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Flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care: Experiences of Finnish parents and educators

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Abstract

This study focuses on flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care (ECEC), an institutional childcare service for Finnish families where both parents or a single parent work nonstandard hours. Although many countries nowadays offer extended hours day care, only Finland has a publicly provided, law-based system guaranteeing ECEC during nonstandard as well as standard hours. We explore, drawing on parental survey data, what kinds of families use such services and when. Furthermore, we utilize web-survey data obtained from early educators to find out what they report as the main challenges involved in implementing flexibly scheduled ECEC. The results showed that single-parent families and lower educated parents were overrepresented among the families using flexibly scheduled ECEC. The unpredictability of working life tends to spill over to ECEC. Due to varying parental work schedules, children have unique daily and weekly rhythms, which in turn impact on administration, pedagogical issues and meeting children's needs.

Key words: ECEC services, Flexibly scheduled ECEC, Parents working nonstandard hours, Early educators, Parents

Introduction

Change in the context in which families live, according to the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1986), presents early childhood education and care (ECEC) services with new challenges. As emphasised by Bronfenbrenner (1986; see also Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982), one of the central arenas in the life of working parents is a working life culture that is not static but constantly in flux in efforts to meet the needs of global markets. A global trend much debated recently is the so-called 24-hour economy (see Presser, 2003), which means service availability, and therefore work, during evenings, weekends and nights. As nonstandard working hours diffuse to more and more sectors and more women take up paid employment, working parents are often faced with the challenge of organising ECEC while they are at work.

Finland is among the global pioneers in making a systematic flexibly scheduled ECEC service available to parents who work nonstandard hours. In Finland the service is known as ‘day and night care’, ‘around-the-clock care’ or ‘shift care’, and refers to childcare that takes place outside office hours. i.e., during early mornings, evenings, weekends and nights. In the international literature, various other concepts are used to describe institutional childcare during nonstandard hours: flexible day care (de Schipper, Tavecchio, van Ijzendoorn, & Linting, 2003), non-standard hours child care (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Jordan, 2008), childcare services at nonstandard times (Statham & Mooney, 2003), and day care with extended hours (Amne et al., 2008). We decided to use the term ‘flexibly scheduled ECEC’, as it describes not only care

during nonstandard hours but also the variation in care in an individual child's daily schedules along with the asynchrony of the individual schedules of all the participating children and educators in any one group of children and the challenges this presents to the centre as a whole.

Relatively little information exists on flexibly scheduled ECEC in Europe and elsewhere, as researchers in different countries have noted (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Statham & Mooney, 2003). In this article, we describe Finland's flexibly scheduled ECEC service. We start by describing the local context and continue with a review of the literature along with some statistics on the flexibly scheduled ECEC service in Finland and in other countries. Based on an empirical study conducted in Finland, we explore which families use flexibly scheduled ECEC, what features characterise this service and what early educators perceive as their main challenges in working in flexibly scheduled ECEC.

The Finnish context

Finnish parents are entitled to place their children in public ECEC until they start school, usually at the age of seven. Formal ECEC services are regulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Finnish ECEC is based on the so-called 'educare' approach that integrates elements of upbringing, teaching and care. ECEC services are provided by municipalities universally to every child and are available either in day care centres, in family day care or in group family day care units formed by four educators. Broadly speaking, public childcare is affordable for Finnish families, as it is heavily subsidised by the state (Plantenga & Remery, 2009). Publicly subsidised private services are also available; of all children in ECEC, 8 percent were cared for by private centres in 2014. When children turn six, they are obliged to attend, free of charge, 20 hours per week of mandatory preschool education for one year.

The number of children in day care in Finland has increased during the 21st century, reaching 245,650 in 2015, and rate of participation in ECEC increases with the child's age. Due to the availability of childcare leave and home-care benefits, virtually all infants under one year of age and almost 70 percent of children under the age of two are in parental care at home. However, half of all children at the age of two and approximately 80 percent of five-year-olds participated in ECEC in 2013. Mandatory pre-primary school thus extends to all children. (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2015). Finnish parents evidently trust public ECEC services, as 92 percent of children attended public ECEC in 2014 (Peruspalvelujen tila -raportti 2014, osa I). Non-parental childcare is also widely accepted in Finland (Salmi, 2006).

