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Playing to Learn in Finland Early Childhood Curricular and Operational Contexts

Jonna Kangas, Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Annu Brotherus, Arniika Kuusisto & Liam Gearon

1. Introduction

In this chapter we outline the definition of play-based learning in both Finnish and international literature as well as describe how Finnish ECEC curriculum guidelines describe play. Further we describe play activities in early childhood education practices from the viewpoints of operational cultures and the learning environment. We use both content analysis of the national curriculum as well as observational data in order to illustrate the national play-based learning context. We use mixed methods design, where various types of data sets are in a dialogue to complement and confirm the findings from each other. This provides a wider and more in-depth information of play-based learning orientation in the Finnish ECEC context. Finally, we take a critical perspective on the Finnish operational cultures and suggest developmental objects.

Curriculum for ECEC guides the practical implementation of the caring and education of young children's growth and overall development. It also guides how for example children's play and further play based pedagogy is viewed. During the recent years, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has taken the initiative to explore the contrasts and complexities of the different national policies and approaches to ECEC. In this examination, Bennett (2005) has distinguished two broad categories between the national settings, particularly visible in Europe, as the pre-primary tradition (e.g. Belgium, France, Ireland, UK, and the US) focusing on cognitive goals and 'readiness for school' as important aims, and the social pedagogic tradition (e.g. Nordic countries, many parts of Central Europe) focusing more on children's play and social development with an emphasis on children's agency. This latter approach defines the developmental aims more broadly, enabling the staff to tailor the ECEC programme to local setting and to base assessment on more varied objectives than set results. As such approaches are directly linked to different perceptions of childhood, the OECD has expressed concerns on the risk of too much emphasis on formal teaching and other 'schoolification'. Referring to the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child, the OECD advocates an understanding of the curriculum in which the children should have a high degree of initiative and agency and stresses the reinforcing of "those aspects of curriculum that contribute to the well-being and involvement of the child" (Bennett 2005; also Dahlberg 2009; Rainio, 2010).

1.1. Definitions of play-based learning

A review of the archaeological, historical, anthropological and sociological research on play, Whitebread, Basilio, Kovalja and Verma (2012) suggest two identifiable feature of play: one, its ubiquity among all human cultures, a universality on the hand which is 'consistently supported by adults in all societies and cultures'; and two, play's multi-variant nature of form in different societies. In both cases 'these variations appear to arise from differing attitudes concerning the nature of childhood and the value of play'.

Recent research has found that social competence is a requirement for successful play, because play includes active carrying out of negotiations and agreements between facts and fiction. Therefore, play has been seen as dynamic and dialogical process in imaginary environment (Møller, 2015). According to Wood (2009; 2010), pedagogical play refers to the use of play in early childhood education in promoting the learning of young children (see also Lester and Russell, 2010; Sefton-Green,,

Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Sintonen, Rajala & Hilppö, 2015). Playful activities and free play are shown to have a role in the development of children's self-regulation skills. Skills such as enactment into learning activities through creativity and exploration or goal-setting for learning through independent initiatives and choice making were shown to be developing in the context of play-based learning environment with the participatory teaching approach of teachers (Kangas Ojala & Venninen, 2015).

International research and policy documents (Hedges & Cooper, 2018) also suggest that teachers should practice the kind of pedagogy that facilitates learning through play, and that there is a discrepancy about play and how it should be implemented in educational practices (McInnes & al, 2011). The empirical data from research on developmental psychology are consistent with the neo-Vygotskian analysis of the role of adult mediation in the development of children's motives for play. If we interpret these findings as characteristic of the dynamic of children's play motivation, as the researchers seem inclined to do, the conclusion can be drawn that pretend play is not initially a self-motivated activity. Rather, the motives for playing gradually develop in children. The observations of the researchers that, at the ages of 24 and 36 months, the length of children's episodes of play with their caregivers was twice as sustained as their solo pretend play can be interpreted as an indication that mothers' participation in children's play increases children's interest in play.

