them: usually the hygiene matters (e.g. washing hands when coming to day care centre) or the safety matters (e.g. to make

clear that staff is aware that the child has come to or left the day care centre). There was no difference between fathers' and mothers' ways of interact, which was important to notice – maybe this was one point of researcher's assumption proved wrong.

In interactions also formal information about child's previous night's sleep or their well-being was shared, but also informal information about for example weekend's chores was told. Formal information also included filling out agreements (e.g. agreement of medication of children or vacation notification) or information about child's birthday. This formal information with agreements is many times obligatory and regulated by municipality authorities, laws or the organization.

Parents also asked for advice from the staff, or asked the staff to talk with the child to support parents' upbringing if something unusual had come up – parents were active partners and seemed to understand their primary right and also the staff's part in holistic child upbringing (e.g. Kaskela & Kekkonen 2011, 11). This was a very important notification to make and lead to an interpretation: parents lean on the staff when needed. This makes the core of the ECEC partnership, compared to situation where parents struggle with child on their own, not accepting or asking for help. Conclusion might be that even though staff creates the basis for the ECEC partnership, the true actors are the parents: it does not matter how much the staff tries to communicate if parents are not active, participating partners. It is for ECEC staff to acknowledge this: some parents want to be active partners from the beginning of the child's ECEC services, some parents need time – or the right staff member – to open up to the partnership and some parents do not want to be active, loud partners but silent, passive ones. At the same time all of these attitudes need to be accepted and respected and but to also carefully encourage parents to open up to partnership.

The children were not forgotten: some parents also noticed the present children, talked to them also and wished for a nice day. Children also told eagerly about their own actions and chores, and parents and staff confirmed and complete the stories. This seems to be a good way to make children active participants of their own life,

which may help to be active also in later life. This might be one developmental point of the research and is dealt with later.

7.3 The Web-questionnaire

The questionnaire was originally done in one day care centre. The questionnaire had low percentage of respondents, so it was expanded to two, corresponding day care centre of same, private owner – this way the curriculum and observations were still adequate. Due to many ECEC changes in autumn in Finland, the parents have had a lot of agreements and questionnaires regarding ECEC practices and this might be one reason to the low answering percentage. Also the upcoming summer holidays might effect on the response rate. The parents were reminded of the questionnaire with a couple of emails and also written and spoken reminders in the day care centres but that did not have a positive effect on the response rate. Also it was noticeable that the parents who were about to response, did it immediately after the first email – they were presumably interested enough about the questionnaire. It is also unsolved what are the previous response rates of these ECEC units' customer feedback questionnaires – is this response rate unusually low or average comparing to them? Only way to benefit of the poor amount of responses is to analyse what signals the low response rate is sending.

In the web-questionnaire first there was a short explanation about ECEC partnership: what ECEC partnership means and how it is implemented in daily actions – this was to help parents to set their minds to the issue. The first two questions were about parent's attitudes towards ECEC partnership:

- what do you think about ECEC partnership, what does it mean to you and
- what kind of ECEC partner are you, what kind of partners are the carers.

The next two questions were about practices concerning ECEC partnership:

- what kind of cooperation do you do or you have done with ECEC staff and
- what are the tasks of you or ECEC staff as a ECEC partner.

The last two questions were about participation:

- how do you create or keep up a relationship with ECEC staff and

- in what ways the ECEC staff has encouraged to participate in ECEC unit's daily actions and happenings. (Appendix 1. The web-questionnaire.)

In addition to these open-ended questions there were a couple of background questions. It turned out that those back ground questions were not needed when doing the analysis part, except the question about the sex of the respondent. The questions followed the planned themes of opinions, real actions and participation and were thus easier to analyse. Naturally the responses were analysed thoroughly, not just concentrating on the themes but also interesting opinions and assumptions of researcher.

