

# FINLAND

Early Childhood Education and Care  
**ECEC Workforce Profile**

*Country report author*

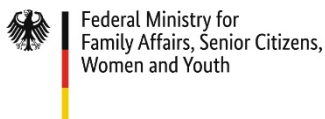
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## Glossary

### **EQF** – *European Qualifications Framework*

Outcomes based (knowledge, skills, competences), eight-level reference tool to enable qualification comparisons between countries.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>

### **ECTS** – *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*

A system for enhancing student mobility through the Europe-wide recognition of credit transfers and credit accumulation in higher education

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en)

### **ISCED** – *International Standard Classification of Education*

An instrument for comparing levels and fields of education across countries, developed by UNESCO in the 1970s and revised in 1997 and 2011.

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

## About the author

**Heidi Chydenius** works as a university teacher at the University of Helsinki and is a doctoral researcher at the University of Eastern Finland. In her dissertation she is examining collaborative approaches towards guiding and supporting students during supervised field practice within a multi-professional ECEC team. Further interests lie in a socio-historical approach towards researching the ECEC teaching profession and team practices.



## 1. ECEC governance in Finland

Over the past ten years, the system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland has been undergoing a period of unprecedented change. In 2013, responsibility for ECEC was transferred from the administration of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture (*opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö*). The new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, which emphasises the best interests of the child and the pedagogy of early childhood education, was passed in 2015. The law assigned the Finnish National Agency for Education (*Opetushallitus*) the task of drawing up a National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 580/2015). The Act on ECEC was thoroughly revised in 2018. The law defines ECEC as “a systematic and goal-oriented entity that consists of upbringing, education and care, with a special emphasis on pedagogy”. New personnel titles and personnel structures were entered into the Act, and the assessment of the quality of ECEC was defined as mandatory (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC (*Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus Karvi, n.d.*) is responsible for the national evaluation of ECEC, teaching and training.

Changes in the administrative sector have initiated a paradigm shift in Finnish early childhood education and care which has been further accelerated by development projects and experiments launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education. Nationwide, the education system has been developed with the help of the *Right to Learn* project in 2020-2022 included in the government programme. The aim of the €313 million project has been the sustainable and effective development of ECEC, pre-primary and primary education through the reform of structures and legislation. Several smaller projects aiming to secure an equal start for learning by improving quality and equality in ECEC and comprehensive school education have been linked to this larger project by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Ministry of Education and Culture n.d.). The latest version of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care was introduced in August 2022, with inclusive early childhood education as its overarching principle (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022).

After all the changes, Finland has a unitary system of early childhood education and care, organised in two stages. Both ECEC provision for children up to age 5–6 (*varhaiskasvatus*) and pre-primary education for 6 to 7 year-olds (*esiopetus*) come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture, but with different curricular frameworks. The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for drawing up curricula for both stages of ECEC. In addition, two different laws govern ECEC and pre-primary education (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; Basic Education Act 628/1998).

Pre-primary education is most commonly provided in ECEC centres and sometimes in transition classes in primary schools for at least 700 hours per year, i.e. for about four hours a day (Basic Education Decree 852/1998). In August 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture launched an experiment of two-year pre-primary education, which is to last until the end of May 2024. This extension to two years is currently a topic of widespread debate.

## 2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

### 2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care was amended in 2018 and the amendments targeted, among other things, ECEC personnel. The pedagogical quality of ECEC was strengthened by increasing the overall proportion of staff members with a tertiary level education and by increasing the number of people who have completed teacher education at university. With regard to changes in the staffing structure, the law will raise the level of staff education so that from 2030 onwards two thirds of the staff in ECEC centres will have a tertiary level education. At least half of those with a tertiary level degree must have a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education completed at a university. The Finnish ECEC system is thus going through a transition period (01.09.2018–01.01.2030) concerning the eligibility requirements for staff in ECEC and staffing structures. The law defined the new professional titles as:

- Teacher in ECEC (*varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja*)
- Childcarer in ECEC (*varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja*)
- Social Pedagogue in ECEC (*varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi*) and
- Special Education Teacher in ECEC (*varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja*) (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 580/2015).

The changes relating to eligibility concern in particular the qualification requirements of the Teacher in ECEC as well as the new Social Pedagogue in ECEC. Previously, it was possible to gain the professional title of Teacher in ECEC along two different routes, either through a teacher education study programme at a university (Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education) or through a social pedagogue training at a university of applied sciences, formerly polytechnics (Bachelor's Degree in Social Services). Since 31 July 2023, the Teacher in ECEC qualification can only be achieved through a teacher education study route. The law codifies the title of Social Pedagogue in ECEC for those with a Bachelor's degree in Social Services, but the competences required and the job description for the position are still undefined.

To support the implementation of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and the new personnel structure, the Ministry of Education and Culture set up an ECEC Training Development Forum (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, *Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi*). The first phase of the forum's work in 2019–2020 included among other things structuring the competences generated in different IPE programmes. However, this was a challenging task. In particular, describing the specialist competences of a Social Pedagogue proved challenging and highlighted different views within the working groups. It should also be noted that Finnish society is strongly corporatist, which also brings its own challenges to the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce.

In this report, we consider **Teachers in ECEC** as core professionals. According to the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, the Teacher in ECEC has overall responsibility for the group of children.

Social Pedagogues (Bachelor's Degree in Social Services) in ECEC also have a tertiary level education, but their job description is currently undefined and therefore their role in groups of children is unclear. The need for Social Pedagogues is not the same in all groups of children and within the framework of the law, municipalities can allocate vacancies for Social Pedagogues where there is a need for child protection and family work. Some municipalities have developed

the role of a Social Pedagogue into a regional and consultative one. In general, few posts for Social Pedagogues have as yet been established.

Special Education Teachers in ECEC are also tertiary level educated, but the role of a Special Education Teacher in ECEC is primarily regional and consultative, without group responsibility, and is therefore not counted as a core professional. Especially during recent decades, municipalities have interpreted the principle of inclusion in such a way that children in need of support have been placed in ordinary groups and integrated special groups have been abolished, which has reduced the continuity of support for children and changed the job description of Special Education Teachers (Pihlaja and Neitola 2017).

Table 1 outlines the profiles and minimum qualification requirements of staff who will be working directly with children in ECEC provision after the transition period, which ends in 2030.