1.2. Finnish context

In Finland, every child (10 months to 6 year-olds) has a subjective right to ECEC. In 2015 68 percent of 4-year-olds, 76 percent of 5-year-olds and almost 100 percent of 6-year-olds participated in ECEC (Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas 2017; OECD 2015; EU 2015). In the working team there are at least one teacher with an academic bachelor's degree and one to three adults with lower educational degrees. One team member can be in charge of four children that are younger than the age of three. When the children are older than three years of age, the team member can be in charge of up to eight children. It is a common practice that a working team consists of three staff members and 12-24 children. Teachers' commitment to the learning situation creates sensitivity towards children's feelings and personal well-being. (National curriculum of early childhood education, 2016). The role of children in the curriculum is described to be active agents and composers of meaningful learning experiences (Karila, 2008; Karila & Kinos, 2012). When implementing the Finnish ECEC curriculum (2016) teachers must ensure that children's initiatives and actions are taken into account. It suggests that teachers support and guide children to become conscious of their own learning. Teachers are advised to listen to children, provide them with opportunities to show initiatives, let children decide on their activities, explore, draw conclusions, and express their thoughts (Kangas, Ojala & Venninen 2015).

2. Research methods

In this paper we use both content analysis on the national curriculum as well as observational data in order to illustrate the national play-based learning context. In a research aiming to shed light into child perspectives, utilizing merely a singular method is often insufficient for grasping a holistic view on the examined phenomena. Mixed methods design (e.g. Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998), where various types of data are set in a dialogue to complement and confirm the findings from each other (Brooker 2001; Denzin & Lincoln 2000), can work to provide wider and more in-depth information.

In terms of ethical considerations, our study was committed into adhering to both national and international guidelines on research ethics, including those set by the Finnish National Advisory

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Board on Research Ethics (Good scientific practice and procedures for handling misconduct and fraud in science, 2002), with special considerations to research with young children.

2.1 Curriculum data

The curricula documents were analyzed through qualitative content analysis (e.g. Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 564-569). In all, documents provide a rich though often underused source of data for educational research. Documentary research holds a critical position in the development of social science. Research on document sources has particular applicability in educational sciences, as educational systems consistently produce excessive amounts of documentary data. (Punch & Oancea 2014.) In the field of curriculum research, critical theory has held an influential role. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 35) write: "It has been argued for many years that the most satisfactory account of the curriculum is given by a modernist, positivist reading of the development of education and society." As the curricular expression of this, they refer to Tyler's (2013) influential rationale for the curriculum, including four questions:

1. What educational purposes should the school [here the ECEC] seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

(Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, 36.)

The policy document level and the day-to-day implementation may not always meet in the way the policy makers have aimed for. Therefore, in connection to curriculum studies, it is also notable to ask, to which extent do these document level guidelines actually become practical level reality in the Early Childhood Education settings and even more so, local settings. Yang and Li (2018) have examined cultural ideology matters in Early Childhood Education curriculums across cultural settings by utilizing a three level model by Adamson and Morris (2014), including (1) the intended curriculum, (2) the implemented curriculum, and (3) the curriculum ideology.

2.2 Observational data

As a second data for this paper, we use observational data. The data was gathered in 2014-2015 through observation (field notes, photos, video recordings) and interviews related to children's play related activities in a context of **XX** ECEC centers located in a large Finnish municipality. The sample included thirty (30) 3-6-year old children (16 girls and 14 boys). The video recorded data (almost 23 hours) was transcribed. Also a separate space-time-paths were transcribed for each of the participating child. Finally, based on the photos (240 pictures), ECEC unit specific visual maps were created for the operational environments representing the physical contexts of the play. The video recorded observation in the ECEC took place in the mornings (8.00-11.30) and afternoons (13.30-15.00). One video camera was permanently located in a separate play room which was in the children's use only, generally with no teacher or adult presence. This might be seen a setting freer sfrom adult rules, enabling more child agency in organizing and carrying out their own free play Riihelä (2007). The other camera was set in the general operational spaces. Besides video recorded observance data, the researchers made notes in field diaries (6 notebooks) based on non-participative observation in each of the ECEC centers as well as took photos of children's play related activities.

4. Findings

4.1. How is Play defined in ECEC curriculum in Finland?

In the Finnish National core-curriculum of early childhood education and care (2016) the word 'play' occurs 55 times, however, only twice as a chapter heading. The conception of play from the national core-curriculum (2016) is that play creates joy and pleasure and thus is motivating activity and not a tool to achieve learning goals. In relation to the main concept of learning the core-curriculum states: The concept of learning is based on the conception about a child as an active agent of her own learning. Play is therefore seen as meaningful for the learning of children. The concept of learning is based on holistic approach and learning happens when children play, explore, move around, take care of the learning environment as well as through self-expression and creativity. (p. 20). However when playing children are not learning through cognitive assignments but more through the way of being, living and perceiving the world. The elements that are combined through play are enthusiasm, co-operation, and challenging personal skills and competences. Play itself is seen as motivating and joyful action, where children are learning different skills and knowledges. Children are naturally curious and they are willing to learn. (Finnish National core-curriculum of early childhood education and care 2016, 14.)

