



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO  
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

# **Current trends of inclusion in Finnish ECEC: Evaluation and monitoring as means to identify and overcome challenges**

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# Content of the presentation



- Brief introduction to inclusive ECEC in Finland
- Governance, monitoring and evaluation
- Evaluation as a mean to identify challenges
- Three exemplary cases of challenges and potential ways forward



# Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC 0–6)



Every child has a right to ECEC, every child has the right to educational support.

The ECEC comprises the perspectives of

- Care
- Education
- Teaching



**Policy goals of the Finnish ECEC system (Kahiluoto 2009).**

***Social policy:***

ECEC system provides **equal opportunities for all children**, but also facilitates equal opportunities **for women and men** in terms of **participation in the society**.

***Employment policy:***

ECEC allows both parents to access the **labor market**.

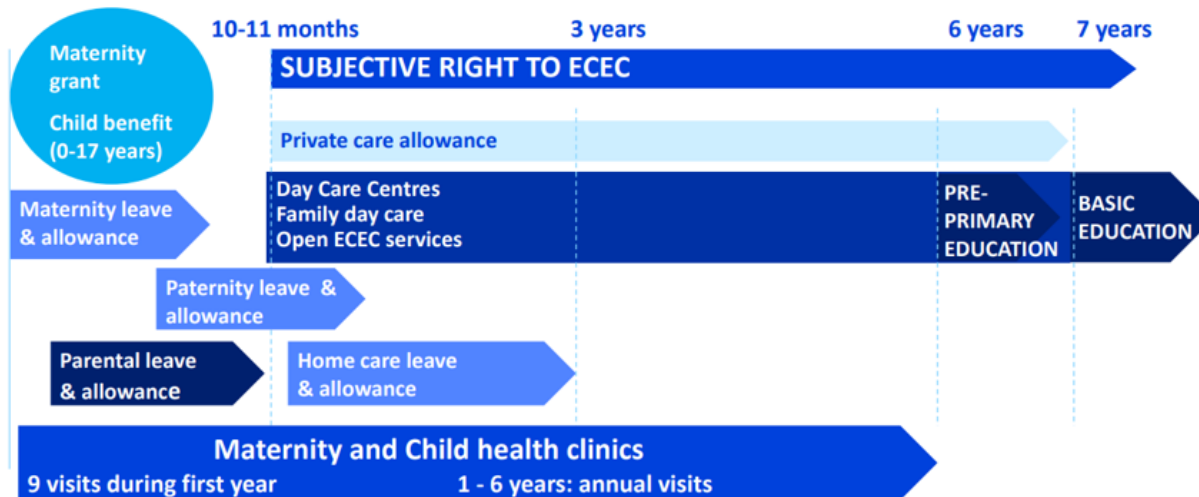
***Educational policy:***

ECEC provides the possibility for all children to receive early education which **can aid in guaranteeing an equal start** for all children.

Value of education actualised not only through sustaining equitable chances for participation but also through economical benefits