Table 1

**Finland: ECEC staff in centre-based settings**

Job title	Main ECEC workplace settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
<p><b>Teacher in ECEC</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja</i></p> <p><i>Profile:</i> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p>	<p><i>Päiväkoti</i> (‘day home’) <b>ECEC centre</b> 0–6 years<sup>1</sup></p> <p><i>Esiopetus</i> <b>Pre-primary education</b> (organised in ECEC centres or schools) 6–7 years</p>	Core practitioner with group responsibility	0–7 years	<p>3 years of university studies with specialism in early childhood education</p> <p><i>Award:</i> Bachelor’s degree</p> <p>ECTS credits: 180 EQF: Level 6 ISCED 2011: 6</p>
<p><b>Childcarer in ECEC</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja</i></p> <p><i>Route 1:</i> <b>ECEC Nurse</b> <i>Lähihoitaja</i></p>	<p><i>Päiväkoti</i> <b>ECEC centre</b> 0–6 years</p> <p>Complete range of social and health care services, e.g. children’s homes, hospital units, youth centres, services for senior citizens etc.</p>	Qualified co-worker	All ages	<p>Approximately 3 years of upper secondary vocational education in social welfare and health care</p> <p>ECTS credits: n/a<sup>2</sup> EQF: level 4 ISCED 2011: 3</p>

<sup>1</sup> **Editors’ note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports for countries with a school starting age at 6: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. In the case of Finland, the relevant format is **0–6** years, since pre-primary education is part of ECEC and children start school when they are 7 years old.

<sup>2</sup> n/a = not applicable



Job title	Main ECEC workplace settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
<p><i>Route 2:</i> <b>Children’s Instructor/ Childcare Worker</b> <i>Lastenhojaaja</i></p>	<p><i>Päiväkoti</i> <b>ECEC centre</b> 0–6 years</p> <p>Also work in: playgroups run by the Lutheran church parishes, open ECEC services and family services, out-of-school provision</p>	Qualified co-worker	0–7 years	<p>Approximately 3 years of upper secondary vocational education in childcare, education and family welfare.</p> <p>ECTS credits: n/a EQF: level 4 ISCED 2011: 3</p>
<p><b>Social Pedagogue in ECEC</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi</i></p> <p><i>Profile:</i> Social Care/ Welfare Professional</p>	<p><i>Päiväkoti</i> <b>ECEC centre</b> 0–6 years</p> <p>Complete range of social services, including ECEC centres, but also family guidance, work with senior citizens, rehabilitation for drug users, etc.</p>	The job description is undefined.	All ages	<p>3½ years at a higher education institution (university of applied sciences) with a specialism in social services <i>Award:</i> Bachelor’s degree</p> <p>ECTS credits: 210 EQF: level 6 ISCED 2011: 6</p>
<p><b>Special Education Teacher in ECEC</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja</i></p>	<p><i>Päiväkoti</i> <b>ECEC centre</b> 0–6 years</p> <p>and other settings/groups for young children with special needs</p>	<p>Focus on children with special needs in several ECEC centres <i>or</i> Focus on children with special needs in an ECEC group <i>or</i> (less often) Core practitioner with group responsibility</p>	0–7 years	<p><i>Route 1:</i> 1-year postgraduate university study route in special needs education following a qualification as Teacher in ECEC and 2 years’ work experience as Teacher in ECEC.</p> <p>ECTS credits: 240 (180 + 60) EQF: level 6 ISCED 2011: 6</p> <hr/> <p><i>Route 2:</i> Master’s degree 5 years of university studies with specialism in early childhood special education</p>

Job title	Main ECEC workplace settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
				ECTS credits: 300 (180 + 120) EQF: Level 7 ISCED 2011: 7
<b>Special Needs Assistant</b> <i>Avustaja</i>	Personal or group assistant for children with special needs in various settings	(Non-qualified) co-worker (although qualification recommended)		No IPE required; recommended: 1–2 years vocational training  ECTS credits: n/a EQF: Level 4 ISCED 2011: 3

#### Box 1

**SEEPRO profile categories for ECEC core professionals** (adapted from Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010)

- **Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (specialist focus, 0–6/7 years)
- **Pre-primary Education Professional** (exclusive pre-primary focus 3/4–6 years)
- **Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional** (focus on pre-primary *and* primary education 3/4–10/11 years)
- **Social and Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (mainly broad focus, including ECEC, usually 0–12 years, but sometimes including adults)
- **Social Care/Health Care Professional** (sometimes early childhood focus, sometimes broad focus, including adults)

## 2.2 Centre leader

According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (580/2015), every ECEC centre must have a head in charge and responsible for operations. The revised Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) defined the eligibility conditions for the head of an ECEC centre. The qualification criteria for the role of head responsible for the operations of centre-based early education are at least a Master's degree in Education and a qualification as Teacher in ECEC or as Social Pedagogy in ECEC, as well as sufficient leadership skills.

The National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2022 states that the starting point of management and leadership should be the promotion of the wellbeing and learning of each child. The curriculum further states that the development of the organisational culture and inclusiveness in ECEC requires a pedagogical leadership which is goal-oriented, planned and evaluative. Pedagogical leadership is not only a task of the Centre Leader, but can be distributed among other personnel according to the work tasks (Fonsén et al. 2021). However, only the Centre Head has the right to manage the overall organisation of the ECEC centre. In addition, the head's duties include managing the personnel and the centre's budget, and ensuring safety precautions and providing guidance for the families using the ECEC centre. In large cities, early childhood education unit managers are often administrative managers and do not work directly with children. However,



the management and leadership structures and thus the head's job descriptions vary widely among different ECEC service providers.

### 2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

One of the challenges of organising ECEC in Finland is the regional differences, especially between big cities and small rural towns. With the help of legislation and other guidelines efforts have been made to align the organisation of ECEC, but the variation in the quality of ECEC shows that the organisation is still left too much to local consideration. Also, the centre-specific pedagogical tasks vary widely and are defined locally. In larger municipalities, specific tasks vary according to the size of the ECEC centres, the number of children and the diversity of families. In an annual meeting the ECEC centre personnel discuss the responsibilities within the centre under the guidance of the Centre Head and agree on a conceptual plan for the next year. For certain tasks, such as that of the Teacher in charge of pre-primary education, a small compensation may be paid which is agreed locally.

The institution providing initial professional education (e.g. university or university of applied sciences) pays a small fee to the supervisor or the ECEC centre for supervising students. Acting as a supervisor usually requires the completion of supervisor training and a cooperation agreement between the educational institution and the ECEC centre.

### 2.4 Coordinating and supervisory staff

In Finland, the municipality must ensure that the services of the local child welfare team, which includes healthcare, psychological and remedial services, are available in pre-primary education (Act on Pupil and Student Welfare 1287/2013). In other respects, the posts and tasks of the cooperation staff in ECEC are decided on locally. There are more such posts in larger municipalities than in smaller ones. Regional positions include, for example, the positions of an ECEC Special Education Teacher and a Finnish Language Teacher (see *Chapter 2.5*). Locally, regional positions for Social Pedagogues in ECEC are beginning to be created. The role of the regional Social Pedagogue in ECEC is to act as a support for parents. They cooperate closely with, for example, counselling centres, social work services, and the child welfare team of pre-primary education.

### 2.5 Specialist support staff

In Finland, with the strengthening of the principle of inclusive ECEC and the clarification of special support, children have the right to a so-called three-level support, i.e. general, enhanced and special support (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Specialist support staff working with individual children within the ECEC centre are usually the Special Education Teacher and the Special Needs Assistant. The intensity of the support a child receives depends on the amount of support needed. This may be continuous or occasional support directly from the Special Education Teacher or Special Needs Assistant, or the ECEC centre staff can receive consultative support to ensure the necessary measures within the centre. For example, a regional or centre-specific Special Education Teacher or a Finnish Language Teacher in ECEC may offer such consultative support.

