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Staff Reforms in Finland

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The German Youth Institute (DJI) is one of the largest social science research institutes in Europe. For over 60 years, it has been researching the living conditions of children, young people, and families, advising the federal government, states, and municipalities, and providing important impetus for professional practice.

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Project context

This working paper is part of the project ‘Team Concepts and Diversification’ of the International Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) at the German Youth Institute (DJI). The project aims to analyse current debates and developments in relation to staff profiles and team concepts, which are a reaction on the parallel challenges of professionalization, staff shortages, and diversifying needs of children and families in Germany as elsewhere. Finland, Ireland and Slovenia are our countries in case. The study defines ‘teams’ as the entire staff of an ECEC centre who work with children on a regular basis and/or take on management tasks. The experiences of these countries with reforms involving staff diversification and the governance issues and challenges that arise in this context will be analysed.

The study is divided into two analytical steps: Firstly, a catalogue of questions was drawn up on the basis of a review and in-depth analysis of primary sources and secondary literature. This focussed on the legal framework for team composition and current or planned reforms, the underlying professional concepts, the political steering of the implementation steps and accompanying measures. In the three countries, experts were recruited to answer the questions in the form of country analyses. The results of the country expertise on Finland are used in the following working paper to present Finland's experiences with multi-professional ECEC centre teams and the latest developments associated with this.

In the second step of the project, interview visits to the countries are planned in order to ascertain the positions, perspectives and experiences of relevant local stakeholders (professional associations, trade unions, municipalities, ministries and authorities). The concrete implementation of the reforms and corresponding country experiences with diversification and cooperation as well as the organisation of work in heterogeneous and multi-professional ECEC teams may help to answer the question of how these ECEC teams can be designed and supported to promote quality.

Birgit Riedel
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Munich, October 2025

1 Changing ECEC staff and personnel concepts in Finland

Finland is categorised as a social democratic welfare state in which ECEC is considered part of social and societal policy (see Esping-Andersen 1990). It was comprehensively expanded as a municipal service from around 1970, primarily to realise labour market participation of women. Since the introduction of the Act on Children's Daycare in 1973 (see Fig. 1), staff in ECEC centres have been made up of centre managers, kindergarten teachers, childcare staff (subsequently referred to as childcarers) and auxiliary staff.

The qualification requirements for these professions increased over time. E.g., kindergarten teacher education changed from two to three years in 1984. From the 1990s onwards, the education of kindergarten teachers was transferred to universities where the first bachelor's degree programmes in early childhood education were introduced. The qualification requirements were also raised for childcarers. From 1983 they had to complete secondary level vocational training in the social and health sector (ISCED3). In the 1980s, a cultural change took place in ECEC facilities, following the example of other Scandinavian countries. Model projects experimented with new forms of more child-centred pedagogy that focused less on structured learning and at the same time placed greater emphasis on family work. Against this backdrop, the professional field of kindergarten teachers was also opened to social pedagogues with a college level degree in social services. In the 1990s the education of social pedagogues was transferred to universities of applied sciences (polytechnics) and is now considered as a bachelor's degree in social services. As the network of universities of applied sciences as well as the size of student intakes grew rapidly under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the proportion of social pedagogues in ECEC rose continuously. (Onnismaa, Kalliala, Tahkokallio 2017.)

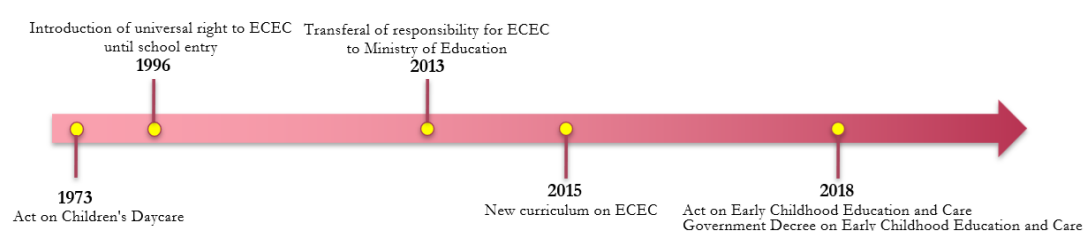
Finland responded to the economic recession of the 1990s by largely shifting responsibility for social infrastructure to the municipalities (Alexiadou et al. 2024) and by relaxing staffing requirements. From then on, it was no longer necessary for two out of three, but only every third person in the ECEC centre to have a university degree in educational science or a university of applied sciences degree in social services. This was intended to reduce the costs of child daycare so that the universal right to ECEC until school entry, introduced in 1996, could be financed. In the long term, these relaxations led to a reduction in the qualification level of ECEC centre staff. The proportion of employees with vocational training in social and health care at secondary level (childcarers and practical nurses) increased, as did the proportion of ECEC teachers with a degree in social sciences, while the proportion of teachers with a degree in educational science stagnated. At the level of practice at the institution, this led to a levelling of professional roles in the sense of a culture of 'everyone does everything' (Karila & Kupila, 2023) regardless of the respective qualification. By the early 2000s, the vast majority of centre staff had completed training in social services, most of them childcarers with upper secondary level training. The

proportion of kindergarten teachers diminished, at its lowest under 20 % of the ECEC personnel.

