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Evaluating the quality of the child care in Finland

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In this study we examine parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) quality in Finland. The study is based on the paradigm of inclusionary quality and the assessment is based on the quality evaluation model. The parents and teachers assess the quality to be good. The strength of the quality was the effect factor assessed by the parents, and the intermediate factor assessed by the teachers. The curriculum content and pedagogy of learning were assessed with lower ratings by both groups. The assessments of the factors differed significantly between the respondent groups, except for the intermediate factor. The high standard deviation in quality variables indicates that there is variation in quality among ECEC organisations. The results show that there is a demand for creating a national quality evaluation system to guarantee equal child-care services everywhere in Finland.

Keywords: quality assessment; evaluation; child-care programmes; inclusive quality

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to describe the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) by using data collected from Finnish child-care centres during the twenty-first century. The assessment of the ECEC quality has been implemented child-specifically by both parents and teachers. The aim of the study is to provide knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of Finnish ECEC. The differences of the parents’ and teachers’ quality assessments will be analysed, and the factors connected to them will be discussed. The quality of ECEC in Finland has been steered with the information guidance. No nationally guided quality evaluation has been carried out so far. Questions have been raised as regards the variation of the quality of the early childhood education. While the number of decentralised ECEC organisations is increasing in Finland, there is a growing need for quality management and for pedagogical leadership. In addition, the ECEC quality needs to be evaluated, because the number of pedagogically trained professionals has decreased. Based on the results of this study, theory-based quality evaluation and its importance as a tool for professional reflection will be discussed.

Research on quality evaluation

Quality research in ECEC was initiated from the USA in the 1970s (Greenman & Fuqua, 1984; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Phillips, 1987), and reached Finnish

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child care in the 1990s (Hujala-Huttunen, 1995; Niiranen, 1987; Tauriainen, 2000). The European Commission Network on Childcare, and especially their publication ‘Quality Targets in Services for Young Children’ (1996), was one of the impulses that started the leadership discussion to enhance quality management in Finland.

The ongoing debate on quality has faced some important changes in the past decades. In the 1970s, the quality research focused on the comparisons of maternal and non-maternal care without considering the substantive nature of the functions of child care. During the 1980s, child-care studies tended to define the quality and variety of child-care settings and children’s individual responses to the different forms of care (Clarke-Stewart, 1987; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the research interest was more comprehensive and contextually orientated than before, and in addition to the proximal influences of child care it examined the distal influences as well (Phillips, 1987; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993). The individual differences of children and their families were also considered, as well as the variance in the quality of the child-care settings.

Due to the increased quality research, a wide range of quality paradigms have emerged. Some researchers argue that quality is something that can be evaluated, but only based on the objectives of child care (Andersen, 1993). According to others (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), quality is a totally subjective matter which cannot be defined or evaluated. The more traditional viewpoint sees quality as an objective concept that can be scientifically and systematically measured and rationalised. Criticising the objective concept of quality, European quality researchers now identify quality as a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept. Quality when seen as a subjective matter is dependent on time and context (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Moss & Pence, 1994; Parrila, 2004; Weiss, 1994).

According to the paradigm of professional quality evaluation, the definitions of quality and evaluation are based on the knowledge of professionals, research and on theory in early education (Kärby & Giota, 1994; Phillips, 1987; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993; Sheridan, 2007; Sylva, 2010). Theory and research enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of childhood, and what good ECEC is. With knowledge gained from theory and research, the educational practices can be further developed, and the foundations for high-quality early education can be formed.

The inclusionary (Pence & Moss, 1994) and participatory (Tauriainen, 2000) paradigm invites the previous quality research into a dialog by revising the former concepts of quality. The inclusionary approach simultaneously takes into consideration the objectives of child-care services, information of the experts, as well as the cultural context and the subjectivity of quality (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Hujala et al., 1999; Parrila, 2004; Pence & Moss, 1994; Tauriainen, 2000). The inclusionary approach emphasises the importance of the stakeholders’ subjective views and experiences of quality. The present quality research sees the input gained especially from children to be important. Scott (2008) points out that children are reliable sources of information while considering issues connected to their own life. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2004) acknowledge children’s perspectives in quality matters when bringing out the primary ‘user perspective’.