Other specialist support staff, such as a Speech Therapist or an Occupational Therapist, are not part of the ECEC staff. These services are part of social and health services but can be implemented in an ECEC centre.



### 3. Structural composition of ECEC workforce: qualifications, gender, ethnicity

In Finland, compiling statistics on and monitoring developments within the ECEC workforce have not been satisfactory. No systematically collected database is available for labour and training needs (Karila, Kosonen, and Järvenkallas 2017, 91–92). In order to remedy these shortcomings, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) provided for the establishment of a data storage system called Varda (*Varhaiskasvatuksen tietovaranto*). The purpose of the data repository is to produce commensurate, up-to-date, comparable and high-quality information that is utilised in national and international planning, guidance and development work in ECEC and in the activities of public authorities. In addition, the data can be used for scientific research. The Finnish National Agency for Education maintains Varda, and ECEC service providers are obligated to store the information about the service provider, locations, children, guardians and staff (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021, 57). The full implementation of the system and the recording of data have been delayed and, as a result, information on ECEC staff is still incomplete.

During the period when ECEC services were administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (until 2013), the proportion of staff with social welfare and health care qualifications was on the increase in the field of ECEC (Onnismaa, Kalliala, and Tahkokallio 2017). In the early childhood education curricula drawn up by the social administration, a mention of teaching was avoided and the teacher's role and tasks were only vaguely presented (Chydenius et al. 2023). The number of students in university ECEC teacher education study programmes was kept very low and a significant number of students graduated with a degree as Social Pedagogue with an additional teaching qualification (Onnismaa et al. 2017). This has not prevented a shortage of Teachers in ECEC, which has been made visible by the eligibility conditions of the new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. By 2030, the share of Teachers in ECEC is planned to be at least 30% and the share of those with tertiary level education at least 60% of the staff in ECEC. Due to the increase in the number of students at university and the multiple forms of IPE, the proportion of Teachers in ECEC is slowly growing. In 2012, approximately 18% of ECEC staff had a Teacher qualification and approximately 30% of staff were educated at tertiary level (Onnismaa 2018). At present, approximately 20% of the ECEC staff have a qualification as Teacher in ECEC and approximately 39% altogether have a tertiary level education (see *Table 2*). Nationwide, more than 45% of ECEC jobs are defined as Teacher in ECEC positions. However, according to an analysis prepared by Finland's largest pension provider Keva (2021), there is a shortage of more than 4,000 Teachers in ECEC in Finland. Because of the shortage of Teachers, often an under-qualified person, most commonly a Childcarer, fills the position. In large cities, in up to 30-40% of cases an under-qualified person performs a Teacher's job. As Childcarers are transferred to Teacher positions, there is a shortage of Childcarers in some places. There is also a shortage of Special Education Teachers (Keva 2021). A non-specialist applicant, often a Teacher in ECEC, fills some of these jobs but sometimes the post is left vacant. Nevertheless, according to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), ECEC service providers must ensure Special Education Teacher consultation and instruction for the children needing support. In ECEC services for linguistic minorities (Sámi and Swedish), staffing challenges are equally prevalent.

Table 2 provides an overview of selected aspects of the structural composition of the ECEC workforce in Finland. Assistants do not belong to these categories<sup>3</sup>.

Table 2

Finland: Structural composition of workforce in ECEC provision, 2021

Staff categories	Year / Proportion of workforce
Staff with specialist higher education degree	Approx. <b>39%</b> – 20% with Teacher in ECEC degree – 17% with Social Pedagogue degree – 1.8% with Special Needs Teacher degree <b>46%</b> of staff are required to have a tertiary level qualification: however, up to <b>15%</b> work as under-qualified staff (often a Childcarer as a Teacher substitute).
Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary)	n/a
Staff with specialist vocational qualification (upper secondary)	Approx. <b>52%</b>
Staff with non-specialist qualification	Small numbers, only as substitute staff
Staff without formal initial professional studies	n/a
Specialist support staff (e.g. speech therapists)	Mostly off-site
Male staff (all ECEC services)	<b>2.9%</b> <b>6.0%</b> of male employees work in ECEC administration, e.g. as Centre Leaders.
Staff with a background of migration	No systematically compiled national data.

Source: Kuusikko-työryhmä 2021; Statistics Finland 2022

## 4. Initial professional education (IPE)

### 4.1 Initial qualifying routes (higher education and vocational)

#### Teacher in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja*)

Initial professional education is provided at universities governed by the Universities Act (*Yliopistolaki* 558/2009). The law defines Finnish universities and their tasks. The Government Decree on University Degrees and Professional Specialisation Programmes (*Valtioneuvoston asetus yliopistojen tutkinnoista ja erikoistumiskoulutuksista* 794/2004) defines the scope and structure of teacher education. In addition, the regulation defines the institutions providing teacher education. Study programmes for prospective Teachers in ECEC are provided by seven universities in Finland, and in all of them, it is possible to continue studies up to a Master's degree in ECEC. Åbo Akademi and the University of Helsinki also offer IPE in Swedish (Swedish is the second official language in Finland). Two universities also provide the option of studying in English (University of Tampere and University of Turku).

Finnish universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy regarding the statutes regulating the teacher education programmes. The goal descriptions of education at different universities vary

<sup>3</sup> Personal or group assistants for children with special needs work in ECEC centres. Usually a child must have a diagnostic statement in order to be granted a personal assistant.

somewhat, but their basic ideas are quite similar (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021). The education provided at Finnish universities is based on research, including the contents and teaching methods and the evaluation and development of education. Conducting research and studying research methods are also part of teacher education (Toom, and Pyhältö 2020). University education in ECEC is carried out in close co-operation with other teacher education programmes, such as those for primary level class teachers or secondary level subject teachers.

Table 3

**Finland: Teacher in ECEC**

<p><b>Job title in Finnish:</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja</i>  <b>Profile:</b> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p>
<p><b>Entry requirements:</b> 12 years schooling + matriculation  <b>Professional studies:</b> 3 years at university, degree course in (early) education  <b>Award:</b> Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education  <b>ECTS credits:</b> 180  <b>EQF level:</b> 6  <b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6  <b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> ECEC centre, 0–6 years; pre-primary transition class, 6–7 years; ECEC planning and administration</p>

**Childcarer in ECEC** (*Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja*)

The qualifying courses to become a Childcarer in ECEC are part of vocational education/training regulated by the Act on Vocational Education and Training (*Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta* 531/2017). The law determines, among other things, the structure of awards. The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for drawing up vocational education curricula. There are two main ways to qualify as a Childcarer in ECEC:

- 1) A vocational upper secondary qualification in healthcare and social services (ECEC Nurse)
- 2) A vocational upper secondary qualification in education and guidance (Children’s Instructor).

It is also possible to fulfil the requirements through some other suitable qualification that includes or has been supplemented with adequately extensive study modules on the care, upbringing and education of children. The IPE of ECEC Nurses and Children’s Instructors (and Special Needs Assistants) can also be organised as an apprenticeship and in some cases, the first year of studies, e.g. in the IPE of ECEC Nurses, may consist entirely of workplace-based learning.