In the context of a highly decentralized ECEC governance, the responsibilities of the various ECEC professions were not clearly defined and varied depending on the municipality and ECEC centre. At the same time, tensions between professional organisations over professional primacy intensified at a professional policy level (Onnismaa et al., 2017). These tensions came to a head around the 2010s, as the quality of ECEC provision was increasingly scrutinised in the light of international discourse. The shortage of ECEC teachers was identified as an obstacle to adequate quality. Gradually, the question arose at both national and municipal level as to whether the social administration should continue to take responsibility for ECEC or whether this competence should be transferred to the education administration (Karila & Kupila, 2023).

In 2013, Finland transferred responsibility for ECEC from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education, after many municipalities had already taken this step. Nevertheless, this change was not without controversy. Criticism was levelled in particular at the threat of ‘schoolification’ of ECEC. In fact, the change resulted in a stronger educational focus, which manifested itself in concrete specifications relating to learning objectives and subject orientation as well as the requirement of individual educational planning and educational documentation for each child. At the same time, the rights of children were always placed at the centre of subsequent reforms, with care work and child welfare being defined as the central task of ECEC (Alexiadou et al. 2024). In parallel, the curriculum for early childhood education introduced in 2015 placed greater emphasis on pedagogy as the basis of work in ECEC centres and day care. The increased requirements also led to a readjustment of staffing requirements.

Fig. 1: ECEC reforms in Finland over time



Own illustration based on Chydenius (2024).

2 Current personnel requirements and reform objectives

According to the Government Decree on Early Childhood Education and Care (753/2018), an ECEC centre currently must have at least one qualified early childhood education professional for a maximum of seven children aged three years and over (1:7), and one for every four children under the age of three (1:4). In case of part-time up to 5 hours/day for children aged three years or older the ECEC centre must have at least one qualified early childhood education professional per 13 children (1:13). The size of children's groups is governed by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), which states that a maximum number of children corresponding to three early childhood education professionals may be present in one group of the day care centre at the same time.

Looking at the team composition, the Act (540/2018) defines three professional groups working in ECEC centres: teachers in ECEC, social pedagogues in ECEC, and childcarers in ECEC. Thus, former kindergarten teachers were given a new title (teacher in ECEC) and a new professional title was created for personnel with a degree in social services (social pedagogue in ECEC). In addition, special education teachers in ECEC (university degree in special education) and assistants (without relevant qualification) can supplement the ECEC teams. The requirement for the position of a teacher in ECEC is at least a Bachelor of Education degree from university, which includes studies that provide professional skills for early childhood education. The qualification requirement for the position of a social pedagogue in ECEC is at least a bachelor's degree from university of applied sciences in social services, which includes studies focused on early childhood education and social pedagogy of at least 60 ECTS credits. The qualification requirement for the position of a childcarer in ECEC is an upper secondary education degree in education and guidance, an upper secondary education degree in social and health care, or another equivalent suitable degree (Government Decree on Early Childhood Education and Care 753/2018). Until 2023, a university of applied sciences degree in social and health services, which included 60 credits of ECEC studies, also qualified to work as a teacher in ECEC. A transitional provision was included in the law, allowing personnel working in the profession to retain their old qualifications.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), enacted in 2018, aims to raise the educational level of Finnish ECEC staff by increasing the number of higher education graduates employed in the sector. According to law, from the beginning of 2030, at least two-thirds must have a qualification on tertiary level, either as a teacher or social pedagogue in ECEC. At least half of them must have a university degree of teacher in ECEC. The law directs the formation of teams of up to three ECEC professionals, in which case the team usually consists of two teachers in ECEC or a teacher in ECEC and a social pedagogue in ECEC, as well as one childcarer in ECEC. The law tightened the qualification requirements so that only individuals with a university degree in education can work as teacher in ECEC. Social pedagogues are no longer eligible for this position, nor can they take on leadership roles in ECEC centres since 2023. Official documents increasingly referred

to multi-professional teams that could strengthen both pedagogy in ECEC and social-pedagogical family work. However, the responsibilities and distribution of tasks remained highly controversial in terms of professional policy (Karila & Kupila 2023).