The amount of responses from the three day care centres was six, and all of the respondents were female. It is well acknowledged that with this amount of responses it is not possible to do any kind of generalisation, and maybe even not the comparison – the saturation point is not achieved (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011, 75). The parents' responses are still interesting; they are analysed and looked through to gain new ideas and views to develop practices and parental participation further. Overall, the questionnaire somewhat verified the notices made in observations and the answers had a basis in the curriculum of the day care centres. This implies that the objectives set for staff and ECEC units' actions are achieved and are appearing to parents as friendly, respectful atmosphere.

Opinions

All of the respondents thought that they are the primary carers of the child and ECEC unit's staff should support the growth and upbringing of the child together with parents. Responded parents also evaluate themselves as open, flexible, trustworthy, approachable, assertive, committed, cooperative and interested in learning new things. Some parents thought that it is important to inform ECEC staff about life events or changes so that staff are updated to support the child and family best way possible.

It was also mentioned that parents think that the aims of the upbringing has been agreed in cooperation with staff to benefit the child's needs and strengths and parents' wishes – communality is mentioned. Mutual trust is also mentioned in parents'

responses in many contexts – staff’s opinions about child’s growth and development are respected. Open communication was also appreciated in majority of responses: parents’ thought that they are open partners of ECEC and require this – and honesty – also from ECEC staff. Parents feel that they should be open about family values or worrying matters – and staff should respect these values or practices parents wish for.

Parents value that ECEC staff members are – or they should be – naturally individuals, but in general warm and assertive partners, they have or should have real and truthful interest in child and family, be professional, respectful, honest, neutral and approachable, creating safe atmosphere for children to grow. Functioning interaction and child’s individual noticing is appreciated by parents. Main feature that parents emphasise in ECEC staff is supportive attitude. This quality came up repeatedly in the responses, in many contexts. It is told that support is needed both with parenthood and with child’s challenges and general upbringing.

Real actions and participation

Some parents write in their responses that they ask for help from staff if needed and tell openly about successes or troubles of child upbringing. This was also noticed in observation, when parents asked the staff to discuss with the child about challenging behaviour. The responses also emphasise feedback: parents ask for feedback of child’s behaviour and growth from staff and seems like that staff is giving advice too – some parents appreciate professional’s opinions and tips about child’s growth and development. Some parents also mention that taking care of the child – learning basic skills, teaching good manners and taking care of child’s clothes et cetera – is parents’ responsibility.

Majority of the parents mention annual bilateral teacher – parent discussions as “real actions” in ECEC partnership. Also lighter drop-off and pick-up –conversations are mentioned as means to execute ECEC partnership and cooperation – conversational relationship seems to be important to parents! These daily conversations were mentioned in every response when asked about how parents create and maintain relationship with ECEC staff. Certainly this emphasis can be a consequence that parents

who chose to respond to the questionnaire, are more interested in discussing their child's daily activities or development in general and that is why this feature is highlighted in responses.

Majority of them emphasise that child upbringing is parents' primary right – thus they also seem to understand that ECEC unit staff need information about child, life events or family values to support the child and the family best way possible. Some of parents mention also emails or phone calls as a part of cooperation with staff. It was interesting that some parents saw that one part of ECEC partnership was an agreement where parents and staff have agreed on a certain practice to benefit child. This is a practical way and example of executing ECEC partnership – it would be interesting to know whose initiative these practices are and does this ECEC unit have this kind of agreements with many families.

7.4 Summary of the Main Results

The objectives of the research were to clarify parents' opinions about ECEC partnership, its' execution and participation in three small private ECEC units. Another objective was also to participate parents to think about ECEC partnership and their impact on it – along the new Finnish ECEC law. These objectives were about to achieve by web-questionnaire and observation sessions. Next chapters are summarizing the most interesting or most significant results.