Table 4

**Finland: Childcarer in ECEC**

<p><b>Job title in Finnish:</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja</i></p>
<p><b>Route 1 – ECEC Nurse</b> (when working in ECEC centre: <i>Lähihoitaja</i>)  <b>Entry requirements:</b> 9 years comprehensive school  <b>Professional studies:</b> Approximately 3 years upper secondary vocational training in social welfare and health care (ECEC Nurse)  <b>Award:</b> Vocational Qualification in Social and Health Care  <b>ECTS credits:</b> n/a  <b>EQF level:</b> 4  <b>ISCED 2011:</b> 3  <b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> ECEC centre (0–6 years)</p>



<b>Job title in Finnish:</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja</i>
<p><b>Route 2 – Children’s Instructor</b> (<i>Lastenhoitaja</i>)</p> <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> 9 years comprehensive school</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> 3 years upper secondary vocational training at The Church Training College or corresponding training institution in Childcare and Education and Family Welfare.</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Vocational Qualification in Child Care and Education and Family Welfare</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> n/a</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 4</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 3</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> ECEC centre (0–6 years)</p>

### Social Pedagogue in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi*)

The Social Pedagogy qualification route prepares for work in different areas of the social welfare sector and with different job titles, one of which is Social Pedagogue in ECEC. Social Pedagogue training is provided in higher education institutions governed by the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (*Ammattikorkeakoululaki 932/2014*). The Government decree on universities of applied sciences (*Valtioneuvoston asetus ammattikorkeakouluista 1129/2014*) defines the scope and structure of studies. In Finland, there are 20 universities of applied sciences, 18 Finnish-language and 2 Swedish-language institutions, with study programmes for the Social Pedagogue degree (Bachelor’s Degree in Social Services). The contents of the education can be structured in different ways depending on the focus areas of the universities of applied sciences.

According to law, the degree course for Social Pedagogue in ECEC must include 60 ECTS credits that qualify for early childhood education and care (Act on Early Childhood Education 540/2018). Both the quantity and the content of ECEC studies vary considerably. The Network of Universities of Applied Sciences for Social Work in Early Childhood Education and Care has given its own recommendations on the content of the study programme (*Ammattikorkeakoulujen sosiaalialan varhaiskasvatusverkosto 29.09.2021*).

Table 5

#### Finland: Social Pedagogue in ECEC

<b>Job title in Finnish:</b> <i>Varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi</i>
<b>Profile:</b> Social Care/Welfare Professional
<p><b>Entry requirements:</b> 12 years schooling + matriculation</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> 3½ years at a university of applied sciences, degree course in social services</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Bachelor’s degree in Social Services</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> 210</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 6</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> ECEC centre, 0–6 years</p>

### Special Education Teacher in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja*)

There are two ways to qualify as a Special Education Teacher in ECEC:

- 1) Eligibility for the position of Teacher in ECEC, plus studies providing professional skills in special education, available at five universities as a one-year postgraduate course of study
- 2) Master's degree programme in Early Childhood Special Education, available at one university.

Table 6

**Finland: Special Education Teacher in ECEC**

<b>Job title in Finnish: Varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja</b>
<p><b>Route 1 – Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education + postgraduate award in special education</b></p> <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> 3 years of undergraduate studies (Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education) and 2 years of work experience as a Teacher in ECEC</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> 1-year postgraduate university study route in special education in early childhood</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Postgraduate award in special education</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> 240 (180+60)</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 6</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> Segregated (exclusively for children with special needs) and integrated (children with special needs integrated in mainstream ECEC settings)<sup>4</sup> groups in ECEC centres or posts in mainstream groups in ECEC centres, consultative work in ECEC services; ECEC administration and planning.</p> <p><b>Route 2 – Master’s Degree Programme in Early Childhood Special Education</b></p> <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> 3 years of undergraduate studies</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> 2 years at university, Master’s degree course in (early childhood) special education</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Master’s degree, Special Education in ECEC</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> 300 (180+120)</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 7</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 7</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> Segregated (exclusively for children with special needs) and integrated (children with special needs integrated in mainstream ECEC settings) groups in ECEC centres or posts in mainstream groups in ECEC centres, consultative work in ECEC services; ECEC administration and planning.</p>

## 4.2 Competences, curricula and pedagogic-didactic approaches in IPE programmes

### Teacher in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja*)

**Competency specifications:**

At the end of the study programme students are expected to:

- Understand childhood as part of cultural diversity
- Understand the growth and development of children as a holistic social and cultural process
- Be able to look at children’s growth, development and learning from several different perspectives
- Be able to look at the holistic learning environment of children and make use of new technology
- Be familiar with the aims, contents and methods of public early childhood education and pre-school education

<sup>4</sup> Early education for children with special needs is mainly provided in mainstream settings (inclusive education)



- Be able to analyse, evaluate and develop phenomena related to early childhood education on a research basis.

**Curricular areas:** (1) Language and communication studies; (2) Basic studies in education; (3) Intermediate studies in education; (4) Content/subject areas in early childhood education; (5) Optional subjects (see *Box 2* for details). Through bilateral contracts, students can study for part of the degree at a university in another country, e.g. through the ERASMUS programme or the NORDPLUS student exchange programmes (University of Helsinki 2022a).

For the preparation of the Teacher in ECEC study programme at the University of Helsinki (see *Box 2*); representatives of municipalities, as the largest employers in the ECEC sector, were consulted (University of Helsinki 2022b).

#### Box 2

#### Finland: Curricular areas, Teacher in ECEC study programme, University of Helsinki (2022b<sup>5</sup>)

##### (1) Language and communication studies (15 ECTS credits)

*Native language, usually:*

Academic writing (Finnish)(2 ECTS credits)

Communication and interpersonal skills (Finnish) (1 ECTS credit)

*Other national language, usually:*

Oral skills in the second national language, Swedish (CEFR B1<sup>6</sup>) (2 ECTS credits)

Written skills in the second national language, Swedish (CEFR B1) (1 ECTS credit)

*Foreign language, usually:*

Academic and professional communication in English 1 & 2 (CEFR B2) (4 ECTS credits)

Student's digital skills (3 ECTS credits)

Teacherhood and communication (2 ECTS credits)

Personal study plan (0 ECTS credits)

##### (2) Education, basic studies (25 ECTS credits)

Social, cultural and philosophical foundations of education (5 ECTS credits)\*

Psychology of learning and development (5 ECTS credits)\*

Planning, implementation and assessment of teaching I (2 ECTS credits)\*

Planning, implementation and assessment of teaching in ECEC I (3 ECTS credits)\*

Toddler pedagogy (5 ECTS credits)

##### (3) Education, intermediate studies (45 ECTS credits )

Support for learning and wellbeing (5 ECTS credits)\*

Planning, implementation and assessment of teaching II (5 ECTS credits)\*

Integrated practice (8 ECTS credits)\*

Advanced practice period (7 ECTS credits)\*

Qualitative research methods I (5 ECTS credits)

Quantitative research methods I (5 ECTS credits)

Bachelor's thesis (10 ECTS credits)

Maturity test (in Finnish), Bachelor's degree (0 ECTS credits)

##### (4) Studies providing professional readiness for work in institutional early childhood education and preschool education (60 ECTS credits)

Preschool and elementary education (5 ECTS credits)

Activity learning in early childhood education (5 ECTS credits)

The diversity of development and early childhood special education (5 ECTS credits)

Mathematics pedagogy (5 ECTS credits)

Environmental education and primary science (5 ECTS credits)

Pedagogy of language and interaction (5 ECTS credits)

<sup>5</sup> Curriculum for Early Education Teacher training (180 ECTS) in 2020–2023. The new curriculum came into effect in the fall of 2023.