Dahlberg and Åsen (1994) as well as Jones and Pound (2008) emphasise that quality evaluation determines what is valued in the early childhood education. They point out that what is evaluated implies what is considered important. Rodd (2006) highlights the importance of research in enhancing the valuation of ECEC professionalism. Well-organised research and evaluation give the possibility to bring out concerns
from the field to the administrative level. Pinch (2009) suggests that well-designed evaluation research can contribute to the future research best when the premises of the study as well as the methodological approaches have been theoretically justified. She warns against using the results of the evaluation for just repeating the dominant culture or the prevailing course of action. Instead, the importance of evaluation comes up, however, only when it acts as a catalyst for professional learning.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), its localised versions and related additional measuring tools such as the ECERS-R and the ECERS-E have been widely used methods for assessing the quality of ECEC (Aboud, 2006; Harms & Clifford, 1980; Kalkan & Akman, 2009; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan, Giota, Han, & Kwon, 2009). Sheridan (2001) describes the pedagogical quality of child-care services using four ECERS-based empirical studies and their meta-analysis. Sheridan’s research showed that the most essential elements in quality are teachers’ attitude, competence and possibility for competence development, co-operation with parents and leadership. Sheridan (2007) describes how research indicates that evaluation of pedagogical quality differs between external and self-evaluations. High-quality ECEC provider evaluated his/her own quality more critically than low-quality provider. Providers evaluated as being of low quality seem to find problems in external resources while providers evaluated as being of high quality find their own educational practices and methods as areas for improvement. In high-quality groups, children were invited to participate and the atmosphere was more open for children’s ideas than in low-quality groups.

The research conducted by Fukkink and Lont (2007) shows that both teachers’ education level and in-service training are correlated to high quality and good interaction between the child and the teacher. Some other research findings (Harrist, Thompson, & Norris, 2007; Leseman, 2009) also indicate the key factor of quality to be the pedagogical aspect and especially the relationship between the child and the teacher. In focus group interviews with the owners and directors of child-care centres, parents, teachers and political decision-makers Harrist et al. (2007) found following quality components: communication and rapport, educational practices, teachers’ characteristics, resources and finances, professionalism and visibility, and participation. The researchers stress the crucial role of the directors as the maintainers of interaction and communication between different stakeholders in quality management.

Kalkan and Akman (2009) compared the quality of ECEC provided by public and private services in Turkey. The results indicated that there is no statistical difference between the service providers, but in general the quality of ECEC appeared to be low. Tobin (2005) considers the fading of the contextual aspects and the dominating position of the values of western societies over national values to be a problem in international research. Tobin emphasises that the quality standards must be created in a dialogue with the local practitioners. The problem is demonstrated, for instance, in the quality evaluation of the child–teacher ratio based on the American quality standard: in France and in Japan ECEC is evaluated to be of a lower quality than in the USA. In these countries, cultural values appreciate more collective aspects than taking care of an individual child as in the USA.

When conducting research on evaluation, it is important to declare the ontological and epistemological assumptions, and also the values – visible or latent – of the evaluation model. At best, the model is able to capture different characteristics of quality, to visualise pedagogical processes, to control the standards of quality and to improve quality (Sheridan, 2007).
Conducting research

Research task

The purpose of the study is to provide knowledge and to describe the quality of ECEC in Finland. In the research, the quality has been examined based on the theoretical quality evaluation model of ECEC. Quality as a phenomenon has been conceptualised as structural, intermediate, process and effect factors. The focus is on the parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of ECEC quality. Their views of different quality factors are being compared and analysed.

The research questions in this study are:

- What is the perceived quality of ECEC in the Finnish child-care centres and family day care?
- What are the differences of the quality assessments by parents and teachers?
- What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of Finnish child care?

Methods

Quality evaluation model of ECEC in the study

The quality instrument used in the study is based on the quality evaluation model of ECEC (Figure 1). The theoretical framework of developing the instrument is based on the contextual theory of the child’s growth (Hujala, 1999), which has its foundation in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological psychology, and also in the constructivist conception of learning.

According to the contextual growth theory (Hujala, 1999), quality is being reviewed from the point of view of different actors and factors. The quality factors of ECEC are defined as structural, intermediate, process and effect factor (Hujala-Huttunen, 1995; Hujala et al., 1999). In order to emphasise the present Finnish values of ECEC, the instrument has been updated according to National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2005). In the renewed model, the questions about the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning are separated from the process factor into its own factor (Hujala & Fonsén, 2010).