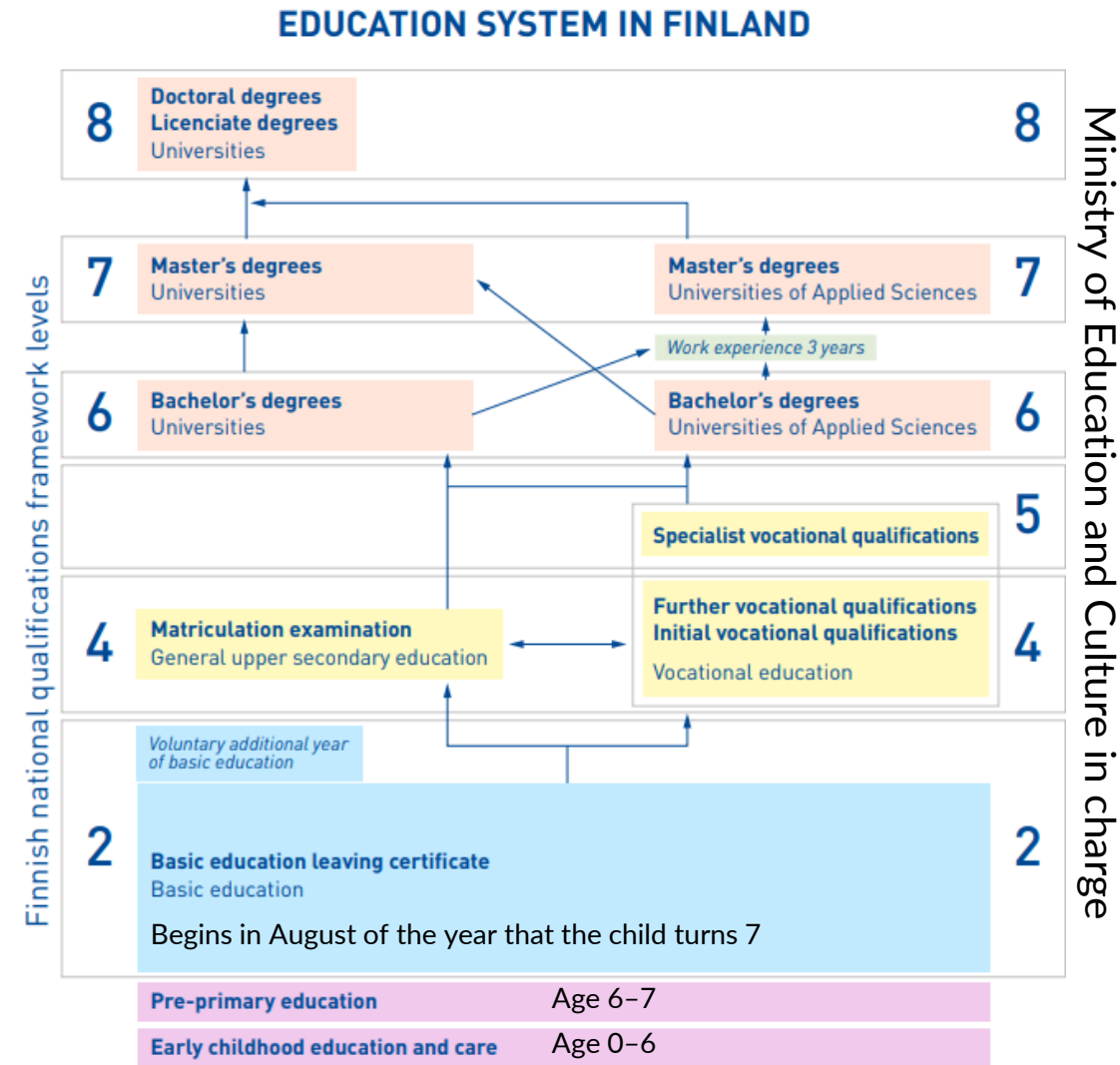
# ECEC as the first step on the educational path

- ECEC is build solidly as the first step on the path of lifelong learning
- Also seen as an important stage of life in itself – value of the child and childhood highly regarded



Finnish National Agency for Education (2019). Education in Finland – Presentation.  
[https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/education-in-finland-2020\\_3.pdf](https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/education-in-finland-2020_3.pdf)

Participation in ECEC is subject to a fee which depends on family income and the number of children. The **maximum fee** charged for ECEC is now around **EUR 289** and the **minimum fee** charged is **EUR 27**.