<sup>6</sup> CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, levels of language proficiency





Moral education and worldview education (5 ECTS credits)  
Children's literature and drama (5 ECTS credits)  
Visual arts education (5 ECTS credits)  
Music education (5 ECTS credits)  
Pedagogy of craft (5 ECTS credits)  
Pedagogy of physical education (5 ECTS credits)

(5) **Optional study modules 35 ECTS credits** (e.g. special education or pre-primary and early primary years education)

\*PST = Pedagogical Studies for Teachers (35 ECTS credits)<sup>7</sup>

### Childcarer in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja*)

A Childcarer in ECEC is qualified in the vocational training sector, most commonly as either an ECEC Nurse or a Children's Instructor. Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for guiding the content of these qualification routes (Act on Vocational Education and Training 531/2017).

A special feature of vocational training is the individualisation of studies. A competence development plan is prepared for the student, which takes into account, among other things, the previously acquired competence. Completion of vocational training is based on the skills demonstrated in practical work situations. It is also characteristic of vocational education to complete studies as an apprenticeship training, in which case the student acquires competence in the workplace in connection with practical work tasks and the training provider is responsible for other possible training content (Act on Vocational Education and Training 531/2017).

In vocational training, the scope and depth of studies are described in terms of competence points. If the internationally used ECTS credit equals approximately 27 hours of work input, a competency point equals approximately 15 hours of input. The scope of the vocational award at upper secondary level is 180 competence points. The duration of the training is individual, with a maximum duration of approximately 3 years.

- **ECEC Nurse (*Lähihoitaja*)**

An ECEC Nurse who has graduated in the field of education and care of children and young people is able to promote the child's growth, wellbeing and learning, as well as the health and wellbeing of children, adolescents and families. The ECEC Nurse award consists of common parts of the course (5 competence points) and professional parts of the course (145 competence points). The student must include optional modules to the extent of 15 competence points. The common parts of the course are: (1) Communication and Interaction Competence, (2) Mathematical Science Competence, and (3) Social and Working Life Competence. The professional parts of the degree are: (1) Promoting Growth and Participation, (2) Promoting Wellbeing and Functional Capacity, (3) Promoting the Child's Growth, Wellbeing and Learning, and 4) Promoting the Health and Wellbeing of the Child, Adolescent and Family. In addition, the award includes optional modules (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018a).

- **Children's Instructor (*Lastenhojaaja*)**

The Children's Instructor has acquired the versatile skills required for guidance, education and communication tasks, as well as good communication skills. The Children's Instructor has the

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<sup>7</sup> Teachers working in comprehensive (primary/secondary) schools, as well as in other educational institutions, are required to have 60 ECTS points in *Pedagogical Studies for Teachers* of which 35 ECTS points can be taken in the Bachelor's degree course for Teacher in ECEC.





ability to take into account the guidance and support needs of people from different backgrounds and ages. The course consists of four compulsory modules (105–110 competence points) and optional degree modules (35–40 competence points). The compulsory parts of the degree are: (1) Professional Encounter, Education and Guidance, (2) Promotion of the Child's Growth, Wellbeing and Learning, (3) Implementation of Pedagogical Activities in ECEC, and (4) Working with Families and Multidisciplinary Cooperation (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018b).

### **Social Pedagogue in ECEC** (*Varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi*)

#### **Competency specifications:**

The study programme is based on the following principles:

- Empowering citizens
- Preventing marginalisation and promoting inclusion and social pluralism
- Promoting social participation, equality and wellbeing in society.

#### **Curricular areas:**

The following study units at the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (2020) form the early childhood education track in the Social Pedagogue IPE programme (60 ECTS credits):

- Childhood growth and development (5 ECTS credits)
- Everyday life of families and children in Finnish society (5 ECTS credits)
- Individual and community counselling (5 ECTS credits)
- Supporting daily life through socio-pedagogical work plus first internship (15 ECTS credits)
- Child protection (5 ECTS credits)
- Special needs support in early education (5 ECTS credits)
- Early education (20 ECTS credits)
- Work placement in ECEC setting (20 ECTS credits)
- Thesis (15 ECTS credits).

### **Special Education Teacher in ECEC** (*Varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja*)

#### **Competency specifications:**

Psychosocial factors such as learning how to utilise play, how to support peer interaction and how to recognise children's needs and respond to them as well as pedagogical sensitivity are abilities that are achieved in the Special Education Teacher's education programme at the University of Helsinki. Studies are based on an ecological framework of early interventions which are considered to be not only individual support for the child with special needs, but also impact on every child's action and behaviour by boosting children's strengths and finding new courses of action in unfamiliar or challenging situations. Furthermore, after graduating, the students are expected to understand the considerable impact of physical environmental factors in ECEC (play materials, schedules, daily structuring of the programme) on children's development and learning.

#### **Curricular areas:**

The postgraduate course in Special Education (early childhood) at the University of Helsinki focuses on basic studies in special education (25 ECTS credits), Children's behaviour, wellbeing and interaction (10 ECTS credits), Learning support (20 ECTS credits), and Professional growth (10 ECTS credits) (see Box 3 for details) (University of Helsinki 2022c).



**Finland: Curricular areas, Special Needs Teacher Education, University of Helsinki (2022c)****Basic studies in special education (25 ECTS credits)<sup>8</sup>**

- Introduction to Finnish special education
- Marginalisation and mental health
- Special educational needs
- Learning disabilities
- Scientific thinking in the context of education

**Theme 1. Behaviour, wellbeing and interaction (10 ECTS credits)**

- Communication and perception
- Challenges in behaviour

**Theme 2. Learning support (20 ECTS credits)**

- Brain and learning
- In-depth special education
- Reading skills and reading difficulties
- Mathematical learning difficulties

**Theme 3. Professional growth (10 ECTS credits)**

- Special Needs Teacher as a researcher
- Special education practice

### 4.3 Alternative entry and qualification routes, system permeability

In Finland, competence requirements are based on formal qualifications. Legislation defines eligibility requirements for all ECEC professional titles with the exception of the Special Needs Assistant. On the other hand, the Assistant is not included in the ratio of children to staff. However, in upper secondary level vocational training (here referring to ECEC Nurses, Children's Instructors and Special Needs Assistants), there is an alternative qualification route, i.e. a fully competence-based qualification system. This offers the possibility of completing a vocational qualification partially or wholly through a demonstration of vocational skills which are then considered equal to the regular qualification.