In the process of constructing the instrument, the quality criteria were compiled. The operationalised variables, i.e. the questions, were developed on the basis of the

![Figure 1. The quality evaluation model of ECEC (Hujala-Huttunen, 1995; Hujala & Fonsén, 2010; Hujala et al., 1999).](image-url)
research as well as the views of the professional experts and the customers. The assessed variables, in all except one factor, are the same for parents and teachers. In the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning teachers’ and parents’ evaluation perspectives are different. The teachers assess the curriculum content and the pedagogy of learning as a process factor, i.e. how little children are being taught. The parents evaluate it as an effect factor, i.e. what the children have learned.

The quality factors presented in the model are supposed to be interdependent so that good-quality effects require a good-quality process which is directed by factors with indirect effects and ultimately more or less regulated by the framework factors. The premises of the child-care quality evaluation lie on the level of service, and especially on its adequacy and availability. ECEC is based on the structural factor, which is also the fundamental quality. The operational quality is regulated by the intermediate and process factors, and the curriculum content and the pedagogy of learning. The process factor represents the actual ‘education and care’ process. The customer perspective can be detected by examining the effect factor. Together the theory-based quality factors form a comprehensive framework for quality assessment.

The structural factor regulates the physical and psychological conditions of the ECEC activities. The quality evaluation instrument contains items, or as we later on refer to as questions, such as ‘Child-care facilities provide children with opportunities for group activities and privacy to be alone’. The intermediate factor aims to assess the guidance of the child’s educational process and the ensurance of the factors related to the teachers’ skills. These are measured with questions such as ‘An individual ECEC plan is drawn up for the child in collaboration with the teachers and the parents’. The process factor aims to assess the implementation of the educational process and the quality of the interaction between the child and the teacher with questions such as ‘Child’s suggestions and independent decisions are taken into account in child care’.

The curriculum content and pedagogy of learning variables measure the implementation and the effectiveness of the mathematical and linguistic skills, as well as the contents of natural science as an ECEC quality factor. The questions related to the effect factor assess children’s and parents’ satisfaction with the child care, and its perceived quality. The effect factor is measured with questions such as ‘Child has enjoyed and been a willing participant in manual skills, e.g. sewing, pottery and woodworking’.

Data collection

The context for data collection is Finnish child-care programmes, including the ECEC programmes for 1–5-year-old children and the pre-primary class for 6-year-olds. The ECEC programmes are mainly publicly provided in child-care centres and in home-based or group-based family child care. In this research, the public child-care centres cover up to 98% of the programmes and private child-care centres 2%. In every Finnish child-care group, there are at least one qualified teacher with BA-level education, and two assistant teachers who are usually child-care nurses. In this study all staff members responsible for the children, and at the same time responsible of the quality, are referred to as teachers.

The current study is based on empirical data \(N = 22,948\) that has been collected cumulatively during the years 2000–2010 within research projects in Finnish municipalities. The sampling can be described as convenience sampling, referring to the
voluntariness of municipalities to take part in the quality research. The participants have been duly informed of the research as well as the voluntary nature of it, and their consent to participate was elicited. The data consist of quality assessment material from both public and private child-care programmes from a total of 394 child-care programmes from 32 municipalities. The response rates have varied between 38% and –100%.

The assessments of child-care quality are based on the evaluators’ views of the ECEC. In the beginning, the empirical data were collected from the parents and teachers using paper questionnaires and later on electronically. The assessments have been conducted child specifically; the parents assess the quality from the point of view of their own child, and the teachers assess the quality of the programme implementation according to every child in the group. In the ECEC quality evaluation, the child perspective is brought out by the assessment of parents and teachers.

There are instructions in the questionnaire for both parents and teachers which determine how the questions should be assessed. Every question has to be assessed according to the source of information defined in the questionnaire: observation, written documents, interviews and information from the child. The response options in the questionnaires are in five-point Likert scales, where option 1 stands for the lowest quality level and 5 stands for the highest quality level. There were also two open-ended questions which are: ‘In addition to the previous questions, what other factors have enhanced or reduced the quality of your child’s care in your opinion?’ and ‘A proposal for improving the quality of education in child care’.