Parents' most interesting and strongest opinions are here highlighted – certainly the amount of the responses was too low to make any kind of generalisation if even comparison. Parents' strong opinion or wish, mutual trust, was also seen in the observation sessions. This was also mentioned in the ECEC unit's curriculum – this, along with notices made in the observations, gives an impression that the mutual trust is well implemented in this ECEC unit. Other parents' frequent wish was ECEC staff's support. This was not directly mentioned in the curriculum, but an objective to create an open and honest atmosphere was set – this supportive attitude is a mutual

wish. This ECEC staff's supportive attitude endorses the parents' view that they are the primary carers of the child: this is a strong basis for ECEC partnership.

The low amount of responses certainly told something about the parents will of participation. There can be a lot of reasons why parents did not want to response to the questionnaire but low response rate did not sent a message that participating and influencing is a priority to parents. In questionnaire, when asked about cooperation, parents listed primarily annual bilateral parent-staff discussions and daily conversations. Interesting was, when asked about how ECEC staff encouraged participation, the parents' listed various ways of involvement. This confrontation is dealt deeper later in the thesis.

8 Discussion and Evaluation

8.1 Achieving the Research Objectives

One objective of this research was to **clarify** parents' opinions about ECEC partnership, its' execution and participation and involvement in a small private ECEC units in middle-Finland. On the basis of ECEC units curriculum it was possible to mirror the values and targets of the day care centres to parents' views and observed actions about the execution of the ECEC partnership. As introduced in the previous chapters, based on the observation the ECEC partnership of the researched day care centre seemed trustful, respectful and equal – the objectives set in curriculum and the recommendations of researchers (e.g. Heikkilä et al.; Kaskela & Kekkonen; Johnston & Halocha; Niikko) appears to be achieved. The mutual respect was shown in observation for example as an approval of different types of behaviour – both on parents' and staff's sides!

Also the independent actions of parents, not waiting for a permission or directions from staff, sent the message of familiar situation, confidence and mutual trust: no need to ask what to do or how to behave or act. Similarly the seeking for advice in

child upbringing refers to trustful, supportive partnership. These examples indicate that parents have absorbed the idea of equal partnership where parents are the professionals with their own child and ECEC staff has expertise in children and education in general – this was verified by the questionnaire also. (Heikkilä et al. 2004, 28; Kas-kela & Kekkonen 2011, 11; MacNauhgton & Hughes 2011, 43; Johnston & Halocha 2010, 190.) It is beneficial to notice that parents value support from ECEC staff – it can encourage staff to approach parents with any kind of matters.

Earlier introduced background report of Ministry of Education and Culture “Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen” [Participate in ECEC] written by Alasuutari, Karila, Alila and Eskelinen (2014, 35) says that parents feel that Finnish ECEC partnership is good: trustful and respectful – this research is also verifying this view. On the contrary, in report it is said that parents are not satisfied with communication: they feel that they are not getting enough information about their children’s day (basic care or daily activities) in ECEC services. This was not directly evaluated by parents in question-naire, but all respondents highlighted the meaning of conversations and discussions. It would be interesting to examine are the parents receiving enough strongly empha-sised information or support in the researched ECEC units.

It was good to notice that every parent thought that they are the primary carers of the child and the staff’s task is to support parents in the child’s upbringing. This was also interpreted in the observation: some parents asked for advice or help from staff but were also assertive parents who acted independently. Of course it is possible that those parents who responded the questionnaire are more aware than others, and that is why they all emphasised this matter. This is a productive basis for ECEC partnership – assuming that parents really accept the staff as advisers and support-ers, and staff acknowledge and accept the parents’ different ways of upbringing and executing ECEC partnership. This is also a challenge: how to encourage those parents who do not want, need or dare to ask for help or advice? ECEC staff needs to be pro-fessional and experienced to notice those who really need help but are not asking – the families who need the advice the most.

Interesting point in observations was that some of the parents thanked the staff at the end of the day. The reasons may vary from thanking the staff just for habit to thanking staff for keeping the child well and safe for a day. Is it just a nice, friendly gesture? Does it verify mutual trust between parents and staff? Is it just a word or a habit? Is thanking part of partnership, or does it make the partners unequal somehow? Also other ways of thanking or remembering staff (e.g. gifts or cards) would be an interesting matter to study.