3 Challenges of implementing the new personnel structure

In order to resolve the conflicts and tensions arising from the reorganisation of the personnel structure, the government and the Ministry of Education and Culture initiated a broad discussion process. This aimed to develop independent role profiles for the professional groups based on the competences imparted by the different training programmes (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2022). To this end, it commissioned the national working group ‘Development Forum of ECEC Educations’. Universities, universities of applied sciences and training centres as well as various professional organisations were involved in the process. While common areas of competence were identified, it proved difficult to work out specific core competences for the respective professional groups to define job profiles and create the basis for a clear division of labour (see Chapter 4 for details). The ideas of the individual professional groups were too different. Although it was possible to establish that the role of an ECEC teacher, as a core specialist, includes having overall responsibility for the group of children and taking on a pedagogical leadership role in the team, it has not yet been possible to reach agreement on the future role of the social pedagogues. According to the law, their role is primarily seen where ‘there is a need for child protection and family work’ in an ECEC centre. However, implementation issues remain unclear, particularly with regard to their specific role in the children group, and have led to few such specialised positions being created to date.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) defines the provision of ECEC as the responsibility of municipalities or joint municipal authorities. They can provide the service themselves or purchase the service from a private service provider under certain conditions. When municipalities or joint municipal authorities provide ECEC services, they also act as employers of personnel. As the main providers of ECEC services in Finland, municipalities therefore have considerable influence on shaping the composition of personnel, and designing work environments in ECEC. In their role as employers, they define the personnel's work tasks in accordance with the framework conditions set by law and regulations. They are responsible for recruiting personnel to meet the ECEC service needs of the municipality or joint municipal authority and for other employer obligations, such as compliance with the collective bargaining and payment of wages, as well as the safety and health of working conditions. Given their budgetary constraints, the Association of Finnish Municipalities, which represents municipalities, has an interest to ensure that organising ECEC services is as cost-effective as possible for municipalities, which is in tension with the Government’s personnel structure targets.

At the same time, acute staff shortages in the ECEC field are hampering the implementation of the reform. According to current estimates, there is already a nation-

wide shortage of over 4,000 teachers in ECEC. The situation in large cities is characterised by the fact that many vacancies cannot be adequately filled. Due to this shortage, these positions are often filled by underqualified people, mostly childcarers, especially in large cities, where this applies to up to 30-40% of teaching positions. In some places this also results in a shortage of childcarers, for whom in turn people from outside the profession are sometimes hired. This is made possible by an exception rule which stipulates that unqualified or inadequately qualified staff can also be hired for a limited period of one year if no suitable applicants can be found. Similar difficulties arise when recruiting special education teachers in ECEC, with these positions often remaining unfilled.

Although the targets set out in the reform will not be easy to reach – if at all – the Finnish Government and the Ministry of Education and Culture are not abandoning the 2030 personnel structure target. The development of ECEC has been clearly included in the Government Programme for 2023–2027 (Programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government 2023). According to the programme, starting positions for ECEC teachers will be increased in universities, with a target of at least 1,400 new ECEC teachers per year. ECEC personnel will be offered opportunities to train for tasks in accordance with the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care through retraining and multi-modal training. For example, childcarers have been given the opportunity to train as teachers in ECEC in a multi-modal training programme called '1000+'. The aim of the programme is to enable part-time study alongside work in an ECEC centre. The name refers to the more than one thousand graduates who shall complete the programme each year. The implementation and planning were carried out in cooperation with all universities that offer training for ECEC teachers in Finland and was financially supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The training programme started in 2021 and will run until at least 2027 (University of Helsinki, n.d.). In addition, the University of Helsinki is launching a degree programme for social pedagogues who have graduated from a university of applied sciences. The programme offers students the opportunity to complete their education with a Bachelor of Education and thus (continue to) have the opportunity to work as a teacher in ECEC. The programme will start in autumn 2025.

For their part, various large cities that are suffering the most from staff shortages have taken measures to increase the attractiveness and retention of professionals in the field of ECEC. They are using strategies such as promoting well-being at work, supporting centre heads and developing different management models, improving salaries and bonuses, introducing various additional benefits such as sports or cultural vouchers, opening up more flexible career and training opportunities, advertising campaigns, etc. (Kuusikko Working Group 2023).

In addition, the Government will strengthen the attraction and retention power of ECEC by developing working conditions and the quality of ECEC. In this context, there was a change in collective bargaining for teachers in ECEC in 2022, with responsibility being transferred from the social sector to the education sector, which was accompanied by salary increases. Nevertheless, the proportion of teachers in ECEC with a university degree in education is growing only slowly. In 2012, around 18% of staff had such a degree and around 30% had a university degree overall. In

2023, around 20% had a university degree in education and around 39% had a university degree overall.

Against the backdrop of the staff shortage, various studies have also addressed issues relating to the staff and work situation in ECEC, only some of which will be discussed here. For example, the SIMO project (Koivusalo & Alasuutari 2024) conducted a retention study in 2024 among all students and graduates who had started a university degree programme to become a teacher in ECEC in 2018 and 2019 (N=1,628). 595 respondents took part in the study. The study revealed that around one third of those who began training to become a teacher in ECEC changed careers either during or immediately after their studies, while around two thirds were working in ECEC and did not express any intention of changing careers. Both the results of the SIMO project and Kantonen et al. (2020) indicate that the commitment to the profession was particularly strong among those who were already working in ECEC before their studies.