**Analysing the data**

In data analysis we used mainly quantitative methods and included qualitative analysis in reporting the results. The paradigm of mixed methods was applied slightly. Mixed methods examine the research questions in a multiple methodological way, and it aims to broaden the perspective of the social phenomena of the research focus (Tashakkori and Creswell 2008). Qualitative analysis in this study extends the viewpoint of the quality in the research, and increases the validity and the accuracy of the quantitative results.

The quality factors were based on the theoretical Quality Evaluation Model (Figure 1). The different quality factors in ECEC were used to form their own sum score of means. In addition to that, the sum scores of the mean values were formed of the parents’ and teachers’ responses. The reliability indexes of the quality factors examined by Cronbach’s alpha (α) varied from 0.58 to 0.90. In this study the reliability indexes were high and therefore gave a reliable basis for using the sum variable values in the data analysis.

In quantitative analysis, the statistical significance between the assessments of the respondent groups was tested. The normal distributions of the factors were tested with the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test before analysing the data. The test (Kolmogorov–Smirnov = 0.021–0.259, p < 0.001) indicated that the distributions of the factors were skewed and therefore non-parametric tests were chosen. The differences in the parents’ and teachers’ assessments were tested by using the Mann–Whitney U-test.

Both quantitative and qualitative results are reported in a dialog with the theory, research and present researchers. The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed by a content analysis. The quotations reported reflect the authentic voices of the informants, and with this we want to be in a dialog with the respondents.
Results

Quality of Finnish ECEC

The quality of Finnish child-care programmes was examined based on the respondents’ overall view. The data consisted of 22,948 child-specific quality assessments by parents and teachers. The parents’ and teachers’ assessments of all variables were summed and the obtained mean was 4.22. It can be considered very good in demonstrating the overall quality of Finnish child-care services as perceived by parents and teachers.

When the factors are examined separately according to the parents’ and teachers’ assessments (Figure 2), the differences between the groups can be seen although they are minor ones. The structural factor was assessed with quite low-quality scores in both respondent groups. However, parents assessed the structural factor slightly higher than the teachers. The teachers gave the highest quality ratings to the intermediate factor. The teachers’ assessment of the intermediate factor was higher than the parents’. The same pattern can be detected in the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning. The quality ratings of the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning received the lowest scores of all factors in both groups. As for the process factor, the parents’ and teachers’ quality assessments differed only slightly. Both groups agreed on the quality of the process factor as being good. The parents rated the effect factor of ECEC with the highest scores of all quality factors.

These results indicate that the strengths of Finnish ECEC are the parents’ satisfaction with the effectiveness of ECEC and the teachers’ satisfaction with the intermediate quality factor. Both respondent groups perceived the quality of the process factor to be good. However, there are pedagogical challenges in implementing the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning.

The differences of the assessments by both groups were tested with the Mann–Whitney $U$-test. The test proved that the assessments differ significantly in every factor excluding the intermediate factor. The values showed the statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) difference in the structural factor ($U = 5.643E7$), process factor ($U = 6.180E7$), curriculum content and pedagogy of learning ($U = 3.341E7$), and in the

![Figure 2. Means of the quality factors assessed by parents and teachers.](image-url)
effect factor \( (U = 5.360E7) \). Because the differences in the quality factors between the groups are statistically significant, the parents’ and teachers’ quality assessments were examined by variables, except for the intermediate factor where no statistically significant difference existed between the groups.

**Quality of the structural factor in ECEC**

In investigating the individual variables, a more specific analysis of the assessments conducted by the parents and teachers can be formulated. Table 1 shows that both parents and teachers agree on the highest ratings in question (Q) number 1 ‘The child was admitted to the requested child-care centre’ (parents = P 4.75, teachers = T 4.83), although the standard deviation is high. This shows that the child’s unconditional and universal right to child care, as well as the principle of local services, are present in Finnish ECEC. Interestingly, ‘The child-care centre’s reliable back-up system for absent employees’ (Q 2) receives the lowest scores from both groups (P 3.53, T 3.50). In this issue the standard deviations are highest (1.28; 1.09). It seems that the creation of a reliable back-up system is a big challenge in many ECEC institutions. An efficient system for substitutes is poorly implemented compared with the other quality issues.