Finnish national qualifications framework levels

Ministry of Education and Culture in charge

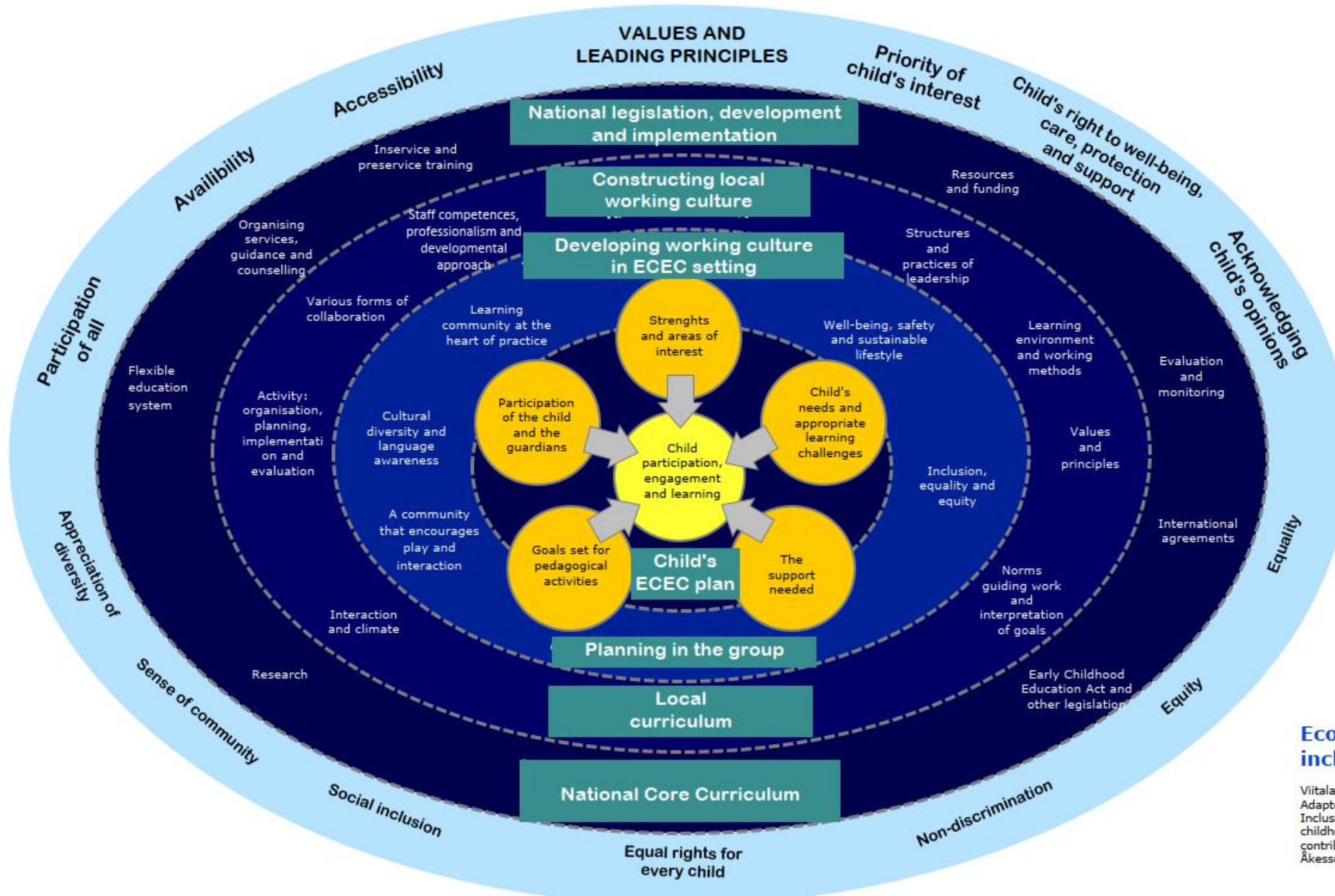


[www.oph.fi](http://www.oph.fi)

Finnish National Agency for Education (2019). Education in Finland.  
<https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/education-system-in-finland-infographic.pdf>



# Inclusion in ECEC – From principles to daily pedagogy



## The underlying values for ECEC

- best interests of the child
- the child's right to well-being, care and protection,
- consideration of the opinion of the child
- The requirement of equal and equitable treatment, principles of inclusion, and protection against discrimination

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (59/1991),  
 The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018)  
 The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (27/2016)

## Ecosystemic model of inclusive ECEC

Viitala, Hautakangas, Holappa & Kaplin-Sainio, 2024.  
 Adapted from European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2017. Inclusive early childhood education: new insights and tools – contributions from a European study. Ed. E. Björck-Åkesson, M. Kyriazopoulou, C. Giné & P. Bartalo.

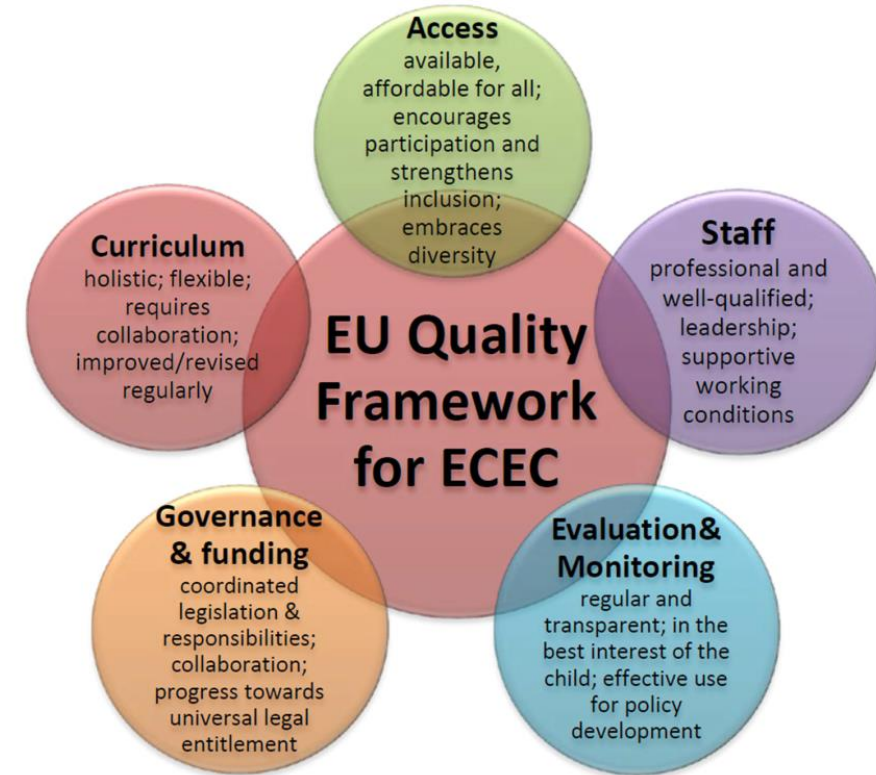
# Governance, monitoring and evaluation in Finnish ECEC