One opinion from questionnaire was about ECEC staff's professionalism combined with the fact if they have children or not. The opinion refers that there is quite a lot of difference in ECEC partnership between ECEC staff with children or ECEC staff without children. This was quite surprising opinion. Assumption is, naturally, that ECEC staff member is a professional despite of his/her parenthood. But has this parent's thought have a seed of truth: does a parent understand better another parent? Is this a thing to take into consideration when educating staff? Does it put childless ECEC staff into unequal position in parents' eyes? Or is this just a matter of personalities and nothing to do with being a parent? A lot of questions arise of this opinion: this might be a good point to discuss about in ECEC units.

The purpose was also to **participate parents** to think about ECEC partnership and their impact on it – along the upcoming Finnish ECEC law and new national curriculum guidelines. Surprisingly low response rate to the questionnaire might refer that parents' are not active to participate to developing their child's ECEC services – the questionnaire would have been a good way to give feedback or suggest developments. It is also possible that parents' did not see the questionnaire as a way of having an impact and do it other way. In fall, when the new ECEC law and national curriculum guidelines comes to effect in Finland, the ECEC units have a lot to think about regarding parental participation: the practices has to be changed. Also the parents need time to assume the new, participatory role – like Larjovuori et al. also emphasised (Larjovuori, Nuutinen, Heikkilä-Tammi & Manka 2012, 4, 8, 23). The importance of parental participation has earlier been dealt in two background reports of Ministry of Education and Culture "Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen" [Participate in ECEC]

(Alasuutari, Karila, Alila and Eskelinen (2014, 35) and Kohti varhaiskasvatuslakia [Towards the new ECEC law] (2014, 46).

This low response rate was very interesting matter to notice. The assumption was that parents would be active to participate and, along with the participation, to develop their child's ECEC services. Reasons for the low response rate may vary but more interesting is to learn that parents really need time to adapt to the new role of active participants in ECEC services and various methods of participation need to be created. This also means that in ECEC units the staff needs to ponder how the parents are encouraged to participate – and which are the ways to participate. The change of the practise is essential improvement in ECEC services and that is why it also needs to be planned and developed carefully from both sides: on the side of ECEC staff's professional development and on the other side, parents' participation in ECEC unit's daily life. This view is also supported in Karila's report (2016, 35). Karila (2016, 35) adds also the thought and challenges of participating families with different cultural backgrounds.

In the observation sessions it was shown that parents' participate openly in child's everyday life in day care centre. The parents were mainly open to discuss about the child's day and interested to hear about the day's activities. This observation was also verified with the questionnaire: parents emphasised the conversational relationship with ECEC staff. It is left unsolved, how parents participate in larger scale: what are the participation percentages in parental evenings or other family happening and are the parents eager to give feedback or developmental suggestions. This information could be interesting when planning and developing new practices to serve customers – parents and children – even better.

In questionnaire, when asked *ways of cooperation* with ECEC staff, majority of the parents emphasise annual bilateral parent-staff discussions and other kinds of connections with day care centre, e.g. phone calls and emails. Also daily conversations are highlighted. No one mentioned parental evenings or family events as a part of cooperation, and no one mentioned giving feedback – asked or voluntary – about ECEC unit's actions or values. On the other hand, when asked *how ECEC staff has*

encouraged parental participation and to participate in ECEC unit's actions, parents list various ways of participation: theme days, feedback questionnaires, parties, parental evenings and other info events, special breakfasts and parent-staff discussions, daily conversations and nice attitude towards parents' developmental ideas. These were not mentioned when asked about ways of cooperation with staff – seems that parents do not perceive event participation as ECEC partnership or cooperation. This is quite surprising thought, because without participating parents there would not be any events either!

It seems like these various types of cooperation and ECEC partnership execution have to be especially highlighted to parents to be important and essential part of ECEC partnership when creating new ways of parental participation or new ECEC unit curriculums with parents. Without parental participation there would not be any happenings, and the various practices of ECEC unit can be more easily developed with feedback or parents' wishes. It is interesting to think why parents do not see all kinds of events or happenings as part of participation: was the question unclear or is it really the parents' attitude towards this matter?