The facilities of Finnish child-care centres have a good reputation, yet there is a remarkable difference in teachers’ and parents’ evaluations. The parents rated the safety of the facilities (Q 3, 4) higher than the teachers. The difference of opinions between the groups is greatest in question 5 concerning the pedagogical functionality of the facilities, which is poorly assessed especially by the teachers (P 3.81, T 3.51). It can be assumed that the pedagogical goals set by the teachers are so high that the facilities are perceived to restrict the implementation of the high-quality pedagogy. However, in this assessment the high standard deviation indicates that there is a lot of disagreement in the opinions.

**Quality of the process factor in ECEC**

Table 2, concerning the process factor, shows that there are interesting differences between parents’ and teachers’ assessments, for example, in the question that deals with parent–teacher partnership. ‘Children are personally welcomed and told goodbye’ (Q 19) scored the highest of all of the process factors from the teachers

Table 1. Parents’ and teachers’ assessments of the variables in the structural factor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural factor of ECEC</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The child was admitted to the child-care center at parents’ request</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The child-care center has a reliable back-up child-care system or</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>substitutes for absent employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Indoor facilities are safe for children</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Outdoor facilities are safe for children</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Child-care facilities provide children opportunities for group activities and privacy</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be alone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
compared with the assessments from the parents (4.51). Do the parents’ and teachers’ different assessments mean that the parents have higher expectations? Do the parents expect more individual attention, or do they just experience the situation differently?

An acceptance of children’s individuality (Q 32–33) and children’s social needs and interaction with peers (Q 34–35) were perceived to be of a high quality by both groups. In Finnish child care the child-centred pedagogy is highly valued, which can be related to an emphasis on individuality (National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2005). The finding concerning social needs indicates that in Finnish child care the social relationships between children are highly valued. The IEA Pre Primary Project (Ojala, 1999) reported similar findings. In Hujala’s (2004) longitudinal study, both parents and teachers have defined for decades that the most important goal of Finnish child care is to support the children’s social development. In the questions measuring the more traditional group-based pedagogy (Q 20–23), the parents and teachers assessed the quality similarly.

### Table 2. The variables of the process factor assessed by the parents and teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process factor of ECEC</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Parents are told about the news and the events of the day when the child is</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>picked up from the child care</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Children are personally welcomed and told goodbye</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. A child’s need to play is addressed during everyday activities in the child</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Children’s sportiness and need to exercise takes place in everyday life in the</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child care</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Children’s questions and thoughts are responded in everyday life</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Children’s play materials and toys are available to the children</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Children’s suggestions and independent decisions are taken into account in the</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child care</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Children are cuddled, cherished and personally paid attention to</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Children are praised for trying. Children gain successful experiences and joy</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of learning</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Children’s various emotions are accepted; children are helped to stand</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disappointments, comforted in sorrow and their joys are shared</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Children are helped to solve conflict situations</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Adults are helping the child to follow through child’s own play and activity</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideas</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Children participate in everyday life activities and duties</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Children have the opportunity to continue a play for long period of time, even</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many days in the child care</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Children are accepted the way they are</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. The individuality of the child and the dissimilarity between families are</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respected and recognised in the child care</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. The child has friends in the child care centre</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Children’s friendships are supported</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(4.80) compared with the assessments from the parents (4.51). Do the parents’ and teachers’ different assessments mean that the parents have higher expectations? Do the parents expect more individual attention, or do they just experience the situation differently?
In these questions, teachers are core informants for many parents. Also, it is presumable that in the questions not engaged with emotional perspective, the parents assess quality from the point of view of a group more than their own child.

The most negative assessments given by the parents and teachers were related to the *children’s involvement in ECEC* (Q 24, 30–31). These questions were poorly assessed by both groups, but received remarkably low scores from the teachers. According to the overall findings of the study, the parents and teachers are generally satisfied with the child care except with the children’s *involvement*. Based on these results, it can be assumed that the children’s participation in daily activities does not occur as expected. Does this indicate that the daily schedule defines the pedagogy of ECEC, in which case the children’s play and participation are subordinate to the schedule? The teachers seem to assent this, but the inconsistency can be detected from the assessments. Is the tradition of the daily schedule so strong that the teachers feel it is unchangeable? The teachers seem to value the children’s participation, but the implementation has not succeeded.

The greatest difference between the assessments of the two groups is in the questions measuring *pedagogy that supports the children’s emotional security* (Q 25–28). Although the parental evaluations score high, the teachers’ evaluations score systematically higher. The differences in the assessments might indicate the respondents’ different assessment perspectives. The parents assess quality from the point of view of their child, whereas the teachers’ evaluations are based on a group perspective.