In the chapter on the concept of learning the core-curriculum emphasizes that play has an intrinsic value for the children, but has an essential role in pedagogics to support learning, wellbeing, and development. In the curriculum concept, play is described as the element where learning and action are the basis (2016). The curriculum defines the concept of guided play, where teachers use play as medium of learning, but also it emphasizes the concept of self-initiated play to describe children's free activities. Kangas, Ojala and Venninen (2015) have identified guiding principles for early years based on the national curriculum. These principles are the autonomy, exploration, social competence, self-expression, self-control, and participation emerging through play and action. The children and adults who are playing are given the opportunity to focus on it.

The role of play is emphasized in the part of curriculum that considers learning community in early childhood education as following:

An operational culture that encourages children to play recognizes the significance of play for a child's well-being and learning. The staff recognizes factors that set limits to play and develop approaches and learning environments that promote playing. The children and staff have the opportunity to experience the joy of doing things together and playing together... Room, time and peaceful settings are given to children's initiatives for playing, experiments and experiences. Playing children and adults are given an opportunity to concentrate on play. (Finnish National core-curriculum of early childhood education and care 2016, 29).

4.2. Practices of play

In the following we describe the play activities in early childhood education practices from the viewpoints of operational cultures and the learning environment.

Operational cultures have been defined in the Curriculum of early childhood education in Finland (2016, 46) as "*historically and culturally evolving way of doing things, which develops in the interaction of the community*". The operational culture in Finnish ECEC context is therefore the wholistic practices of implementing early education within one preschool. Concept of the operation culture is defined in the national core-curriculum of ECEC (2016, 48) and is described to be "*culture that encourages children to play recognizes the significance of play for a child's well-being*". Characteristic to the operational culture in Finland is an alternation of both guided and non-

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guided activities but also (according to our finding from the observations) that children don't expect adults to participate in play based activities if they happen in classroom or outside.

Play in Finnish early childhood education is and has been a natural learning activity. It has been an important part of the praxis even before the curriculum reform in 2016 (Leinonen, Brotherus & Venninen, 2014). Viewed from the organizational culture the conception of the child as an active agent and mastering of the play was visible. Children could quite freely enter play-based activities, negotiate and solve problems on their own. They seemed to be competent in testing their skills and understanding. In the following case 1 children are testing their skills of building machines together and solving social problems.

Case 1: Our team (9:32 am at class)

Five 4 and 5-years-old boys have created a constructions with H-blocks. Soon they have set up two artillery lines facing each other. They start shooting the other line with loose blocks (see picture).



Picture 1. Artillery lines in action

However, they discover that the side with three players is always winning and the other side is always loosing and therefore that side is giving up. Then Aron, 5-years-old begins the problem solving. He switches from one side to the other, balancing the power distribution of the play. All players seems to be pleased with the solution and "loosing" side welcomes Aron warmly to join their side.

(Video-observation, ECEC center 1, class of 3 to 5-year-olds)

Play activities are sometimes considered to have less meaning to children's learning. Both Aras (2016) and Leinonen, Brotherus and Venninen (2014) have stated that in early childhood education teachers guide children to self-initiated play activities before other classroom activities, motivating

them to participate in teacher-guided learning activities. These are traditional ways of implementing early childhood education, where the time-schedule of the day is planned by teachers and the focus is on controlling it and on the pre-set flow of learning goals (see Kangas & Brotherus 2017). The conception of learning here might be suggestive as something more – there is, for example, evidence to suggest that play is itself foundational to the formation of patterns of social activity and relationships (Riihelä 2007).

Such learning takes place with and without adult supervision. Learning through play is thus both amongst young peers with or without adults in the vicinity. Riihelä's (2007) notion of play as an important originating source of social activity seems therefore to be in need of refinement from the data collected here. In our conceptualisation of playing to learn, this indicates a complex interaction of early childhood peer learning along with adult (here teachers') supervisory guidance. Bondioli (2001) thus similarly suggest 'the adult as a tutor in fostering children's symbolic play'. According to the observations children would sometimes require more teacher participation in their play. Children took often contact with teachers and showed them meaningful play episodes and items. Sometimes also sought for guidance, like in the case 2 below, where two 4-years-old boys were getting only verbal guidance from their teachers who were not in the same room.