While the ECEC teacher training programme was consistently rated positively in the SIMO project, particular attention must be paid to the quality of education in the coming years, as both the scarce financial resources of universities and the shortage of staff in ECEC put pressure on providers of educational programmes. Regarding the training of personnel in ECEC, the extent to which it contributes to the development of students' professional identity and competence must also be critically examined. Efforts to make the design of the teaching programmes more efficient can lead to a deterioration in the quality of training, which in turn has a negative impact on student motivation. For example, various forms of distance learning have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. This can prove counterproductive, particularly in the interaction-based profession in ECEC. At the same time, the combination of teaching a larger and more heterogeneous groups of students with increasingly scarce resources and less face-to-face teaching poses a challenge from a pedagogical perspective.

4 The Finnish experience and (re-)organisation of multiprofessionalism

The concept of multi-professionalism was introduced in Finnish ECEC in the 1990s (Karila & Kupila 2023). However, professionals with different educational backgrounds began working in the same teams even before this. Before the Act on Children's Daycare (36/1973), the staff of day care centres consisted of kindergarten teachers and childcarers, who worked mainly in their own groups of children: teachers with older children and childcarers with younger children. In connection with the enactment of the Act on Children's Daycare, social pedagogues were given the opportunity to apply for kindergarten teacher positions under certain conditions. In Finnish ECEC, it has therefore been possible to train for teacher positions both in early childhood teacher education (transferred to universities in 1995), and in social and health education institutions (transferred to universities of applied sciences in the 1990s). With the new personnel structure launched in the 1980s, teams of teachers and childcarers began to be formed (National Board of Social Affairs 1981). In the 1980s, the vacancies for assistants in children's groups began to be changed to childcarers' vacancies and assistants were trained to be childcarers in children's groups through apprenticeship. The amendment to the Decree on Day Care (806/1992) made it possible to replace teachers with childcarers, which increased the proportion of those with a secondary education in the personnel. In addition, except for pre-school class teaching positions, teaching positions could also be obtained with a degree in social services. According to Onnismaa and colleagues (2017), the result was a situation in which, from the 1990s, those with secondary and tertiary education in the social and health service sector began to form most of the ECEC personnel. At its lowest, less than 20% of the personnel had completed kindergarten teacher education. The personnel structure therefore became strongly one-sided. This essentially also characterises the current situation and was one of the reasons that led to the enactment of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018).

The Ministry of Education and Culture has been working to clarify the division of labour between professional groups in ECEC since 2013, and attention has been focused on structuring the job description and responsibilities of teachers in ECEC, so that the teacher's pedagogical competence would strengthen the quality of ECEC and support the child's educational right. The structuring and reforms related to the job descriptions and personnel structure of ECEC personnel were finally implemented in connection with the enactment of the Act Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). The role and professional profile of the teacher in ECEC was sharpened. The Act stipulated that the teacher in ECEC is responsible for drawing up the child's individual ECEC plan and assessing its implementation. Moreover, the teacher in ECEC has the overall responsibility for the group of children and for guiding the work of the team. From 2023 onwards, working as a teacher in ECEC required to have a bachelor's degree in education from university. A bachelor's degree in social services from a university of applied sciences would no longer qualify for working as a teacher in ECEC. Based on the government proposal (40/2018), the intent of the law was to strengthen the pedagogical quality of ECEC

by increasing the number of people with tertiary level education and pedagogical education in ECEC centres. In addition, the law aimed to dismantle the culture of "everyone does everything" and structure the opportunities for different professional groups to utilise the expertise produced by education in their work.

4.1 Restructuring and rebalancing teams in Finnish ECEC

The goal was set to build ECEC centres into multiprofessional work communities (Government proposal 40/2018). The need for a multiprofessional approach is justified by the increasing diversity of society and the diverse social tasks of ECEC. Thus, the law ended up registering three different professional groups: teachers in ECEC, social pedagogues in ECEC and childcarers in ECEC. The law and regulations are generally interpreted as guiding the establishment of multi-professional teams in ECEC centres, consisting of either two teachers or a teacher and a social pedagogue and a childcarer. However, the law only sets conditions for the number of teachers and higher-educated personnel. As such, the law would also allow *de jure* for the establishment of teams with three teachers or one teacher and two social pedagogues as well. The qualification requirements for an ECEC centre head are a master's degree in education and sufficient leadership skills.

In addition, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) reformed the professional titles of ECEC personnel and separated teachers and social pedagogues into their own professional groups. According to the government proposal (40/2018), the definition of the job titles and qualification requirements for teachers and social pedagogues in ECEC was intended to better highlight the special expertise brought by each education. The change applied a transition period and social pedagogues who had worked as a teacher in ECEC were allowed to retain their position. Despite this, the change aroused strong resistance and discussion about the nature of ECEC pedagogy among social pedagogues and professional organisations representing them. Social pedagogues and the professional organisation would not have wanted to give up the professional title of teacher in ECEC. Consequently, social pedagogues have primarily struggled to maintain their qualifications as teachers. They also opposed the requirement for ECEC centre heads to have a master's degree in education. Currently, the debate on teacher qualifications has subsided, but changing the qualifications of ECEC centre heads is still the subject of active discussion by the trade unions. The aim of the professional organisations representing social pedagogues is to amend the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care so that a higher degree in social services completed in university of applied sciences would make it possible to qualify for the position of ECEC centre head. The job description of a social pedagogue is also still the subject of public scrutiny, and there is a struggle over job descriptions and responsibilities, especially between social pedagogues and teachers in ECEC.