All in all the results lead to the conclusion that the *children’s individuality and social needs* as well as the *parent–teacher partnership* are assessed to be of a good quality. These issues are considered to be important in Finnish ECEC, and they both have been implemented with a high quality.

**The quality of the curriculum content and the pedagogy of learning in ECEC**

The curriculum content and the pedagogy of learning aspects assess the mathematical, linguistic and science content areas and their implementation and effectiveness. The teachers assess the curriculum content from the point of view of the pedagogy, in other words how the children are taught, whereas the parents assess the effectiveness of the curriculum content, i.e. what the children have learned. The questions concerning the curriculum content and the pedagogy of learning scored the lowest of all of the quality factors (Table 3) by both respondent groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum content and pedagogy of learning in early childhood education</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36. The child’s linguistic skills are developed in the child care</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Mathematical skills which are practiced/which children have learned through play in everyday life situations in the child care</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. The children become acquainted with nature and natural phenomena in everyday life situations in the child care</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. The children become acquainted with the immediate surroundings, for example, through trips, in the child care</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis revealed that the teachers assessed the pedagogy of linguistic (Q 36) and mathematical skills (Q 37) which have been carried out better than what the parents assessed the children have actually learned. The teachers scored 4.22 in the development of linguistic skills, whereas the parents scored notably lower, 3.86. The lowest quality rating given by the parents was the development of mathematical skills (3.68). The teachers’ assessments were also low (3.86) for providing the contents of mathematics.

Our child is able to read and count very well. This has become a challenge to preschool, because the assignments seem too easy and boring for her. As a parent I wish that there were additional tasks for children like mine. (Parent)

The results suggest that the teaching of linguistic skills is the pedagogical strength of the Finnish child care. The weakness of the pedagogy of learning is connected to parents’ perceptions about the children’s mathematical learning. Also, questions 38 and 39 related to the natural sciences scored quite low from both respondent groups. It seems that the curriculum content and pedagogy of learning are challenges in developing the quality of Finnish child care.

**Quality of the effect factor in ECEC**

Out of all the quality factors, the parents are the most satisfied with the quality of the effect factor. The teachers’ assessments on the effect factor are also high, but not as high as assessed by the parents (Table 4). The strength of the quality of the effect factor seems to be the children’s happiness with the programme. Question 40 ‘Children are enthusiastic, happy and satisfied with their lives in the child-care centre’ (P 4.49; T 4.47) and question 42 ‘The child is happy to come to the child care’ (P 4.42; T 4.48) scored the highest by both groups. The question 46, ‘The child has enjoyed and been a willing participant in manual skills (e.g. sewing, pottery and woodworking)’ receives lower scores than other questions. The teachers score even lower (3.96) than the parents (4.11).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect factor of ECEC</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40. Children are enthusiastic, happy and satisfied with their lives in the child-care centre</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Child-care practice meets the views and hopes of the child and the parents</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. The child is happy to come to the child care</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. The child enjoys music (e.g. playing instruments, singing, creative sport and dancing)</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. The child enjoys visual arts (e.g. drawing, painting and designing)</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. The child enjoys stories, children’s literature and acting</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. The child enjoys manual skills (e.g. sewing, pottery and woodworking)</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. The child enjoys physical exercise (e.g. games, gymnastic, various sports)</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In parents' views the children enjoy more and participate more intensively in the ECEC activities than what the teachers seem to think. The parents’ assessments are based on the feedback from their children, whereas the teachers base their knowledge on the everyday situations in the child care. This could indicate that the children’s experiences of the child care are so positive and this has been conveyed to the parents as well. In any case, both respondent groups feel the effectiveness of the programme to be of a high quality.

In Finland, the customer-orientated programme is emphasised. There are also strong attempts to operate according to the wishes of the children and their families. Although differences between the assessments within certain items appear, the results of the effect factor indicate that the child care has succeeded in reaching the co-operative aims. As both parents and teachers assess with good ratings ‘The child-care practice meets the views and hopes of the child and the parents’.