Case 2: Whose house is this? (08:40 am at class)

Tommy and Timothy are entering to block play with legos. They are observing and exploring a big box of legos. The teacher who is sitting next to the door is brushing the hair of a girl reminds them to build a representation of their own home.

Tommy: Hey, teacher, My house is ready?

Teacher [don't look at the boys]: Did you finished the house already?

Tommy: yeee...

Timothy: I am not ready yet.

Tommy: Me neither!

Timothy: Why did you ask for the teacher then?

Boys continue building. Tommy adds several pieces in his constructions and is the whole time calling somebody to look at his work saying 'look at me, look at me.'

Tommy: Hey, teacher, My house is ready!

Teacher [in the other room]: Bring it to me.

Teacher and Tommy stops for a moment in front of his house.

Teacher: Who could live in this house?

Tommy goes back to Timothy and says: I have to put a family in here

Timothy breaks his house and starts again. It has to be higher for a family.

(Observation diary, ECEC center 1, class of 3 to 5 year olds)

While the teachers were absent it was also common that children didn't have skills to involve themselves in play. Children could wander around the play area and spend time. Children were lightly observing toys or chatting with each other. Building a long-lasting play would require possibilities to make plans and implement them in peaceful conditions, for 3 and 4-years-olds teachers' engagement and participation would create more meanings and help to create long-lasting play. Few times during our observations children were involving themselves in play fully and were within their imaginary world:

Case 3: New proposal (9:12 am behind the classroom)

Henry have entered to the classroom with his mother and teacher is greeting him warmly.

Henry looks around and teacher seems to be guessing what he is looking for.

Teacher: Would you like to play with James and Benjamin? They are in the second room [behind the classroom]. You can join them, if you wish?

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Henry smiles and nods happily. He waves to his mother and runs to his friends who have been constructing a castle with wooden blocks.

Henry: Hey! What are you doing?

Boys explain about the castle but do not seem enthusiastic about it. Henry looks a moment on the construction.

Henry: We have to tear it down!



Picture 2 We should tear it down!

The unexpected proposal seems to inspire the boys. All three jump on the castle and start kicking it down and laughing. The noise summons an assistant teacher to them.

Assistant teacher: Henry! What are you doing!

James and Benjamin: No, no! This was our decision. It is a construction work.

Boys laugh and assistant teacher accepts the explanation and leaves boys to their play.

(Video-observation, ECEC center 2, class of 3 to 5 year olds)

The new curriculum is setting goals for views on children as competent participants of self-initiated play activities. While the results from our research show that the play activities are secondary related to teacher initiated and routine activities, in future teachers will need to pay more attention to these existing routines and ideas about play and develop through reflective practices existing pedagogical supports to play based activities (see Kangas & Brotherus, 2017; Kangas, Ojala & Venninen, 2015). This in order to support children's active agency and participation as whole.

Learning environments of the Finnish early childhood education have been designed to support the daily schedules in the classrooms. The national curriculum of ECEC (2016) defines that education is not only the teaching and cognitive processes and excluding other activities. This holistic approach means that the entire day is meaningful for the child. Therefore three warm meals is served to children and they have a chance to sleep in their classrooms after lunch. These care

activities are a part of the Finnish ECEC and they set requirements for classroom design. On the other hand, research findings suggest that learning environments are designed for both guided and non-guided activities. There are several corners, small rooms and secret spots for self-initiated play of children Finnish ECEC centers while the guided activities are often completed within circle-time (sitting on the floor) (see Kangas & Brotherus, 2017). However, Kangas & Brotherus (2017) have shown that children have to learn to play and use their environment (materials, places and time) without teachers support and there are rules to justify ways of play. Common item in Finnish classrooms is the ‘wall of play’, where children find the available activities and they choose one activity with their name tag (picture 4).



Picture 4. A typical ‘wall of play’ in classroom in Finland

On a wall of play there are rules: How many players can participate and which space can be used for that particular activity.

Case 4: There is no room for you (8:49 am at class)

In a sofa of the home-play corner sits three girls and they chat. They have ‘booked’ the room from the ”wall of play” with their name-tags. Isabel and Ira peek in.