4.2 The struggle over job descriptions and division of responsibilities

The everyone-does-everything work culture means that the division of labour is based on a narrow understanding of equality, in which every employee is allowed to do the same as everyone else. The working method also means that multi-professionalism is not implemented in a way that professionals can utilise the differentiated expertise produced by education in their work and for the best interests of children. The Act on ECEC and decrees aim to develop the multi-professionalism of Finnish ECEC in such a way that professionals with different educational backgrounds have the opportunity to utilise their own expertise in their work. In this case, teachers can be seen as having a hierarchically higher position due to their pedagogical expertise. Teachers have pedagogical leadership in a multiprofessional team. However, the aim is not to build a hierarchical system, but a system in which everyone's expertise is valued. In Finnish ECEC, talking about leadership in teams is avoided because equality and mutual respect are emphasised to maintain team harmony. The expertise of social pedagogues focuses particularly on social and health networks and family work (FINEEC 2024; Ministry of Education and Culture 2021, 2024; Valkonen et al. 2024). This expertise has its own place in the field of many societal tasks of ECEC. It is still being considered how this expertise can best be used especially in children's groups.

The more detailed structure of the job descriptions of ECEC professionals is the responsibility of the employer, so in addition to government guidance, municipalities and private service providers guide the distribution of work tasks and responsibilities in ECEC. Within the framework set by law, regulations and the curriculum, municipalities and private service providers have strong autonomy in defining job descriptions. Consequently, the division of work and responsibility between professional groups is also structured locally, depending on the municipality and private service provider.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has supported municipalities and private service providers in drawing up job descriptions for ECEC professional groups and especially for social pedagogues by organising the Development Forum of ECEC Educations (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). The report, issued by the Forum after its first term of operation (2019-2021), published a compromise proposal describing the differentiating skills of a social pedagogue, about which the members of the committee had differing views. The report states that the difficulties in describing the differentiated competence of the social pedagogue were particularly related to ambiguities at the interfaces between the work of the teacher, the special education teacher, and the social pedagogue. According to the report, the differentiated competence of a social pedagogue is particularly linked to the social welfare of children and families and to network competence in the social and health service sectors (for more details see Chapter 4.3.; see also Valkonen et al. 2024). As of 2023, a social pedagogue degree will no longer qualify for teacher in ECEC vacancy but qualify for social pedagogue in ECEC vacancies. The professional title of a social pedagogue was in use in the six largest municipalities in Finland in 2022. Despite this, the job description for this professional role has still not been defined by many employers. There is some discussion whether the social pedagogue's expertise is

best utilised in ECEC groups. Some municipalities have hired social pedagogues to work as a regional social pedagogue. In this case, the social pedagogue works in a specific area for example, around several ECEC centres, supporting families with children.

The lack of social pedagogue job descriptions challenges not only the position of social pedagogues as part of a multiprofessional ECEC team, but also the implementation of cooperation and division of work within the team. In addition, it is challenging for universities of applied sciences offering social pedagogue in ECEC education to develop the goals and content of the education without a clear picture of the tasks and responsibilities of a social pedagogue in ECEC. According to a report published by FINEEC (2024), ECEC social pedagogue education is organised in 18 Finnish-speaking and two Swedish-speaking universities of applied sciences. Students studying for the Bachelor of Social Services degree can choose studies that are oriented towards ECEC and provide qualifications to work as social pedagogue in ECEC, so that the degree includes studies in ECEC and social pedagogy worth at least 60 credits. The orientation of these students towards ECEC has decreased since the entry into force of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care in 2018, but the situation varies by university of applied sciences. This led to demands that universities of applied sciences must update and clarify the curricula leading to the Bachelor of Social Services degree and the implementation plans that supplement them to correspond to the core competences of social pedagogue in ECEC in accordance with the renewed professional structure. The FINEEC report also emphasizes cooperation with ECEC practice and clarifying the role of social pedagogues in interaction with ECEC practitioners (*ibid.*). Based on the report, it appears that the planning of social pedagogue education has not sufficiently considered the updated professional titles and personnel structure in ECEC, and the education has not been developed to a sufficient level to meet the updated skills needs of social pedagogue positions.