The last objective was to possibly **compare** the results to corresponding small, private owned ECEC units and use them when **renewing and developing** the practices and documents along the new law and new national curriculum guidelines. A basis for developmental work could be a report by Halme et al. (2014, 22) - Tuki, osallisuus ja yhteistoiminta lasten ja perheiden palveluissa – Työntekijöiden näkökulma [Support, empowerment and cooperation in children's and families' services – Employees' point of view] – where they state that the most essential developmental challenges in parental participation in general regards informing parents and children, chances to give feedback and being part of decisions regarding oneself – small but important matters to take into consideration in ECEC units and something to remember when renewing the documents and practices!

One possible practice development in ECEC units could be the child's right and responsibility to report the day's actions to parents: if a child tells about day's feelings, actions and possible challenges to parent, the parent might listen more carefully than

when ECEC staff tell those matters to parent. In addition this might encourage parents also to participate. ECEC staff should also keep in mind the possibility of the child being part of decisions regarding oneself. This could be also a small step towards better implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to respect child being an active participant in their own life.

Another developmental idea is considering parental participation and professional growth of staff. Participating the parents to create new ways to participate and develop the practices of ECEC units is the upcoming challenge to ECEC staff. Clearly ECEC units need to serve more than one way to participate: active and passive ways, open and anonymous ways, loud and silent ways. In ECEC units there has to be space for every kind of parental participation: straight feedback and suggestions, parents being present but silent in events or even being passive in every way. ECEC staffs' task is to offer the possibility and encourage and ask parents for their participation but also accepting that being passive is also a choice.

There still should be parental evenings, family happenings and customer feedback questionnaires, but also new ways of parents impacting the ECEC unit's daily life has to be created – and parents may suggest these new, appropriate ways. One task for ECEC staff regarding this matter is to highlight the meaning and means of parental participation which were not clear to parents according the web-questionnaire. Halme et al. (2014, 22) say that parental participation requires high-quality cooperation and partnership between parents and staff – functioning ECEC partnership seems to be a basis for parents' interest to participate and thus it should be a priority to ECEC staff also!

One way of increasing parental participation could be to create the new curriculum of ECEC unit with parents. Naturally also challenges appear: what would be the best method to encourage and participate parents to think about the ethics, values and practices of ECEC unit? What to do, if parents wish and plan for something that does not fit into private ECEC unit's owner financial plans or values? Is the chance for participating just nominal gesture or a real way of having an influence? If the chance to

participate and develop is given, all of the decisions need to be open, transparent and explained.

Earlier introduced report "Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen" [Participate in ECEC] (Alasuutari et al. 2014, 35) stated that parents are not satisfied with communication with ECEC staff: they feel that they are not getting enough information about their children's day (basic care or daily activities) in ECEC services. In questionnaire parents emphasised the meaning of conversations and discussions. This might be one thing to pay attention to when developing and renewing ECEC unit's practices: to react to parents' wishes for conversational relationship – how to implement that daily in drop-off or pick-up situations. It remains to be seen how parents take this possible open communication between ECEC staff, child and parents. Even though openness and honesty were at parents' wish list, sometimes subtle discussion is better than frank communication – this is of course a matter of ECEC staff's professionalism which way of communication is better and more efficient.

One important matter which needs more clarifying and new practices is finding those parents and families who need the ECEC staff support but do not ask for it for some reason. Parental participation can also be utilised creating the ways to achieve these parents and families. Of course the parental participation in general is a twofold matter: those parents who like to participate, are already participating in ECEC unit's actions and those parents who are not interested in participating or ECEC unit's actions, are assumingly not interested in the future either. This is a one thing that might have also distorted the responses of the web-questionnaire and a thing which needs a thorough planning of ECEC staff.