I wish the teachers all the best and thank you for the good care. Our family is very satisfied with the child care. It is so nice to come in the mornings when the staff welcomes us warmly. (Parent)

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to describe the quality of Finnish child care as perceived by the parents and teachers, and analyse the differences in assessments between the groups. The quality instrument used in the study has a theoretical and cultural foundation. To be theoretically and culturally appropriate, it has been constructed by researchers and professionals in the child-care field. The purpose of the cumulatively collected empirical data is to produce a reference file when developing ECEC. It offers Finnish municipalities, child-care centres and groups reference for finding the strengths and the weaknesses to develop ECEC in the programmes. Theory-based quality evaluation gives foundation for ensuring teachers’ professional development. Reflection on one’s own work enables professionalism, but that process requires valid tools.

Variation in the quality of the programmes

The quality of Finnish child care is perceived to be very good. Because it is known that the ratings of the customer satisfaction surveys are commonly on a high level (Johnson, Shavitt, & Holbrook, 2011), we were sensitive even for the minor differences in the assessments. We consider the lower assessments in the quality profile as a challenge in developing child-care practices.

High standard deviations (SD = 0.42–1.90) in the variables of the quality assessments within the respondent groups indicate that the quality varies considerably in Finnish child care. This research reinforces the results of previous studies indicating that Finnish child care is generally of a high quality but the quality varies among the programmes (Kalliala, 2008). The variation indicates that today’s strategy of steering the quality management by information steering is inadequate for ensuring equality and professional development.

The results related to the children’s quite low involvement in ECEC also indicate that perceiving children as active subjects in play and other situations requires improvement. According to Heikka, Hujala, and Turja (2009), procedures in child care appeared to be constructed by effortless practice more than the child’s needs or
The teachers’ theoretical knowledge is on a high level, but this theoretical knowledge is not steering practice. The meaning of play and child-centredness are emphasised in the curriculum but they have not yet been implemented properly.

One essential aim in developing ECEC is to strengthen the pedagogy of learning and the curriculum contents. This result leads us to ponder on whether the implementation of the curriculum needs to be reconsidered. Is it so that the focusing on parent–teacher partnership in Finnish child care has compromised the primary function of ECEC: To support the child’s learning process. The integration of an individual ECEC plan and the curriculum is a new and challenging task which according to this research, should be improved. Taking the child’s participation in the programme into account, and the integration of the child observations and curriculum contents are considerable improvement challenges.

The teachers’ higher-quality ratings in the questions concerning the process factor and the educational practices evoke a question of the relationship between the parents’ expectations and the educational practices of teachers. The results can also be interpreted from the point of view that the parents are not aware enough of the child’s day in the child care. According to this interpretation, the improvement of communication and making the educational practices visible enable the parents to have a better understanding of the pedagogy of learning, contents of practice and the quality of the child–teacher interaction in the child care. The parents’ opportunity to participate and to become acquainted with the child’s everyday life in the child care should be defined in the individual ECEC plan. Rivas and Sobrino (2011) emphasise that strengthening the communication between teachers and parents is an appropriate way in solving problems encountered in responding to the expectations of parents and the provided education.

Quality management

In Finland, the existence of the qualified professionals is considered to guarantee the high quality of ECEC. The recent trend shows that the number of pedagogically trained professionals has decreased, which is a matter of great concern. The expansion of the child-care centres into decentralised organisations (Halttunen, 2009) and reducing the pedagogically trained personnel in the child-care centres set a growing pressure on the pedagogical quality management. Kalliala (2008) claims that differences in quality can be found in an adult’s sensitivity in interaction with a child. The international quality research emphasises unanimously that the strengths and variation of quality in ECEC must be visible and the quality management needs to be supported (i.e. Barros & Aguiar, 2010; Gol-Guven, 2009; Paiva, Shneider, Mahchado, & Perinazzo, 2009; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Rivas & Sobrino, 2011). Rohacek, Adams, and Kisker (2010) highlight the importance of leadership style in maintaining the quality of ECEC. The director’s high level of confidence in the staff and also high expectations for teachers’ competence and professionalism were connected to the high quality of ECEC. As a result of this study, it seems that in Finland a national quality management system would be needed in order to ensure high-quality child care. However, the selection of the quality evaluation instrument needs to be carefully considered. According to Fenech, Sumsion, and Goodfellow (2008), the external quality standardisation of ECEC may even weaken the pedagogical quality. The inclusive quality evaluation, which is based on the discipline of early
childhood education, should lay the premises for the systematic development of practices, and serve as a pedagogical tool for leadership.

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References