- Governance and Monitoring

- **The Ministry of Education and Culture** >> national planning, **governance** and monitoring of ECEC.
- **The Regional State Administrative Agencies** >> regional planning, guidance and supervision of ECEC and the duties of the national authorising authority (326/2022)
- **The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI)** acts as the expert agency in ECEC
- The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health or a Regional State Administrative Agency **may inspect** the activities, units and premises of organisers and service providers of ECEC.

- Evaluation

- **The organisers and providers of early childhood education and care shall evaluate the early childhood education and care they provide and participate in external evaluations of their activities.** The key findings of the evaluations shall be published.
- **Conducting national external evaluations is a duty of the Finnish National Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC).** ECEC has been under its jurisdiction since 2015.
- Evaluation in ECEC is guided by the principles of enhancement-led evaluation.
  - Information is produced to enhance the activities, not for the external evaluator!
- Evaluation is based on the self-evaluation of staff and it highlights the development needs they bring up themselves.



COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION  
of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood  
Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/02)

# National evaluation as a tool to identify challenges in implementing curriculum



- Universal system with the same binding curriculum for ages 0–6 years
- National Core Curriculum covers aspects of inclusion, but also the main pedagogical goals and principles set for ECEC
- FINEEC carried out an evaluation regarding the **ECEC curriculum implementation** at ECEC centres and family day care (Repo et al., 2019)



EVERY DAY QUALITY  
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION AND CARE

ECEC curriculum implementation at ECEC centres and in family day care



SUMMARIES 16/2020

## The evaluation questions were:

- How are the content-related objectives set in the National core curriculum implemented at ECEC centres and in family day care?
  - What factors promote or hinder the implementation of the National core curriculum at ECEC centres and in family day care?
- 
- Based on self-evaluation in line with the enhancement-led evaluation
    - Staff and leader survey

- Areas for development in pedagogical activities
  - Familiarity with the National core curriculum
  - Art education, explorative activities and multiliteracy
  - **Emphasis on areas for development in groups of children under 3 years of age**
  - Friendships
  - Linguistic environment
  - Unclear division of work between professional groups



# Challenge #1

## Under three-year-olds are often in marginal



### 6 Factors hindering the implementation of the activities

The respondents were asked to tell the main reasons why all children cannot manage to participate in the rich pedagogical activities.

#### Reasons related to the group of children

The most significant single reason was found to be factors related to the children and the group of children, such as the children's varying needs, their age, support needs and challenges in language development. In many places, staff said they would like to have support in the implementation of activities in line with the local curriculum in the diverse group of children.

#### Emphasis on areas for development in groups of children under 3 years of age

According to the answers to the open-ended questions, the content-related shortcomings related to the implementation of pedagogy were emphasised especially in groups of children aged under three. In early childhood education and care, consideration should be given to how a versatile learning environment is organised when children are very young, what art education of young children or the activities that encourage them to exploration are like, and how the initiatives of young children are observed.