On the other hand, some of the job descriptions made for a social pedagogue in ECEC do not consider the skills produced by their education and interpret government guidance in such a way that work tasks and responsibilities remain undifferentiated between ECEC professional groups. In this case, too, it is challenging to implement multiprofessionalism in a team. The aim of the legislative reforms has been to provide clarity in the division of labour among ECEC professionals, but it seems that the efforts to structure them have, at least temporarily, even increased tensions in ECEC centres (Karila & Kupila 2023). One explanatory factor may be that the expressions related to the division of labour still leave quite a lot of room for interpretation as to how work is concretely divided in ECEC teams (Chydenius et al. 2023). The curriculum uses formulations such as “in an appropriate manner” or “on the teacher's responsibility”, which can be interpreted differently from different perspectives. In some cases, responsibility can be seen as another employee doing the work for which the teacher in ECEC is responsible. The guidance towards joint planning also raises the question of how much the teacher can utilise their pedagogical expertise and plan independently and how much they should listen to and consider the views and wishes of the team members in the name of team cohesion (Chydenius & Valkonen *in review*). Also, differing perceptions of ECEC pedagogy

and thus, the basic task of early childhood education creates challenges for multi-professional teamwork (Valkonen et al. 2024).

From the perspective of teachers in ECEC, many of the changes enshrined in the law and curriculum have strengthened teachers' opportunities to utilise pedagogical expertise in multi-professional teamwork. Teachers have also received local and general salary increases due to their responsibilities. The salary increases have also been driven by a shortage of qualified teachers in ECEC. The position of teachers in ECEC has also been strengthened alongside other teachers, as teachers in ECEC were transferred to the same collective agreement as other teachers in autumn 2021. Although the responsibilities have clarified the job description of teachers in ECEC, the formulation of responsibilities in the law and in guiding documents is still open to interpretation (Chydenius et al. 2023). This leads to negotiations and tensions within teams regarding how responsibility is interpreted within each team, and in many situations, guidance from the head of ECEC centre or ECEC administration would be needed to interpret the division of labour (Chydenius & Valkonen in review). Before the reform in many places, ECEC centre heads and personnel had come up with solutions that allowed childcarers to draw up child's individual plans under the guidance of the teacher. For these childcarers, the clarification of roles and titles meant a change in their job description, since the ECEC curriculum now stipulated the overall pedagogical responsibility of the teacher in ECEC (National Board of Education 2016). This change also sparked discussion, as childcarers in many places were accustomed to planning and implementing pedagogical activities in a group of children in accordance with an "everyone does everything" operating culture. On the other hand, the curriculum directs that teachers and other ECEC personnel should plan and implement pedagogical activities together. The guidance leaves a lot of room for interpretation, and therefore ECEC personnel must interpret how the teacher's pedagogical responsibility and the personnel's joint pedagogical planning and implementation are organised in practice (Chydenius et al. 2023).

4.3 Reactions by trade unions and professional groups

In Finland, social pedagogues are represented by the trade union Talentia. Talentia's over 26,000 members mainly consists of social pedagogues working in different fields, as well as social workers. Talentia collaborates closely with universities of applied sciences and The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences Arene. Most people who have graduated as a social pedagogue are members of Talentia, even if they work as teachers in ECEC. The Trade Union of Education (OAJ) represents teachers and has over 100,000 members, but the organisation represents all teachers, meaning that its members work at different levels of education. ECEC teachers thus only make up a small part, approximately 10% of OAJ's membership. Universities have some cooperation with OAJ, but the cooperation is not very close. Recently, efforts have been made to intensify cooperation and build a common view on current issues in ECEC, especially the issue of ECEC centre head qualification. Talentia and universities of applied sciences have advocated for the interests of social pedagogues and strive to strengthen the social status of the professional group. They for example wanted to enshrine in the law the possibility

of working as an ECEC centre head with a higher degree in social services. OAJ and universities, in turn, have sought to justify the importance of pedagogical education and educational science in ECEC heads positions. Trade unions and education providers use letters to politicians, meetings with politicians, and writing statements directly to the Ministry of Education and Culture as means of influencing. The ECEC centre head's eligibility is under consideration by the ministry. The government program states that the government wants to open the opportunity for those with a higher social pedagogue degree to work as ECEC centre heads. Therefore, it is very likely that the law regarding the qualifications of heads will be opened. The government program was influenced by trade unions, as Finland can be considered to represent a corporatist social system. Both historically and today, trade unions have many opportunities to influence political decision-making in Finland.

Childcarers in ECEC and the professional organisations representing them continued to oppose the responsibility of teachers for planning and assessing child's individual ECEC plan as well as the teacher's overall pedagogical responsibility. The change in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care related to teacher's work task and responsibilities was incorporated in teachers' employment conditions. This increased the teacher's working time outside the child group from eight to 13 percent, or approximately from three to five hours per week. The change in teachers' working hours in the child group, combined with the new personnel structure, has produced both preconceived fears among childcarers and the professional organisations representing them, as well as genuine experiences of situations where childcarers work with a group of children without the support of the entire team. In Finnish early childhood education, with the "everyone does everything" operating culture, small group activities have also been adopted, in which case the group of children is often divided into small groups according to ratios (1:7 or 1:4). This has led to a situation where the ratio determines teamwork and implementing the activities of an entire group of children is perceived as challenging without whole team's support.