8.2 Suggestions for Future Researches

In the future the objectives of Finnish ECEC are changing due the new steering documents. That of course raises a lot of research matters in the ECEC field in general and in ECEC units. This particular research can be repeated with the new view of participation, when it is obligatory for ECEC units to give parents opportunities to partic-

participate in ECEC units' activities somehow: planning, executing or evaluating. This research concentrated in daily activities, and can be expanded to regard also bigger happenings, e.g. parental evenings or other family events: what is the participation rate, who are the ones to participate, if the parents are active or passive participants and how the parents want to participate to ECEC units' activities.

This research took into consideration the drop-off and pick-up situations in ECEC unit. Another further research topic could be to examine other sensitive situations regarding ECEC partnership: child's start and first days in ECEC unit, bilateral parent-teacher discussions or other, multi-professional discussions or situations, where parents are not happy to ECEC unit's way of working. Both parents and ECEC staff sides and opinions are interesting and worth studying further.

Future research suggestion might involve the parents more: what are the ways in which parents want to participate, what ways they feel easier and what are not as popular. Another interesting question – which also this research touched – is what ECEC staff need to do for parents to participate. Researching this issue further may help the ECEC staff to offer proper and various ways of parental participation and the right ways to encourage the parents to involve in ECEC unit's daily actions. This development may deepen the ECEC partnership and thus improve the holistic growth and development of child.

Other smaller things that raised further, interesting questions and study matters were parents thanking ECEC staff after the day, other gifts (e.g. in Christmas) and ECEC professionalism changes with staff having children or not. These might be good discussion issues with parents or ECEC unit staff or questions of customer feedback form. From own point of view it would be interesting to get customer feedback also from satisfaction in communication: are parents getting enough info about child's day and daily activities in my working place – thus it was a matter of discontent in report "Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen" [Participate in ECEC] (Alasuutari et al. 2014, 35).

Like mentioned before, Austria's lack of information was striking and noticed in international publications also (e.g. Starting Strong –project 2006, 66). Firstly it would be a huge improvement if Austria had a national curriculum guidelines for ECEC in English to add transparency in their ways of working. There is also a lot of ECEC matters which are worth studying – especially now when Austria is investing heavily on ECEC which is by researches a reasonable thing to do (Austria: Generous support for families 2015; Work programme of the Austrian Federal Government 2013 – 2018 2013, 24; Schweppenstedde, Janta & Gauttier 2016). Researches might consider for example comparison with rural and urban areas, comparison between different states, ECEC partnership, child's good start in ECEC services and other good practices in ECEC services – and of course quality changes in long-term with the investments.

8.3 Evaluation of the Process

The whole process of master's thesis was quite long and thorough. From Austria's point of view the task was not as easy going: information seeking lasted for weeks, and the results were not so productive. From documents Starting Strong (2006, 66) and Early Childhood Education and Care (2015), was found information about the lack of ECEC research, quality improvements or professional development in Austria. Though some remarkable developments are going on: currently published curriculum guidelines of ECEC and planned, up-coming national law of ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care 2015; Hartel 2014, 7). Even though data about ECEC partnership was not found, Kapella et al. (2012) summon in the Eurofound publication Parenting Support in Austria, that various types of parental support exists in Austria. More material might have been found in German, but left unused due to lack of language skills.

From Finnish point of view there was a lot of information of past, current state and future of ECEC culture and ECEC partnership in Finland. Maybe this is also because of the big changes that are going to be happening in a couple of months – to develop these matters, they have to be examined thoroughly. The information seeking and theory framework is thus leaning towards Finland, being not as balanced as should

be. This is also one reason for delineating and clarifying the topic from cross-national research to literature review with a case study regarding only Finland, and a reason to rethink the research questions and objectives. The approximate amount of both national and international source material is adequate, appropriate and mostly up-to-date.