- Challenges with curriculum implementation and organizing daily pedagogy (KARVI 2019), but also in receiving support for different needs (Heiskanen et al., 2021)
- Three year-olds as a specific and vulnerable group

Age	2021		2023	
	N	%	N	%
Under 1-year-olds	435	0.9	279	0.6
1-year-olds	17 826	38.3	19 677	43.4
2-year-olds	32 145	69.7	38 670	76.5
3-year-olds	40 275	83.8	41 901	87.6

Source: EDUFI Statistics Vipunen, cited 30.5.2025

- Increasing number of children attend to ECEC
  - Especially porportion of 1–2-year-olds in ECEC settings has rapidly increased



# Ways forward

- Forms of responding to these challenges
  - National mission at the Ministry, Researchers mobilised to gathering and providing research-based evidence
  - National evaluation by FINEEC
- Activating the research networks
  - Finnish Network of Infant and Toddler Research
  - Closer look at under three-year-olds as a marginalized group in the European educational policy realm (EU Horizon application)
- Making amendments in initial training institutions



## 8 Development recommendations 2019

Based on the presented results, proposals for measures aiming to support the content-related development of ECEC are put forward.

### 1 High-quality activities in accordance with the National core curriculum must be implemented for children under three years of age

According to the results of the evaluation, the children's age was considered one obstacle to curriculum implementation. Staff found that it is not always possible to implement play-based pedagogy, art education, linguistically rich interaction or activities that encourage exploration in the activities of children under three years of age. In the education and in-service training of ECEC staff, attention should be paid to the staff's ability to respond to the pedagogical needs of children under the age of three and the ways of implementing the contents of the curriculum among smaller children.



## Evaluation of the realisation of ECEC for children the age of three and under (2026-2027)

The evaluation will take place between 2026 and 2027 and the site will be updated as the evaluation progresses.

This evaluation will be conducted to examine how ECEC for children under the age of three is realised in Finland. The previous evaluations implemented by FINEEC have indicated shortcomings in the pedagogy for children under the age of three. According to the results, the objectives set for e.g., play pedagogy, art education, linguistically rich interaction or activities encouraging exploration are not in all respects realised in ECEC for young children. Thus, several recent national experiments have focused on children over the age of three. At the same time, the active measures taken to increase the level of participation have also increased the proportion of children under the age of three in ECEC. The evaluation supports comprehensive development of ECEC by producing information on the current state of ECEC for the youngest children.

# National evaluation as a tool to identify challenges in meeting the needs of the immigrant children



## Longitudinal assessment of learning outcomes in basic education, first and third grade

### PRE-PRIMARY, PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) will implement a longitudinal assessment of learning outcomes in basic education. The aim of the assessment is to get information about learning outcomes and changes in students' competence curves focusing in mother tongue and literature (Finnish, Swedish, and Finnish as a second language) and mathematics. Students' transversal competences will be assessed concurrently according to the new Finnish national core curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014).

<https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/pre-primary-and-basic-education/learning-outcomes-evaluations/longitudinal-assessment-learning-outcomes-basic-education-first-and-third-grade>

- The number of people with an immigrant background is constantly growing in Finland
- Finland has a short history of large-scale immigration, and the needs and diversity of this population are not always recognized.

- FINEEC carried out an evaluation regarding the first graders' (N = 7770) school entry skills (Ukkola et al., 2019)
- The evaluation identified 5 risks for low initial skills
  - 1) Special education needs
  - 2) Finnish or Swedish as a second language
  - 3) Learning difficulties in proximal family
  - 4) Low parental education
  - 5) Birthday in the last months of the year

[https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/Karvi\\_Policy-brief\\_0723.pdf](https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/Karvi_Policy-brief_0723.pdf)

## Challenge #2

# ECEC is not fully inclusive toward immigrant children



- Children's growth as members of society is supported via ECEC. Attending ECEC develops the Finnish or Swedish language skills needed in basic education.
- The participation of children with an immigrant background in early childhood education can prevent the development of skills segregation and increase inclusiveness (Burger 2010; Currie 2001; Kosonen & Huttunen 2018).
- Children's Finnish or Swedish language skills are best strengthened through language-aware staff, high-quality activities, and possibilities for peer learning
- (see e.g., [https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/KARVI\\_T1320.pdf](https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/KARVI_T1320.pdf)).

However, children with an immigrant background participate less in early childhood education than others, even when it is offered free of charge (Siippainen et al., 2020) which was tested in Finland over the course of three years.

However, staff in ECEC often lack skills and competences of language-aware pedagogy. The staff have reported inadequacy in coordinating the linguistically rich environment purposefully for children with Finnish as a second language skills and other children in the group (Repo et al. 2019).