4.4 Research perspectives on multiprofessional teamwork in Finnish ECEC

Recent research on teamwork in Finnish ECEC has focused primarily on examining teachers in ECEC team leadership (Bøe et al. 2022; Fonsén et al. 2022; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019; Halttunen et al. 2019; Heikka et al. 2019a, 2019b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Kahila et al. 2024; Ranta et al. 2023a, 2023b) as well as teacher identity (Hanhikoski et al. 2024) and self-efficacy (Pitkäniemi et al. 2024). Research on teams has focused on the cooperation that takes place in teams (Kahila et al. 2023) and the emotions related to teamwork (Hanhikoski et al. 2024; Ranta et al. 2022) as well as well-being in teams (Kumpulainen et al. 2023). In addition, Karila and Kupila (2023) have comprehensively described the structure and formation of multiprofessional teamwork in Finnish ECEC. A few studies have also described the structure of the ECEC field and examined the formation of teaching and multiprofessionalism in this field (Chydenius et al. 2023; Ranta et al. 2021). A few studies have

focused on examining the competences produced by different ECEC educations (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al. 2020; Valkonen et al. 2024).

The Skilled Early Childhood Education and Care (Osaava varhaiskasvatus) project (Valkonen et al. 2023) studied the professional competence produced by ECEC personnel's educations and the utilisation of the competence produced by the educations in ECEC work. The research project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The results of the project show that the competence requirements in ECEC are not yet clearly reflected in the organisation of ECEC work. This is generally explained by the lack of personnel who meet the eligibility criteria. The competence produced by educations in ECEC work is most clearly reflected in the teacher's planning responsibility and use of planning time. It seems that when working with a group of children, the division of labour is strongly determined by the principle of "everyone does everything". In addition, the study finds that conflicting concepts and different perceptions of the basic task of ECEC, inappropriate work organisation and unclear division of labour, and resulting problems related to the interaction relationships in the team challenge staff satisfaction, working conditions, well-being at work and meaningfulness of work (Valkonen et al. 2023).

In addition, research has shown that different interpretations of ECEC pedagogy pose a challenge to the structuring of the common and differentiated competences of ECEC professional groups. Valkonen et al. (2024) studied the competence produced by different ECEC degree programmes and the value attributed to the competence by ECEC professionals, based on focus group interviews. Suitable vocational education and training provide qualifications to work as a childcarer in ECEC. The study shows that the competence produced by secondary level education is built around care and includes medicational and pedagogical competence. The personnel who have vocational upper secondary qualification strongly emphasised the importance of learning on the work, i.e. a practical orientation to work. Those with a degree in social services described that the education had produced competence related to social welfare, which includes broad-based social work and family work competence as well as network competence in social and health services. Social pedagogue education was felt to have produced pedagogical competence, but paradoxically, pedagogy was not given significant value in ECEC work by the social pedagogues, and the pedagogical competence of other professionals was even belittled. ECEC teachers who completed teacher education described in interviews that the education had produced competence related to the management of educational science knowledge, such as critical thinking and continuous learning skills. In addition, teacher education was considered to have produced pedagogical and didactic competence. Overall, teacher education could be stated to produce specific competence for ECEC work, while other educations produced general competence. In addition, the study showed that teachers, social pedagogues, and childcarers all stated that their education had provided them with pedagogical competence for ECEC. However, pedagogical competence in ECEC does not seem to create unity among professionals, because the understanding of pedagogical competence is structured differently in educations. The authors conclude that pedagogy in Finnish ECEC should therefore be defined more precisely and in such a way that personnel who have completed different ECEC educations are able to utilise the knowledge and skills produced by their own education in their work (Valkonen et al. 2024).

The implementation of multiprofessional teamwork in practice has been studied infrequently. Chydenius and Valkonen (under review) analyzed the tensions in the interaction of multidisciplinary teams in their study. The study identified that the tensions in multiprofessional teams are built specifically around the teacher's pedagogical responsibility and the new division of labour related to it. In this case, the utilisation of the teacher's pedagogical competence and the maintenance of team cohesion are to some extent at odds, as team members generally strive to avoid internal conflicts within the teams. According to the study by Valkonen et al. (2024), the conceptual ambiguity of pedagogy appears to be particularly challenging from the perspective of division of labour. The final report of the Development Forum of ECEC Educations (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021) also describes that ECEC competence can be seen as a common area of competence for ECEC professionals who have completed different educations, in which case the competence is more robust or thinner based on the educational background. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a special competence of those who have completed teacher education. Furthermore, the study by Valkonen and colleagues (2024) shows that pedagogy can also be seen as different in terms of content, focusing more on the child's growth, and learning or focusing on a social pedagogical orientation, the definition of which itself is ambiguous. Therefore, it can be said that ECEC pedagogy is, alongside the teacher's pedagogical responsibility, one of the challenges to the realisation of multiprofessionalism.