The research itself was the easy part of the study – at least when compared to the theory part. The researched the ECEC units were very cooperative: the questionnaire and observations were meant to execute so that they do not interrupt the staff at any way – no extra tasks for them because of the thesis. The data gathering methods produced material which was multifaceted and interesting – of course also subjective, because they were gathered for this research specifically. The natural subjectivity of researcher steered the observations, the creation of the questionnaire and all of the notices made during the thesis process.

The timetable of the web-questionnaire was a question. In this writing process the parents' time to response to questionnaire was quite short which might effect on the response rate. It occurred that the parents who were about to response, did it right away – the tight timetable was eventually not an issue. The reminders sent to parents did not increase the response rate, and that was the reason to expand the questionnaire to another ECEC units. The expansion did not increase the response rate significantly either. The timetable could have be planned better, but probably did not effect on the results of the thesis. The other parts of case study, observation and document examination, were successfully implemented.

Due the ethical reasons the research was not made in the working place of the researcher. It can be considered would the response rate be higher if the research would have been executed in there, when the control of for example reminding the parents would have been on the researcher's shoulders. Other matters to evaluate are the language of the questionnaire – Finnish was obviously the right choice – and the lay out of the questionnaire – was that tempting enough? Also the quality of the questions can be evaluated even though thoroughly considered and pre-tested: were the questions too difficult to understand or was the questionnaire too long? Was the

issue interesting, was this the right time to execute questionnaire or were the parents encouraged enough to response?

Verification of findings, especially construct validity and reliability are also under evaluation. Despite of data triangulation the construct validity of this research remained poor because of the small amount of responses in web-questionnaire. The questionnaire or the research did not deal with issues that would have been dealt before in studies: the evaluation of validity is quite challenging because there is not any studies to compare with. Reliability on the other hand is evaluated to be adequate in terms of the questionnaire and observation: responses seemed spontaneous, deep and thorough and the choice of unfamiliar ECEC unit was right. Naturally the same issues that thin the construct validity, effect also to reliability.

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Appendice

Appendix 1. The web-questionnaire.

Vanhempien ajatuksia kasvatuskumppanuudesta

Hei!

Tämä kysely koskee kasvatuskumppanuutta. Kasvatuskumppanuudella tarkoitetaan vanhempien ja päiväkodin henkilöstön tietoista sitoutumista toimia niin, että lasten kasvua, kehitystä ja oppimista tuetaan. Kasvatuskumppanuudessa yhdistetään vanhempien ja päiväkodin henkilökunnan lasta koskevat tiedot, kokemukset ja havainnot. Yhteistyötä lapsen parhaaksi tehdään sekä päivittäisessä arjessa että virallisemmissä yhteyksissä. Toivon, että vastatessasi pohdit omaa suhtautumistasi kasvatuskumppanuuteen ja itseäsi kasvatuskumppanina. Vastaukset ovat anonyymeja ja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti.

Aluksi kaksi kysymystä suhtautumisestasi kasvatuskumppanuuteen.

1. Mitä ajattelet kasvatuskumppanuudesta? Mitä se sinulle tarkoittaa?

2. Millainen kasvatuskumppani olet? Millaisia kasvatuskumppaneita päiväkodin työntekijät ovat?

Seuraavaksi muutama kysymys käytännön toimista kasvatuskumppanuuteen liittyen.

3. Millaista yhteistyötä teet tai olet tehnyt päiväkodin henkilöstön kanssa?

4. Mitkä ovat kasvatuskumppanuuden osapuolten (vanhemmat ja päiväkodin henkilökunta) tehtävät?

Viimeiset avoimet kysymykset koskevat osallisuutta.

5. Miten luot suhdetta päiväkodin henkilökuntaan?

6. Miten päiväkodin henkilökunta on kannustanut osallisuuteen ja osallistumaan päiväkodin toimintaan?

Täytähän lopuksi muutaman taustatiedon.

7. Sukupuoleni on *

nainen

mies

8. Hoidossa olevien lasten lukumäärä: *

9. Lasten sukupuoli: *

tyttö

poika

10. Kauanko olette olleet varhaiskasvatuksen asiakkaina? *