Flexibly scheduled ECEC within Finnish ECEC services

A total of 14,335 children, or seven percent of all the children receiving public ECEC, attended flexibly scheduled ECEC services in the year 2013. Compared with the year 2010, the flexible care rate had remained unchanged (Säkkinen 2014). Flexibly scheduled ECEC services are provided either by regular ECEC centres in the form of extended opening hours from 5 am to 10 pm or in around-the-clock centres for children in need of overnight and weekend care.

Finnish day care legislation does not recognize flexibly scheduled ECEC as a separate category; hence, its practices conform to the general regulations and guidelines for early childhood education and care (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 1973: 36; Act on Primary Education, 1998:628; National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education, 2014; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016). State guidelines and regulations specifically for this service continue to be lacking despite the fact that the first 'around-the-clock' centres started as far back as 1972 and that a child's entitlement to childcare

during the hours needed was enshrined in law in 1983; municipalities have to organize child day care so that ‘it offers the child a day care option that suits the child’s care and education and around-the-clock care during the hours of the day needed’ (Act on ECEC, 1973:36). Hence, municipalities have drawn up their own guidelines for flexibly scheduled ECEC services. Municipal ECEC centres normally provide both part-time and full-time services from 6 or 7 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m., depending on local childcare needs. Extended hours or overnight and weekend care is concentrated in some centres only. According to a survey by Plantenga and Remery in 2009, parental demands for flexibly scheduled ECEC were met in only 62 percent of Finnish municipalities. Provision of such care, especially in rural districts, is challenging. For example, arranging extended hours childcare in a family day care unit is constrained by legislation governing staff working times. Moreover, municipalities are not obliged to provide ECEC after the age of school entry at seven; hence, only a few municipalities offer services for older children.

Flexibly scheduled ECEC in other countries

Opportunities for childcare during non-standard hours seem to be rather limited in most European countries outside the Nordic group. As a part of the welfare regime, they provide public day care services for families with children both to maximize employment and to promote gender equality in the labor market. Alongside the goals of equality and employment ECEC services also aim at high pedagogical quality. In Sweden, municipalities have, since 2012, been obliged to provide flexibly scheduled childcare services for children of parents working nonstandard hours from one to up to 12 years of age. Only approximately 2/3 of all municipalities provided flexibly scheduled centre-based childcare (‘dygnet-runt-förskola’ i.e. around-the-clock preschool or ‘nattomsorg’ i.e. night-care) in 2014. Since 2012, service

provision has been strongly developed, and municipalities receive extra financial support from the Swedish state for so doing (Utbildningsstatistiksenheten, 2016). In some cases, a childminder is assigned to work at a child's home (Johansson, 2014).

However, day care services do not seem to meet the childcare needs of parents working nonstandard hours. For example, according to a survey conducted in the Stockholm region, 14 percent of female employees with young children reported inability to work full time because of the inflexible opening hours of their local day care centre, and 27 percent of female employees only managed to combine a full-time job with childcare with the help of a partner (Johansson, 2014). Furthermore, single mothers are more dependent on public childcare during nonstandard hours than married or cohabiting mothers (Johansson, 2014; Knutel, 2013), as is also the case in Finland and elsewhere (Moilanen, May, Räikkönen, Sevón, & Laakso, 2016). In Denmark, only four municipalities have offered a 24-hour service, while a limited number of caregivers in larger towns offer care during evenings and nights (Knutel, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, Statham and Mooney (2003) examined childcare services operating during nonstandard hours and the factors that prevent or facilitate the provision of such services. They concluded that despite some demand for childcare during nonstandard hours, it is not sufficient to justify service development. Similarly, Simon, Owen and Hollingworth (2017) found that a typical pattern in British families is the use of more than one form of childcare, usually grandparents along with some formal provision. Because care during nonstandard hours is not always seen as acceptable, many parents choose either to use partners, relatives and friends or home-based formal childcare such as childminding at either the childminder's or child's own home. In later studies, Singler (2011) and Rutter and Evans (2012) noted a shortage of provision

that is flexible enough to meet parents' needs. In France, some crèches offer extended care (e.g. care for 10 hours between 6a.m. and 9.30 p.m.) or 'nonstop' care (Plantenga & Remery, 2009).