Multiprofessionalism should be based on the utilisation of the competence produced by different educations in the implementation of ECEC work (FINEEC 2024; Valkonen et al. 2024). The division of work in a multiprofessional team appears to be relatively simple when talking about tasks outside the group of children. The situation is considerably more complicated when it comes to work in a children's group. The separation of the basic principles of ECEC, such as the inclusion of children as an area of competence of a specific professional group, is not in line with the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. It is therefore important that ECEC employers continue to specify the job description of social pedagogue and thus, the competence produced by education required in the work. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2024) also recommends that ECEC education providers should further clarify the competences produced by each qualification in ECEC as a whole and in individual ECEC competence areas. However, it must be noted that multiprofessionalism has historically created challenges in terms of the division of labour division of labour between different occupational groups in ECEC centres. Therefore, it is necessary to critically examine, both now and in the future, how the model of many different educational lines works in ECEC and whether it produces expertise that can be harnessed to promote the societal tasks of ECEC.

The challenges of multiprofessional teamwork are reflected in teacher leadership and make it challenging to implement in practice, as the roles and responsibilities of the different professional groups in ECEC – leaders, teachers, social pedagogues, and childcarers – are unclear (Heikka et al. 2018; Heikkinen et al. 2022). Based on own research, teachers in ECEC sometimes do not want or do not have the competence to take on their role as an employee responsible for the pedagogy of the

team (Chydenius & Valkonen in review). In the FINEEC (2023) report, representatives of both university education and professional practice estimate that the importance of teachers' leadership competencies will increase in the future. This need is also reflected in the change in the work tasks of ECEC centre heads. The workload of ECEC centre heads has increased in Finland in recent years. ECEC centre heads have usually several centres and many subordinates to lead, which means that heads need the support of teachers in leading the work and pedagogy of the ECEC centre. Scholars have argued for the model of distributed leadership and teacher leadership in this context, which is why teachers should have sufficient leadership competencies. It seems that teachers' pedagogical and team leadership should be increasingly focused on in early childhood teacher education. Multiprofessional teamwork competencies should also be strengthened in all ECEC educations so that the teacher has space and team support when acting in the role of pedagogical team leader. On the other hand, the teacher must consider multiprofessionalism in this responsible role to effectively utilise the expertise from various ECEC educations and to strengthen interaction and trust within the team.

5 Outlook

The transfer of ECEC under the administration of the Ministry of Education and Culture has strengthened the position of ECEC as part of the education system. In public discourse, ECEC is spoken of with appreciation and its effectiveness is widely recognised. ECEC personnel are spoken of with appreciation, as well. However, this appreciation is not always reflected in practice. The salaries of ECEC personnel, especially teachers, have increased, as their responsibilities have increased and there is a shortage of them in ECEC. However, professionals in the field, like other professional groups in the public sector, are low paid compared to the general salary level in the country.

Education and training are one of the largest expenditure items for municipalities, and within this, personnel costs constitute a significant part of the expenses. Finland's state finances have long been unbalanced and Finland's debt ratio has worried decision-makers. The current government wants to balance the economy with major cuts. The Ministry of Finance estimates that the situation of municipal finances will also deteriorate in the coming years, which is why municipal services must be adjusted in relation to municipal income. There has already been a lot of talk in public debate about the challenging working conditions in ECEC centres. The press writes, among other things, about “giant ECEC centres” that are striving for efficiency and the functionality of their facilities, as well as the challenges and workload of ECEC personnel. The state has sought to support municipal finances by reducing regulations related to ECEC, which can, however, be seen to affect the quality of ECEC. E.g., according to the National Curriculum Framework, municipalities were obliged to draw up their own local curriculum adapted to the local situation and needs of the population. Recently, the obligations of municipalities were eased by removing the local planning obligation for ECEC and the planning obligation related to equality in ECEC. However, the economic impact of these will likely remain marginal. At the same time, the state is investing in ECEC. It has invested significantly in ECEC teacher education, which has been positively received by the sector. In addition, the state has funded extensive development projects, such as a nationwide experiment with two-year pre-primary education. It can therefore be said that ECEC is establishing itself, but the challenges of working conditions and the deteriorated budgetary situation may have a weakening effect on the development of the sector.

Increasing the number of teachers in Finnish ECEC is the will of both the current and previous governments, as well as the Ministry of Education and Culture. In addition, universities have committed to this goal and have increased their education places. The number of places of master's in ECEC students has also been increased. However, the volume of ECEC teacher education has been too low since at least the 1990s. Therefore, the work will not be easy. The challenges posed by working conditions and public debate from the perspective of the sector's traction and retention power make it difficult to increase the number of teachers. Despite the efforts to upgrade the qualifications of existing staff, there is also political pressure to open the eligibility conditions and personnel structure of ECEC. The trade union Talentia, which represents social pedagogues, aims to use this as leverage to

strengthen the position and number of social pedagogues in the field of ECEC. Beyond these factors, the debate over the clarification of job profiles and roles within the team, which has been ongoing for two decades now, will have to continue. The fact that Finnish society is traditionally very corporatist and that there is considerable competition between the trade unions representing the various professional groups plays a central role in the fierce professional policy disputes and makes it difficult to find a compromise.

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