There are no formal barriers between vocational training and tertiary level education. For example, after completing the qualification route to become an ECEC Nurse it is possible to apply for a place in tertiary level education. However, the training programmes of vocational schools and universities of applied sciences, such as that for the registered ECEC Nurse or the Social Pedagogue in ECEC, are more general than university degree programmes. For example, a graduate Social Pedagogue can work in family work, child protection, youth work, school welfare work, adult social work, criminal sanctions, substance abuse and mental health work, disability work, special upbringing, elderly work, multicultural work – or in ECEC.

<sup>8</sup> Basic studies in special education (25 ECTS credits) must be completed before entering the Special Education Teacher's study programme. However, only 20 ECTS credits are counted. Thus, the sum total of ECTS credits of the whole study programme is 60 ECTS credits.

## 5. Guided workplace experience (practicum) in the initial professional education of core professionals

### Teacher in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja*)

**Time allocated to field-based studies:** Field-based studies refer to practical placement periods in ECEC settings, including pre-primary classes. The term refers to structured and supervised studies and is preferred to the term ‘workplace-based learning’, which could be interpreted as just being in an authentic workplace setting and assisting centre staff. The time allocated to field-based studies in the Teacher in ECEC degree programmes at Finnish universities varies between 7% and 11%, which amounts to between 12 and 20 ECTS credits out of a total of 180 ECTS credits. Most commonly, the field-based element accounts for 15 ECTS credits (Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, and Kalliala 2015).

**Content focus in field-based studies:** At the University of Helsinki<sup>9</sup>, each field-based period has its own character and goals. *Integrative practice* (8 ECTS credits) focuses on the planning, implementing and evaluation of early childhood education, in particular on developing skills and reflective competences in the core content areas of early childhood education (e.g. drama and physical education, music, nature and mathematics). *Final practice* (7 ECTS credits) aims at developing the holistic responsibility of the student with respect to planning, implementing and evaluating work in the ECEC centre, including working with parents. In addition, the student becomes acquainted with administration and working as a member of multi-professional teams and networks. Field-based periods are carried out in collaboration between two students, in which case the student receives peer feedback in addition to the supervising Teacher in ECEC and university lecturer.

Alongside the field-based periods in ECEC settings, students plan, carry out and observe different kinds of pedagogical sessions with children in a campus-based classroom that has been constructed especially for visiting groups of children at the University of Helsinki. Students also visit ECEC centres beyond the placement periods, e.g. during physical education courses, and organise various activities for children. Students also receive supervision from university lecturers when carrying out these activities. The professional identity of the Teacher in ECEC (including eight hours of observation in ECEC centres) is treated as a part of *Planning, Implementation and Assessment of Teaching I* course during the first academic year. The students spend two mornings (three hours each) and one whole day (six hours) in ECEC settings observing the pedagogical activities carried out by the Teacher in ECEC and their professional role. The observation is reported and discussed with other students and the university lecturer.

**Structure of field-based studies and mentoring support:** The Teacher in ECEC supervisor has a key position in helping students to develop their skills and construct their theory-in-use. It is also considered important that the university lecturer be very familiar with the field of ECEC. Consequently, in ideal cases, the educational background of the university lecturer who supervises student teachers should include an ECEC teaching qualification (Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, and Kalliala 2015).

Close cooperation with municipalities (ECEC administration) is exercised, particularly in the case of the field-based study periods. At the University of Helsinki, a network of placement centres

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<sup>9</sup> The University of Helsinki has been used here as an example because it has the largest Teacher Education Department in Finland, taking in 140 Teacher in ECEC students each academic year (exceptional years: 2020: 200 students; 2021: 220 students; 2022: 260 students, 2023: 200 students).



was established in 1996 based on officially ratified contracts between municipalities in the metropolitan area. The consistent and goal-oriented education of field supervisors (5 ECTS credits), conducted by the University of Helsinki, has been an essential part of strengthening the coherence of the network. Furthermore, Teacher supervisors/mentors are invited to the university at the beginning of each field-based period. Once a year, a symposium on field-based studies brings together participants from the entire teacher education department (i.e. including the study programme for school teachers), the cooperating schools and ECEC centres, to reflect on current developments.

The 'double supervision model' – where the student receives feedback and guidance from both an experienced teacher in the field and from a university lecturer – depends on there being a sufficient number of motivated supervisors. The aim of collaboration between ECEC centres and the university is to create a new kind of learning community (Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, and Kalliala 2015).

**Recent reforms, trends and debates:** In Finland, co-operation has been launched between six universities offering Teacher in ECEC education with a focus on developing teaching practice guidance in changing learning environments in Early Childhood Teacher Education. The OHOSKE (2022) network is supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and it develops the supervisory competences of teacher education in ECEC and brings together national and international research data on supervisory competences and their development in changing learning environments, besides clarifying the goals and contents. The network organises supervisory training and seminars, and produces supervision materials for use in teacher education programmes. The network develops supervisory skills related to early childhood teacher education in the initial and continuing professional education of early childhood education teachers and teacher educators. The network includes local development groups and covers early childhood teacher students, teachers in kindergartens, teacher educators, municipal actors and researchers in the field.

### **Childcarer in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen lastenhoitaja*)**

The vocational education and training of a Childcarer in ECEC always includes on-the-job learning in Finland or abroad, and competence is usually assessed in working life. The length and extent of workplace periods vary according to the student's personal study plan, averaging 30 competence points out of 120 competence points. It is also possible to complete the studies in a workplace-based learning manner in the form of apprenticeship training.

### **Social Pedagogue in ECEC (*Varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomi*)**

Workplace-based learning (*internship*) within the IPE of Social Pedagogues is allocated at least 45 ECTS credits. At the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, for example, students who have decided that they want to work in ECEC conduct their first (5 ECTS credits) and third internship (20 ECTS credits) in an ECEC setting. Quality is enhanced by developing the guidelines and support for theory-based professional reflection, which is conducted by tutors and Teachers supervising students during their internships. There is an ECEC centre internship network in the metropolitan area of Helsinki for the students of Metropolia and the supervisors are trained twice a year. Either a Teacher or a Social Pedagogue in the ECEC centre guides students in their internship. One challenge is that many of the students choose to do the internship working as supply staff, without a supervising teacher in the same team. That limits the possibilities of peer learning and pedagogical reflection. Tutors at Metropolia are working to solve this challenge and recommend internship as a student, not as a staff member. Since there are approximately 20



institutions offering study programmes for Social Pedagogues, duration and content of the field-based learning element of IPE vary considerably.

## 6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

The CPD of ECEC staff is included in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). The organiser or provider of ECEC must ensure that the ECEC staff participate sufficiently in CPD activities that maintain and develop their professional skills. In addition, the implementation and effectiveness of CPD are to be monitored and evaluated. The Ministry of Education and Culture regularly issues detailed instructions on the content, amount, organisation, monitoring and evaluation of continuing professional development (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018).