Some non-European reports exist on the availability of childcare services during nonstandard hours. Anme and co-authors (2010) studied extended and night care in Japan. Centre-based night care is nowadays an essential form of childcare for Japanese parents working nonstandard hours. Since 1981, authorized night care centres have been established to meet childcare needs stemming from the increased number of working mothers. In Canada, Halfon and Friendly (2015) concluded that childcare options for parents who work nonstandard hours are very limited. In Milwaukee, USA, Dorothy Jordan (2008), in her dissertation study, found that parents reported a lack of childcare choices during nonstandard hours. Varying work schedules appeared to create considerable stress for parents working nonstandard hours. Lack of consistency in the schedules upset sleep patterns and left parents sleep-deprived and chronically tired, and often disgruntled with their work shifts.

Challenges and benefits of childcare during nonstandard hours

A small amount of research has investigated the typical features of childcare during nonstandard hours. These studies or reports have usually focused on administrative issues. In a Canadian report (Halfon & Friendly, 2015), the main challenges in the administration of nonstandard hours child care were related to scheduling staff, maintaining consistency in the room and communication between staff. For Canadian nonstandard hours day care programs, recruiting supply staff to work nonstandard or irregular hours was an ongoing challenge. Similarly, a British report (Statham & Mooney, 2003) indicated that the main barriers in developing childcare during atypical hours were the reluctance of childcare workers to work nonstandard hours, funding and costs, unpredictability of the hours required, and lack of

government encouragement and guidelines. Childcare services in rural areas faced special problems because of scattered populations and lack of sufficient demand. In the USA, Jordan (2008) found that directors were concerned about enrolment during nonstandard hours, and that it was crucial for them to know parents' work schedules in advance, to allow them to plan the children's and staff schedules.

Concerns relating to the quality of early childhood education and care have also been expressed. Halfon and Friendly (2015) noticed that childcare personnel in nonstandard hours programmes in Canada were generally quite satisfied with the overall programme quality. However, building and maintaining relationships with children and their families was regarded as difficult due to children's varying care schedules and shift-working staff. Some other researchers (de Schipper et al., 2003; Salonen, Sevón & Laakso, 2016, Sevón, Rönkä, Räikkönen, & Laitinen, 2017) have also paid attention to characteristics of flexible day care that may threaten children's sense of stability. These include long periods and staying overnight in care, individual care schedules, variation in the composition of groups and changes in care personnel, who often work in shifts.

On the other hand, the relationship between the staff and families, especially during evenings, has been regarded as more intimate than during daytime (Halfon & Friendly, 2015). As only a few children attend daycare during evenings and weekends, services can more freely take into account children's potentially different needs. According to Statham and Mooney (2003), there is greater flexibility in routines and children have more choice during nonstandard hours of childcare. Sevón and her colleagues (2017) found that children in flexibly scheduled ECEC showed more positive moods in the mornings than children in daytime ECEC, possibly due to a more flexible and relaxed time at home compared to those who are obliged to rush to get to

daycare and then work early in the morning. Jordan (2008) found that flexible day care staff had developed several good practices to make children feel more secure and at home, especially in the evening time, thereby enhancing their wellbeing (see also Salonen et al., 2016).

Jordan (2008) noticed that parents, personnel and directors expressed strong feelings about non-standard hours childcare outside the home. It was the timing of care that evoked the strongest feelings. Not sleeping at home and not having a family dinner were experienced as especially troubling by participants. All informants expressed the view that non-standard hours care was not an accepted societal norm, and in spite of using or providing it they perceived disapproval of what they were doing. Contrary to the discomfort that society had with non-standard hours care, directors, parents and caregivers all stated that more centres needed to offer this type of care. Other researchers (e.g., Statham & Mooney, 2003) have similarly noticed the negative stigma around non-standard hours childcare. Boyd-Swan (2015) found that children attending daycare during nonstandard hours often came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Aims of the study

The focus of this article is flexibly scheduled ECEC services for families who need care in the evenings, nights and weekends because of work or studies. First, we analyse the characteristics of Finnish families who use flexibly scheduled ECEC services and compare these families with those who use daytime ECEC services. Second, we explore the characteristics of the use of flexibly scheduled ECEC (timing and length of care periods) in comparison to those of daytime ECEC services. Third, we explore what challenges are faced by personnel working in flexibly scheduled ECEC.

Methods

Respondents and procedure

This article utilizes data from a cross-national study titled ‘Children’s socioemotional wellbeing and daily family life in a 24h economy’ (Families 24/7) (see Rönkä et al., 2017) collected by means of two web-surveys: a parental web-survey and a web-survey for day care personnel. All research procedures were in accordance with the generally accepted ethical standards.

All the individual study participants gave their informed consent.