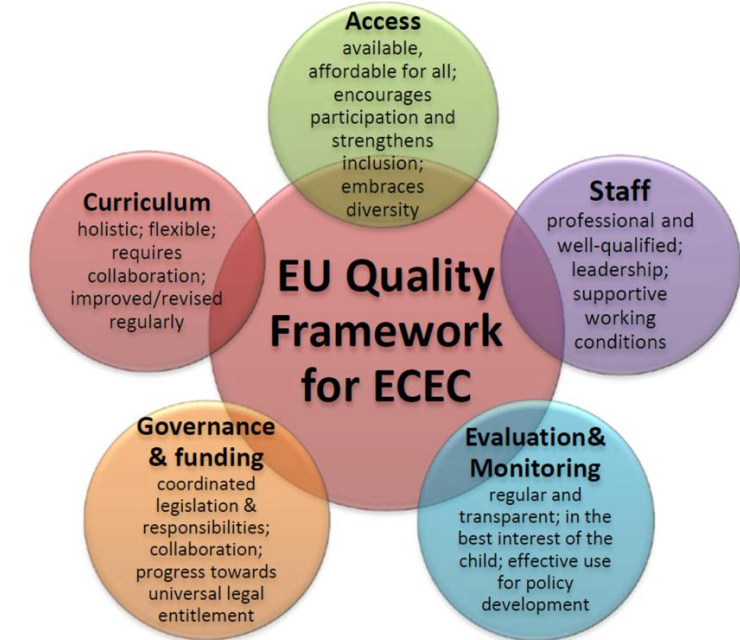
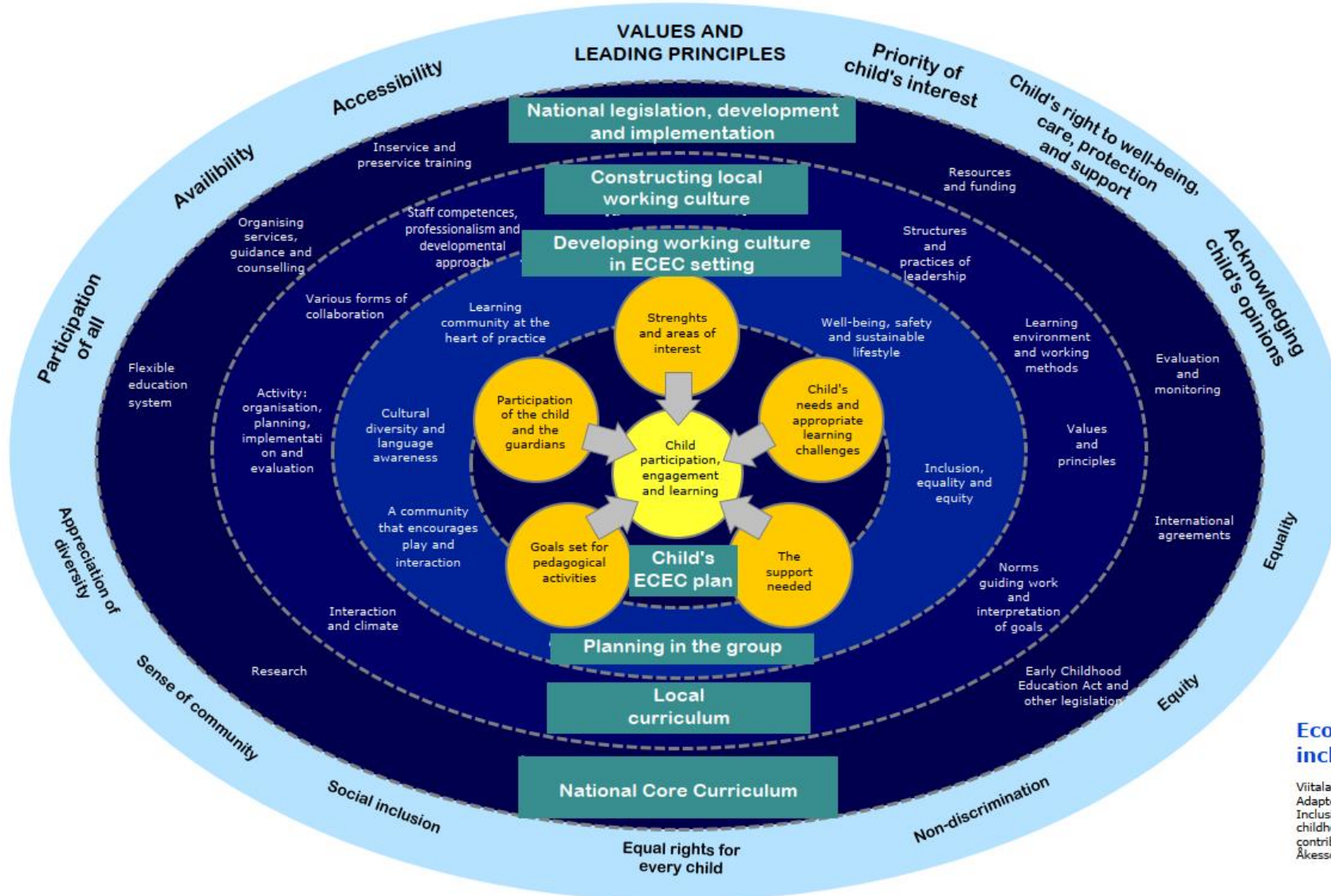