Isabel asks: Can we play the home-play? [which no one is playing at the moment]. The three girls tell Isabel that the room is booked. Isabel goes to the teacher and ask permission to start home-play with Ira. Teacher checks the ”wall of play” and confirms that in the home-play-area there is room only for four children, so there would be no room for both Isabel and Ira. Isabel and Ira accept teacher’s decision and they sit down next to door waiting for their turn to enter the play.

(Video-observation, ECEC center 3, class of 3 to 5 years old)

During the observation period from April 2014 to November 2015 play environment didn’t change or it was not developed in the ECEC centers. It was designed to be safe for children’s plays and give room to independent initiatives and learning, but children’s personal skills and competences were not taken into account. During drama play there is always the same dresses despite of the popular media and children’s culture and the home play corners were from 1950’s without microwave ovens or dish-washers. During the observation period we found a couple of

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environments set by teachers, like in the case 4 below. Every time teachers showed some effort to plan and set up an environment, children became inspired about the play-possibilities.

Case 4: Airport in the classroom (9.50 am in classroom)

5 children aged 3 and 4 have been left behind in the classroom to wait their turn to go to the gym hall. On the other side of the wall the teacher is focusing on the drawing activity with older children, but three of children are restless and don't want to focus on the drawing. They take their papers and come to classroom. With them is a young trainee assistant who is on his second day in the classroom.

Trainee assistant: Do you know how to make paper airplanes? Do you want me to show to you?

Children: Airplanes? Wow! Can we really?

Trainee makes couple of planes and shows children how to use them. Children try to make their airplanes fly, but aiming high enough is challenging and the planes end up crashing each time.

Lidia: We need...something up?

Calvin: Like, like...like airport!

Trainee assistant: Could this table serve as an aircraft carrier [pulls the table in the middle of the room].

Children are confused about the concept of aircraft carrier, but Lidia ventures to stand up on the desk. She holds the hand of trainee assistant, focuses and throws the airplane. Plane flies beautifully to the other side of classroom.



Picture 5. Aircraft carrier

Children are soon involved in the play. They are climbing up to the desk, aiming and throwing the planes and then picking them up to start over again (see picture). The play develops further.

5. Conclusion

Even though play based learning is understood to be one of the key factors in Finland, it does not seem to have a strong presence in the National Curriculum Guidelines for ECEC (mentioned as a word only 55 times). However, the concept of play based learning and teaching is quite new in Finnish teacher education, where previously play has been mainly a focus of observation that gives information about children's competences and skills. Teachers' competencies need to be supported, so that they see themselves as active enablers and supporters of children's play activities. Therefore also up-to-date research from the Finnish context is needed.

According to our observations, play based activities were often seen as self-initiated activity of children where teachers didn't participate that actively. However, teachers were responsible for setting up the environment and controlling the routines and schedules in the background. The national curriculum of ECEC (2016) describes the significance of play for children's well-being. However, this did not fully emerge through existing practices and the balance between non-guided and guided activity requires more critical reflection and development. Play creates shared joy and motivation and is not emerging only as a tool to achieve learning goals. Children were considered as active agents of their learning. They had freedom to involve in self-initiated activities of play that created chances to solve problems meaningfully and therefore teachers presence was not needed. This however, might lead to situations, where adults may even be quite unaware of many elements of play that is taking place in the children's 'subculture' in the ECEC context (Köngäs 2018).

Based on our research findings we suggest that play based activities in ECEC are considered through participation, well-being and learning of both individual child and children in joint meaning making. Different experiences in play offers possibilities to construct thinking processes and practice different skills. The ECEC operational culture should therefore be further developed through constructing new approaches and solutions into the pedagogical environments for play. These would better enable or support and enrich the pedagogical practice of play as learning. Furthermore, the practices and routines related to supporting children's play in the ECEC could thereby be re-evaluated and further developed in order to develop the quality of play as an environment for and of learning. Merely focusing on the further development of physical structures is not, however, enough. The key to change into better support for children's play seems to derive from renewing the cultural practices and structures in the ECEC which view play as part of children's learning, not only of instrumentalist knowledge and skills as learners in institutional (school and pre-school) contexts but a zone of peer-to-peer engagement which is quite foundational to their ability to survive and thrive in later life. This provides a chance for critical development but also a more complex enrichment in the understanding of limited, pragmatic models of play in narrow instrumental terms. By developing teachers' involvement in play-practices it is possible to develop a better quality of play as learning in early childhood curriculum settings. It provides yet further opportunities for exploring the insights of play as a function of personal and social life too across a range of disciplines.

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