Parental survey. The data for this study were drawn from a survey targeted at Finnish, Dutch and British parents with children aged 0-12 years. This article utilizes data collected in Finland. The data collection took place between November 2012 and January 2013.

Respondents were recruited via childcare organizations, unions and employers, all of whom were invited by letter or email to promote the study. The parental survey was filled in by 483 Finnish parents (379 women, 104 men). The survey was especially targeted at parents working nonstandard working times but parents in other work situations were also invited to participate in the study to enable comparisons. Consequently, parents working nonstandard working times are overrepresented in the data. Owing to the recruitment procedures used, it is not possible to evaluate the survey response rate. For example, day care centres do not give out information about their client families, and the exact number of workers with children between 0–12 years old is not reported by employers or trade unions. Thus, it is not possible to calculate the number of parents who received information about the survey but declined to participate.

In answering questions related to childcare, respondents were asked to think about one child in the family, termed here the ‘target child’. The target child was defined as the child closest to the age of 4. Respondents were asked about the target child’s childcare arrangements over the past seven days for care periods longer than one hour when the respondent was at work or studying. This study utilizes data from parents (n = 252 women and 50 men) whose target

child was in centre-based care outside the home, either in an ordinary daytime ECEC centre or in a centre providing flexibly scheduled ECEC, during this time period. Participant background information is presented in Table 1, in the results section.

Survey for early educators. Centres providing flexibly scheduled ECEC (34 units in total) were selected from 25 municipalities purposefully sampled from geographically different parts of Finland. Both big (over 60 000 inhabitants) and small (less than 60 000 inhabitants) municipalities were represented. The web-survey was filled in by 227 early educators. As with the parental survey, it is not possible to calculate the exact response rate to this survey. The centres of flexibly scheduled ECEC were most often (46 %) units serving 76-100 children. The majority of the respondents (61%) were childcare nurses with an upper secondary degree education, 29% were kindergarten teachers with at minimum a university degree, 8 % were directors and the rest (2%) in some other position. Childcare nurses mostly work the nonstandard-hour shifts. We use the term early educator for all these occupational groups. Almost all the centres were municipally run and only one was in the private sector. The proportion of privately run centres was somewhat lower in our data than in ECEC nationally. The web survey included both structured and open-ended questions on, for example, care times, pedagogy, good practices in enhancing children's wellbeing and challenges related to day and night care. In this article, we analyze early educators' answers to an open-ended question concerning the challenges relating to flexibly scheduled ECEC. A thematic content analysis was performed on the open-ended answers

Measures

Parental background information included the number of children living with the participant, age of the target child, lone parenthood (single, separated or widowed parent), self-

evaluation of the family's financial situation (0 = *the worst possible*, 10 = *the best possible*), highest education received and age in years. Respondents' *work schedules* were assessed with the question 'What is your working time pattern?' The seven response categories (1=*regular daytime work*, 2=*evening work*, 3=*night work*, 4=*early morning work*, 5=*irregular work schedules*, 6=*shift work* and 7=*other non-standard work schedule*) were recoded into two categories: regular day work (category 1) and nonstandard working times (categories 2 to 7). In addition, respondents were asked whether *changes to their work schedule* occurred regularly (1= *yes*, 0= *no*) and their number of *working hours*, i.e. hours actually worked, per week: 'How many hours do you normally work a week (in your main job), including any paid or unpaid overtime?'

Childcare arrangements. Parents were asked about the use of *childcare in the early mornings* with question 'How many early mornings (between 05:00 and 07:00) did your child spend in centre-based/professional care in the last month?' Similar questions were asked about *Evening* (between 18:00 and 22:00) and *overnight care*. *Monthly hours in childcare* were elicited with the question 'How many hours did your child spend in centre-based/professional care during the past month?' To evaluate *the prevalence of 10-hour care spells* ('How often does your child spend over 10 hours per day in centre-based/professional child care?') the respondents chose from six options (daily, every week, a few times a month, once a month, a few times a year, never). Respondents also evaluated *the costs of childcare* based on the following open-ended question ('How much do you pay for the care of this child per month?').