The Finnish National Agency for Education organises state-funded CPD for staff through the acquisition of training offers from municipalities, associations of municipalities, registered communities and foundations, universities and universities of applied sciences. In cooperation with the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the Finnish National Agency for Education collects information on the CPD needs of staff and determines the content to be offered. According to the summary of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC 2021), the needs for education in ECEC focus on art education, toddler pedagogy, leadership of pedagogy, assessment skills and curriculum knowledge. In 2019, slightly more than 15% of ECEC staff participated in CPD offers organised by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The number of participants decreased by almost 10% from the previous year due to the pandemic (Finnish National Agency for Education n.d.).

In addition to CPD courses provided by Finnish National Agency for Education, many other courses are available for ECEC staff. The Development Forum of ECEC Training programme for 2021–2023 identifies challenges related to continuing professional learning. Finding out the training needs of ECEC personnel needs to be enhanced and the organisation and planning of CPD strengthened. There are also many different providers of CPD, and there are no nationally agreed criteria for the quality of training, which makes it difficult to assess the quality of the offers. In addition, staff access to CPD is limited in terms of lack of resources and suitable offers. The Development Forum therefore proposes the development of a comprehensive system of CPD in terms of funding, quality, providers, planning and evaluation. Development work is also required to ensure availability and participation. In addition, the development programme recommends strengthening the continuity between pre-service and in-service training (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021).

Changes in Finnish ECEC have increased the need for CPD. According to the FINEEC report (Repo et al. 2019), more than 40% of ECEC professionals and ECEC Centre Heads felt that they needed further training to implement the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy. About 70% of the staff had already participated in CPD related to the ECEC curriculum or pedagogy during the years 2016–2018. More than 50% of the respondents (n=1,642) found participation in CPD useful from the point of view of implementing the ECEC curriculum (Repo et al. 2019).

## 7. Working conditions and current workforce issues

### 7.1 Remuneration

In Finland, salaries for Teachers in ECEC (ISCED 01 and ISCED 02) are about 9% below the OECD average. In contrast, salaries in primary and secondary education are higher than the OECD average. Although the salary level of teachers everywhere typically improves the higher the level of education, in Finland the change from one stage to another is greater than the average. In OECD countries, the average salary level for upper secondary school teachers is about 17% higher after 15 years of work than in ECEC, whereas it is almost 50% higher in Finland (Haapamäki et al. 2021, 17).

Part of the reason for the unfavourable salary development of Teachers as well as Special Education Teachers in ECEC has been in the bargaining sector, which was unsuitable for teachers. The Teachers' salary has traditionally been agreed in a collective agreement with the rest of the municipal sector. After years of contract negotiations, all Teachers in ECEC were transferred to the collective agreement in the field of education as of September 1, 2021 (Local Government and County Employers KT 2021). From the perspective of the Teachers in ECEC profession, this can be seen as the ultimate integration of early childhood education into the education system. The working conditions of other personnel in ECEC are agreed in connection with a collective agreement with the rest of the municipal sector.

In the spring of 2022, a significant collective agreement was reached in the municipal sector, including the education sector, on the basis of which the salary level of ECEC staff will be increased by a total of about 5% between 2022 and 2025. In addition, the duties of the Centre Leader and the Deputy Leader were clarified and the remuneration was increased (OAJ 2022a). The salary programme includes all teachers, which is why the salary gap between Teachers in ECEC and other groups of teachers will continue to grow in the future.

### 7.2 Full-time and part-time employment in ECEC provision

The regular working time of ECEC personnel is a maximum of 9 hours a day, and in the municipal sector 38 hours 15 minutes a week or in private ECEC centres 38 hours 20 minutes a week. Less than 8% of ECEC personnel work part-time.

### 7.3 Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified and newly appointed staff

Collegial support has proved to be vital for teachers who have full teaching responsibility from the very beginning of their career (Onnismaa et al. 2016). Various forms of induction support in the field of education have been discussed and induction training for both Teachers and Centre Leaders has been recommended in reports (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021; Siippainen et al. 2021).

A peer-group mentoring project for recently graduated Teachers in ECEC started in collaboration between the City of Helsinki and the University of Helsinki in 2014. In the first phase of the project, university lecturers trained 25 peer mentors and the first mentoring groups started in autumn 2014. Teachers in ECEC and Social Pedagogues working as teachers participated in peer-mentoring groups, which have been adopted as a regular working method in ECEC services in the city of Helsinki. Teachers' peer group mentoring draws on the ideas developed in the *Finnish*



*Network for Teacher Induction* (2016)<sup>10</sup> (Onnismaa et al. 2016) and is described here as an example. There are various forms of induction support and orientation to work in municipalities but no common policy so far.

The city of Helsinki continues to invest in mentoring and aims to alleviate the acute shortage of teachers. The mentoring system has also been extended to Centre Leaders and Deputy Leaders in Helsinki. Since many Centre Leaders will retire in the near future, peer group mentoring is expected to be an efficient way to support younger staff in leadership positions when they start working in their new post. Other municipalities have also developed induction measures for recently qualified Teachers as a measure to increase job commitment and improve occupational health.

#### 7.4 Non-contact time

According to the nationwide collective agreement, approximately 13% (about five hours per week) of a Teacher in ECEC's working time should be allocated for non-contact time. This time is devoted to the planning, evaluation and development of pedagogical activities, the preparation of pedagogical plans and the evaluation and development of the pedagogical work of a multi-professional work community. In addition to this so-called planning, assessment and development time, the Teacher in ECEC must be given sufficient non-contact time for cooperative tasks such as cooperating with parents or other professionals. Team discussions and staff meetings require some non-contact time for all team members, including Social Pedagogues, Childcarers and Assistants (Local Government and County Employers KT 2022). In 2021, the Trade Union of Education in Finland (*Opetusalan ammattijärjestö*, OAJ 2022b) collected data on the implementation of non-contact time in ECEC. Teachers had an average of only four hours to plan, evaluate and develop ECEC; meaning that the five hours specified in the agreement are often not met. On the other hand, the amount of time devoted to other forms of cooperation had increased (OAJ 2022b).

#### 7.5 Current staffing issues

In Finland, there is a nationwide shortage of Teachers in ECEC. According to a report by Keva (2021), there is currently a shortage of more than 4,000 Teachers. The retirement rate will be high over the next 10 years, with 26.4% of Teachers in ECEC working in municipalities retiring. The Ministry of Education and Culture has supported universities in increasing the number of students in Teacher in ECEC training and in launching development projects related to teacher education. These initiatives aim to reach the level of more than 1,000 new Teachers in ECEC students per year (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021, 92, 99). The calculations in the Government's proposal on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) estimate that

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<sup>10</sup> *Osaava Verme* is a collaborative network between the Finnish teacher education institutions, including the vocational teacher education institutions and teacher education departments of universities. The main goal is to develop and disseminate the peer-group mentoring model (PGM) to support new teachers. Peer-group mentoring (PGM), known in Finland by the acronym *verme*, is a Finnish approach to supporting new teachers in their early career. PGM brings new teachers together to share and reflect on their experiences and to discuss the day-to-day problems and challenges they face. The method was piloted by the funding of the Finnish Work Environmental Fund in 2008–10 and is being continuously developed by The Finnish Network for Teacher Induction 'Osaava Verme'. PGM groups usually meet once a month to discuss work-related issues. The PGM approach draws on the constructivist view of learning, which maintains constructing knowledge is based on prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. Peer discussion is therefore an essential element in creating shared understanding of the work of teachers (Finnish Network for Teacher Induction 'Osaava Verme' 2016).



by 2030 the number of Teachers in ECEC in training will be sufficient, if the enrolment in universities is about 1,000 new entrants per year and the rate of completion is 80%. From 2022 onwards, no separate budget has been allocated for funding the raising of degree targets for Teachers in ECEC, but the increase for education will be implemented as part of the basic funding model for universities (Government's proposal 40/2018).