# Ways forward



- Increase staff competences of language-aware pedagogy
  - In ECEC, it is important to **ensure** and **find active ways to support** every learner's feeling of belonging to the group and the opportunity to form peer relationships with Finnish or Swedish speakers. Peer relationships create a sense of belonging to one's immediate environment and community, and peers also teach language skills. .
- Improving service guidance in municipalities to make ECEC more easily accessible (see also Siippainen et al., 2020).
- Family campaigns
  - Working closely with the parents in immigrant communities
- Adding educational pathways that would increase the number of multicultural staff in ECEC
  - E.g., University of Helsinki provides KIVAPE –studies that facilitate language supported pathways to working life for adults with immigrant backgrounds

# Educated staff guarantees inclusive ECEC



COUNCIL  
RECOMMENDATION  
of 22 May 2019 on High-  
Quality Early Childhood  
Education and Care  
Systems (2019/C  
189/02)

## Ecosystemic model of inclusive ECEC

Viitala, Hautakangas, Holappa & Kaplin-Sainio, 2024.  
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childhood education: new insights and tools –  
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Åkesson, M. Kyriazopoulou, C. Giné & P. Bartalo.

# Professionals in ECEC

Legislation provides general criteria for the staff **qualification and ratio** (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 240/2018; Decree on Children's day care, 1973).



**Training/qualification** is required for the **ECEC staff working with 0–6-year-olds**

One in three staff members **in an ECEC setting** must have a higher education degree. Four qualification types and professional roles

## Teacher in ECEC

BA (or MA) in Education  
(University degree)

*Specialized in early years pedagogy and teaching, responsibility over team level leadership & planning, drafting children's individual plans, developmental knowledge.*

## Social pedagogue in ECEC

BA (or MA) in healthcare and social services (inc. at least 60 credits in ECEC and social pedagogy)  
(University of Applied Sciences)

*Specialized in collaboration with families, expertise in social welfare issues, and multiprofessional networks*

## Childcarer in ECEC

At least a vocational upper-secondary qualification in the field of education and guidance or health and social services.

*Age-appropriate basic care, interaction with parents, child-wellbeing*

## Special education teacher in ECEC

BA (or MA) in Education  
(University degree)

*Supports and guides ECEC staff in their work with respect to children's individual needs of support, organizes special education and works in collaborative, multiprofessional networks*

**Family day care takers in home based ECEC** must have a vocational qualification suitable for the task or other training suitable for the sector.

*In addition to completing the similar tasks as the staff in ECEC together, the family day care takers also prepare meals and clean.*

*Consultation of the ECEC special education teacher.*





# Challenge #3

## Not sufficiently qualified and stable staff in ECEC



### EVERY DAY QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

ECEC curriculum implementation at ECEC centres and in family day care



SUMMARIES 16:2020

- Areas for development in pedagogical activities
  - **Unclear division of work between professional groups**
- Factors hindering the implementation of the activities
  - **Staff sufficiency and turnover, lack of material, limited resources**

### Staff sufficiency and turnover, lack of material, limited resources

A total of 40% of staff felt that staff turnover affects the daily activities in ECEC. To enable consistent implementation of the activities and to even out differences in quality, sufficient resources must be guaranteed for the activities in ECEC. In addition to these, it is essential to discuss how situations are solved at the level of pedagogical activities when the resources available at the time are not sufficient.

Based on prior research it is known that the structural marginal conditions such as group size, adult to child ratio and staff structure affect the pedagogical activities in ECEC. Quality is also greatly affected by resources allocated to ECEC, including not just financial resources but also the physical spaces and materials.

Trade Union of Education (OAJ) conducted a survey in September 2021 (<https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2021/alanvaihtokysely-09-21/>)

Responses from over 2 600 trade union member teachers across different levels of education system.