Results

Comparison of families using two types of ECEC services

We found a few differences between the families using flexibly scheduled ECEC services and those using daytime ECEC services (see Table 1). First, lone-parent families were

overrepresented among the families using flexibly scheduled ECEC services. Second, parents whose target child was in flexibly scheduled ECEC were younger and had fewer children than those whose child was in daytime ECEC. Third, the parents in these two groups differed in educational status: parents using daytime ECEC services were more highly educated. Finally, we looked at the self-rated financial situation of the family. According to subjective ratings of the family's financial situation, the families using flexibly scheduled ECEC were not worse off than those using daytime ECEC. Therefore, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the perceived financial position of the families using flexibly scheduled ECEC services, even when linked to single parent status and lower education, was not necessary worse.

Mean length of weekly working hours was similar between the two groups: 38 hours in the daytime care group and 37 hours in the flexibly scheduled ECEC group. Regular day work was more common among the parents using daytime ECEC than those using flexibly scheduled ECEC. However, it was interesting to find that parents with a child in daytime ECEC might also have a nonstandard working time pattern. In fact, approximately four out of ten parents in both groups reported changes in their working schedules on a regular basis

Insert Table 1 here

Typical features of care

On the monthly level, the number of hours spent in care were the same for children irrespective of the type of care, with means of about 110 hours (see Table 2). However, long periods in care were more typical for the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC. In this group, 14.3 % of children had long periods of care each week, compared with only 3.6 % of the children in daytime ECEC. The difference also holds for the typicality of long periods of care: Most (87.1%) of the daytime

ECEC children had no care days longer than 10 hours whereas among the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC the corresponding figure was 58.4 %.

As expected, being in care during early mornings, evenings and nights was more common among the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC than those in daytime ECEC centres (see Table 2). However, not all the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC spend nights in care. About 80 per cent of the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC had not, during the past month, spent any nights in care. Similarly, some children in daytime ECEC centres occasionally spent early mornings and late evenings in care .

The costs of childcare were somewhat higher for the parents whose child was in daytime ECEC than for the parents using flexibly scheduled ECEC. Service costs to parents depend on the family's income and composition as well as service use. The time of day when the child is in care, however, is irrelevant. In other words, those with a higher household income receive less support from public funds and thus pay more. The cost is also dependent on the number of children in the family, and on the use of services (i.e. number of care hours a month, which is calculated irrespective of when it is provided during the 24-hour day). Those in daytime ECEC typically work full-time and their total household income tends to be higher; their contributions are therefore higher compared to those with lower incomes, who also make more use of flexibly scheduled ECEC but, generally, for fewer hours per month.

Insert table 2 here

Challenges faced by early educators

Centres providing flexibly scheduled ECEC differ from ordinary ECEC centres in that some staff members, especially childcare nurses, work nonstandard hours. Work schedule solutions vary: in

some centres, nonstandard hours may be permanently worked by some childcare nurses, while in others most of the staff work nonstandard hours. Further, the number and composition of the children present in care varies from time to time with weak predictability. Often during nonstandard hours, the child-adult ratio may fall short of the official guidelines. In contrast, there may be a shortage of staff during rush hours, e.g. in the mornings. Staffing is based on calculations of optimal child-adult ratios. Children's future care-time needs are continuously changing, often with a short response time.

Challenges relating to professional expertise

We asked early educators in the flexibly scheduled ECEC centres about the main challenges they faced as professionals. The categorization of the open answers to this question is shown in table 3.

Pedagogical expertise. Owing to constant change in group composition and staffing levels, the educators reported difficulties in planning and implementing goal-directed pedagogy. As the following examples show, either there is no time or space for shared planning or what has been planned fails to be realised or is not completed due to unexpected changes in individual work and care schedules:

“Pedagogical activity is more spontaneous than planned because some parents cancel their child’s attendance without warning, and so we can’t carry out the activity as we had planned.”

“You start something, but you can’t complete it by yourself because of your own shifts or the children’s shifts in care.”

Insert Table 3 here

Many educators agreed that pedagogy, care, and interaction when working in flexibly scheduled ECEC require special expertise and skills. They often compared flexibly scheduled ECEC with ordinary ECEC, and found differences between the two.

“Nothing that works in the normal day-care centres can be transferred as such into a day and night care centre. Instead, we’ve created many good practices for use across the whole of ECE in our municipality”

If planning is not always possible, one has to be able to act spontaneously: for example, organize pedagogical activities for children when the time is right. *“The days vary a lot and it is not always possible to follow certain routines. Sometimes there is no kindergarten teacher present during the planned activity, and it is the nurse who has to run it”*

Meeting children’s needs in fluctuating daily life. The early educators were concerned about their possibility as well as capacity to take children’s varying pedagogical and care needs into account. They tried to offer activities equally to all children but found this challenging because children’s rhythms and current levels of vitality varied due to their individual care times. It was also a question of synchrony in the level of vitality between different children and staff members.

“Children’s different daily rhythms affect their position in a group. You can’t plan an activity for the whole group of children in your mind. Instead you have to fit the activity in with children’s individual care times and the length of their care periods.” It is common for groups to include children of various ages, especially during weekends and evenings.

It is part of an educator’s professional expertise to notice and take into account children’s levels of vitality, as these differ widely, as stated by one educator:

“The child who arrives at day care in the afternoon and starts his/her day is eager. How can I continue to be energetic and stimulating after an already long day?”

The educators were frequently concerned about the long periods of care of some children. *“Sometimes I have a feeling that the periods in care are too long and burdening for the child. On the other hand, the child might have several days off during which the child is with his/her parent.”*

To be able to take into account children’s individual needs, educators have to get to know each child. The early educators complained that in the flexibly scheduled ECEC context this is difficult. Given that both the children and some of the early educators work in shifts, children and personnel meet each other infrequently and irregularly.

“Every day different children and your own work schedules. It may be a week before you even meet a certain child”

Some children may have many days off or schedules crisscross, and educators don’t see some children for a long time.

“This is especially challenging and difficult if either the child or worker work during the most marginal hours, evenings weekends and nights.”

Communication with adults. The educators regarded interaction and cooperation with families challenging. Families using flexibly scheduled ECEC centres are diverse in form as well as in their living and custodial arrangements. Families might also be in a special situation or currently living in changing circumstances. This poses challenges for meeting, understanding and supporting families and building a partnership, as demonstrated by the following comments:

“Family situations vary, you have to keep up to date and arrange possibilities to meet parents and children.”

“Sometimes family situations are challenging, and you might have to discuss very challenging issues with parents such as custodial disagreements.”

It was sometimes difficult for an educator to understand and respect the decisions parents had made, for example in relation to their working time and children’s care times. *“You have to be able to respect all families and children.”* On the other hand, some educators felt shift work burdened parents and they sympathized with them. Likewise, the transfer of information between parents and staff was difficult because both worked nonstandard hours. Hence, the educators have to work to make the relationship with families work: *“You must make an effort to develop a good partnership with parents”*

Constant changes in work and care schedules not only made cooperation with parents difficult, but also cooperation with colleagues: *“Relationships with colleagues [are challenging] as well; it may be a long time before you are on the same shift with a certain person again.”* Communication amid a constant flow of people takes time and energy: *“You may be away from day shifts and your ‘own’ child group for up to two weeks. Then you need to be active and ask a lot and read the team’s message book.”*

Coping with work conditions. Staff work schedules as well as children’s care times are in constant flux. This requires flexibility and patience on the part of the staff. Some respondents also reported that work in a flexibly scheduled ECEC centre, especially for childcare nurses who work in shifts, is characterized by working alone. This is especially common on extreme shifts, such as late evenings, early mornings, weekends and nights.

“The nights are long and ‘lonely’”

Besides feeling lonely, some also found it demanding to cope with multiple matters and make decisions alone. Educators also have to decide independently on many issues when the

director or colleagues are not present: “[one challenge is] to work alone and make decisions independently.”

Leadership. Those working as directors or in supervisory positions often mentioned leadership-related challenges, paying special attention to the lack of national guidelines and to challenges caused by the allocation of resources. They found it extremely difficult to develop and plan pedagogy and activities in a situation where research and national guidelines are lacking. The centres develop most of their practices themselves, and the director is mainly responsible for adapting the general regulations, guidelines and practices to suit their own specific context. “*On the other hand, this offers the director opportunities to devise her own solutions and decisions.*”

The directors often mentioned that it is difficult in flexibly scheduled ECEC to allocate human resources to ensure a suitable staffing level during both rush hours and quieter times. This is especially demanding when care times are cancelled or a staff member is absent.

“*Allocation of the staff resources at the right time and place among the child groups [is challenging].*”

Discussion

This study contributes to filling gaps in research on flexibly scheduled ECEC, also known in the international literature as non-standard hours childcare, extended hours day care and atypical hours day care (see e.g., Statham & Mooney, 2003). Researchers agree on the urgent need for research in this area, as parental work during nonstandard hours is becoming increasingly common. Further, this study was among the first to give Finnish early educators an opportunity to voice their opinions and experiences of flexibly scheduled ECEC.