- 63 % of **ECEC teachers** have considered leaving the profession: **Considering other career options was most common among those who work with the youngest in ECEC and in basic education.**
- Most common reasons for considering leaving profession were
- **Work load** (83%)
- **Increase in the amount of work** (67%)
- **Low wages** (50%)

Eight out of ten ECEC teachers mentioned low wage level as the main reason for considering leaving profession.

Those who had the **most responsibilities** and **the lowest starting salaries** were the ones who had **considered most often other career options.**

Indequate number of **qualified** staff in ECEC. Mostly among teachers but increasingly also among childcarers. Challenges persist partially geographically. May be reflected to youngest in ECEC-

# Challenge #3

## Students may question a career in ECEC in initial training

Koivusalo, E., & Alasuutari, M. (2024). Commitment to Early Childhood Education Teacher Studies and the Teaching Profession. University of Jyväskylä, JYU Reports, ISSN 2737-0046; 51.

- Survey of 595 students and teachers working in ECEC
- Students with previous work experience in the field were
  - motivated by the child-centeredness of the profession.
  - perceived their capability of designing educational activity sessions for children and considering children's development and socialisation processes in teaching to be higher than students without work experience.
- Over half of the respondents responded that they had not received enough feedback supporting their professionalism during the studies
- About two-thirds of those working as early childhood education teachers were committed to the profession.
- The majority of those working in ECEC were satisfied with their career choice, were happy to work in the field of ECEC and did not regret their decision to become an ECEC teacher, but rated their work as stressful, considered the **compensation insufficient**, considered their **workload too heavy** and thought the size of **child groups too large**.

Kirmanen, S. (2025). "Haluaisin uskoa siihen, että opettajien työolot olisivat muuttumassa parempaan." Opettajaopiskelijoiden kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä opettajankoulutuksen ja työn veto- ja pitovoimasta. Master thesis, JYU

- Survey for student teachers (ECEC teachers and class teachers) (N = 90)
- 64.2 % of the respondents had considered changing career.
- Most frequently mentioned reasons for considering changing career:
  - Low wages
  - Job demands
  - Lack of resources

# Ways forward



- Underlying larger labor market discussions, despite the demands under the current economical situation
- Clarifying the professional roles of those working in ECEC (Vlasov et al., 2024).
  - Job descriptions: Governance and monitoring? Policymaking?
  - Contents of the degree programmes: Initial training institutions
- Increase of student intake
- Supporting staff wellbeing through increasing resilience
  - Balance between **job demands** and **resources** (see e.g., Lerkkanen et al., 2025)
- Focusing on the aspects that staff reports as **reasons to remain** in ECEC (Koivusalo & Alasuutari, 2024; Kirmanen, 2025)
  - Importance of professionalism for the self-image
  - Professional work with children is inspirational
  - Children and educational mission as important values
  - Reasons to remain and to change the occupation may include tensions



# Summary



- Finnish ECEC system is build on shared values, including inclusion
- Nevertheless, realization of inclusion needs to be critically evaluated
- Children face risks of being excluded, some more than others
- Staff plays a central role in ensuring inclusive ECEC
- Evaluation is an important way of identifying challenges, but also a mechanism to find solutions and ways forward





# Thank you for your attention!

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# Group forming principles in Finnish ECEC



Mostly mixed age groups, both in day care and in family-based care.  
Group size is determined by adult:child ratio.

## 0-3-year-olds' child group

- Generally: 12-13 children
- Adult-child ratio **1:4**
- 1 teacher and 2 childcarers

Two staff members work as **work pairs** (usually teacher and childcarer) with **a stable small group of children** (e.g., 2 adults and 8 children).

Up to three work pairs can work within one group area.

This new model of organizing groups has emerged in 2010's.



## Family day-care

- Up to 4 children / family day-care taker





# Current trends and challenges in professionalisation



- Legislation (Act of ECEC 540/2018; §37)
- **At least two thirds of the persons** referred to in section 35 who work in an early education centre in upbringing, education and care tasks **shall be qualified teachers or social pedagogues in ECEC**, and **at least half of these staff members shall be qualified teachers in ECEC**. Other staff members shall at least be qualified childcarers in ECEC.
  - Section 37 enters into force on **1 January 2030**.

A general lack of qualified staff members to start with, it is difficult to get enough qualified teachers, but also substitute teachers.

A risk increases that the **qualified teachers are placed to work in the groups of older children**, leaving the youngest without pedagogically trained teacher.