The study demonstrates (Jordan, 2008) that the unpredictability and constant changes in working life tend to spill over to ECEC. Due to varying parental work schedules, children experience unique daily and weekly rhythms, which in turn have an impact on ECEC administrative and pedagogical issues. This study further shows that the unpredictability of schedules also affects the possibilities of educators to meet the needs of children equally. The fact that parents, children and most early educators work non-standard and often unpredictable work or care schedules means that the so-called 24/7 economy is highly visible in the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC. The ecological systems theory on the role of wider institutions, services and policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) is today more than ever relevant in understanding the realities of children, families and early educators in the context of nonstandard work and care schedules.

The results yielded new information about the Finnish families using flexibly scheduled ECEC services. These are mostly families where both parents work nonstandard hours or lone-parent families where the parent works nonstandard hours. The parents using flexibly scheduled ECEC services were less educated than the parents using daytime ECEC services but there was no difference in the self-reported financial situation between the users of either service. Finnish families using flexibly scheduled ECEC services do not necessarily come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as found in some other studies (see Boyd-Swan, 2015). Using flexibly scheduled ECEC is socially acceptable in Finland and does not carry the same negative stigma as in several other countries (e.g., Jordan, 2008).

The study yielded new information about the use of flexibly scheduled ECEC services. Most often, the need for flexibly scheduled ECEC took place during evening time and early mornings, while the need for overnight care was rare. On the monthly level, although the average

number of hours used by families was similar for both types of ECEC services, long hours spent by children in care were more common in flexibly scheduled ECEC than in daytime ECEC. Long hours of care, which are generally regarded as harmful for children (see de Schipper, et al., 2003) are most often a result of working on rotating shifts. This issue should be taken into account in the planning of work schedules in the case of parents with young children.

Challenges for administration and pedagogy

Flexibly scheduled ECEC presents educators with various administrative challenges (see Statham & Mooney, 2002; Halfon & Friendly, 2015). These concern accommodating to parental work schedules, coping with constant changes and, especially for centre directors, allocation of resources. In the absence of national guidelines directors are left to establish their own rules and practices. In Finland, the same legislation applies to both daytime and flexibly scheduled ECEC services.

The results also revealed challenges relating to the quality of ECEC, a topic that has largely been neglected. These concerned the implementation of pedagogy, cooperation with parents, and meeting children's educational and care needs. All these were regarded as challenging owing to the unpredictability and constant change that characterize daily life in flexibly scheduled ECEC centres, where most educators and all the children and their families have unique rhythms (see Sevón et al., 2017). The number of possible relationships that may need to be considered is large, as many children have two homes and several parental figures.

Interestingly, the parents of the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC did not report more changes to their work schedules than those of the children in daytime ECEC, although the early educators very often mentioned the problems associated with varying parental work schedules. It

may be that cancellations and changes in care schedules concern only a small minority of families.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the non-representativeness of the samples of parents and educators. Both were studied via web-surveys, and hence it is not possible to control response rates. Purposeful sampling, designed to represent different geographical regions of Finland and both urban and suburban areas, was applied in selecting the flexibly scheduled ECEC centres. It also proved easy to recruit these centres. Very few municipalities or units declined to participate; on the contrary, directors and educators were very motivated to participate owing to the lack of existing research. It is, however, possible that those who responded to the survey differed in some way from non-respondents.

Practical implications

Apart from supporting parental employment, the wellbeing and equality of opportunity of the children in care should be promoted in nonstandard ECEC services. Flexibly scheduled ECEC presents educators with several challenges in the areas of pedagogy, cooperation with parents and supporting children with varying rhythms. The practices used in traditional, services operating only during the daytime are not adequate. Instead, to offer pedagogical activities to all children, it is imperative that their individual rhythms and levels of vitality are taken into account. Furthermore, from the point of view of educators working in shifts, a time and place has to be established for planning these activities. To build a good partnership with families also takes time and energy, since parents and educators may meet only occasionally. Although

Finnish units offering flexibly scheduled ECEC have done pioneering work in developing good practices in responding to the needs of children and parents, there is an urgent need for national guidelines and legislation to support ECEC units.

Finally, the question concerning children's education and care in the 24-h society is not limited to ECEC services. Children and families would benefit from a wider public discussion on working life and organisational life. Children's needs for nonparental care during nonstandard hours is ultimately affected by legislation on the opening hours of services and working hours.

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