The challenges of attraction and retention are generally recognised in public sector jobs in Finland. Concerning the ECEC workforce, this has been highlighted in research and has provoked a lot of discussion in the media. The challenge is to keep ECEC personnel in their jobs, but especially to recruit recently graduated Teachers to commit to their work. Research shows that a high proportion of ECEC staff consider quitting the ECEC profession (44–62%), and Teachers' intentions to leave profession are higher (62%) than in other personnel groups (Heilala et al. 2022). Based on the research, according to the Teachers' perceptions the main reasons for the challenges of the sector's attraction and retention power are in salary and human resources. Remuneration is attached to the idea of valuing work. Personnel resources, on the other hand, are a result of the Teacher shortage and the ripple effect it creates. As an equation, these raise the question of the economic intensification of ECEC services (Kangas et al. 2022). Efforts have been made to raise wages through local agreements, and in the spring of 2022, the national wage negotiations guaranteed public sector personnel a salary increase of about 5% in the years 2022–2025 (OAJ 2022a). At the end of 2021, the Minister of Education started a report on the challenges of ECEC staffing and, based on the report, to guarantee adequate staffing by improving the legislation. The most significant of these are the notification obligation of the staff regarding non-compliance with the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and refinements to early childhood education personnel sizing (540/2018).

## 8. Recent policy reforms and initiatives relating to staffing and professionalisation issues

In order to support the implementation of the transition phase of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, an ECEC Training Development Forum (*Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisforumi*) was established in the spring of 2019 by the Minister of Education and Culture. The first term of the Forum lasted up to the end of 2020. At that time, the aim was to develop cooperation between ECEC settings, IPE institutions and training courses and to draw up a development programme at the national level for 2021–2030 (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021).

The second term of the Development Forum began in the autumn of 2021 and continued until the end of 2023. The objectives of the second term are to:

- Promote co-operation between different levels of professional education and training for ECEC staff and ECEC providers
- Monitor the implementation, development and change processes of ECEC
- Monitor and promote national and international educational research
- Support the implementation of the Act on Early Childhood Education Care in matters related to professional education and promote the implementation of the personnel structure specified in the Act
- Improve the attractiveness of ECEC and the whole field of work among students and applicants for education through active information. (Ministry of Education and Culture n.d.)



## 9. Recent country-specific research focusing on ECEC staff

### Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECEC staff

**Source:** Gillberg, Susanna, and Inkeri Ruokonen 2022 (see *References* for further details)

**Aims:** The aim of this study is to provide information on how ECEC staff perceived the measures taken in ECEC centres in March–June 2020, especially from the perspective of the work community and changes in work tasks.

**Methods:** The research data were collected through an online survey by the Helsinki Kindergarten Museum. In addition to background information, it was possible to answer ten open-ended questions in the survey, of which five were selected for analysis in the study. 587 ECEC employees from different parts of Finland answered the survey between March 26 and June 30, 2020. The collected data were analysed using the principles of data-driven qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** The experiences of ECEC staff about the exceptional period varied. In some work communities the unprecedented situation was dealt with mainly through the distribution of official bulletins, while in other work communities a joint discussion was felt to be important. During this exceptional period, ECEC staff had more time to focus, for example, on recording ECEC plans and organising the learning environment. Changes were also reported in pedagogy, and some ECEC centres began to provide so-called distant ECEC, although there were no general guidelines or tools for it. The exceptional circumstances caused by the COVID-19 virus can be seen as a crisis for the work community in ECEC centres. Centre heads play a key role in dealing with such crises, and the research highlights the issues and measures staff would have needed in terms of support.

**Implications:** Seen positively, a time of crisis may highlight the opportunities and challenges of ECEC. In this study the need to develop operating methods related to ECEC pedagogy and steering in times of crisis came up and need also to be considered at the administrative level.

### Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on heads of ECEC units

**Source:** Nurhonen, Linda, Heidi Chydenius, and Lasse Lipponen 2021 (see *References* for further details)

**Aims:** The aim of the report was to provide information on the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on ECEC for three groups: heads of ECEC units, children and guardians. The heads of the ECEC units were a particular focus of the study. Previous research on the management of ECEC in times of crisis is scarce. Therefore, the study sought to highlight the views of the heads of ECEC units about the support they needed and received, as well as the potential burden of the exceptional period.

**Methods:** The research data consisted of a survey and interviews with the heads of the ECEC units. The survey was prepared and carried out in cooperation with the University of Helsinki's Centre for Educational Assessment (CEA). The response period for the survey was from 1 February 2021 to 28 February 2021. 679 people from 120 municipalities responded to the survey. Interviews with heads of ECEC units were conducted in November–December 2020 via remote connections. 23 heads of ECEC units participated in the interview.

**Results:** The results of the study showed that the workload of heads of ECEC units increased during a pandemic and the job image changed. In the work of the head, more emphasis was placed on personnel management, work organisation and work related to COVID-19 instructions. The workload for heads of ECEC units increased so that there was not enough time left for

pedagogical leadership. According to the results, well-functioning and well-established leadership structures supported managers' resilience, job absorption and developmental work.

**Implications:** The crisis brought out the importance of management structures and the possibilities and competence needs of using digital devices in ECEC as well as need to better prepare for future crises at the administrative level.

### Staff structure and expertise in ECEC

**Source:** Ukkonen-Mikkola, Tuulikki, Raija Yliniemi, and Outi Wallin 2020 (see *References* for further details)

**Aims:** The aim of the research was to find out the significance of the change in the expertise of ECEC personnel and to identify the expertise of different professional groups in the teams piloting the new personnel structure.

**Methods:** Second-year ECEC student teachers (n = 19), supervising Teachers in ECEC (n = 14) and education teachers (n = 7) took part in the study. The qualitative action research data consisted of staff diaries, development plans and group interviews. Discourse analysis was utilised in the analysis of the data.

**Results:** Three discourses related to the change in expertise were identified: discourses of powerlessness, development, and the best interests of the child. In addition, Teachers positioned themselves responsible for the team's pedagogical activities and promoting children's learning. Compared to Teachers, the position of Social Pedagogues was based more on shared responsibility for team action. In addition, the Social Pedagogues' expertise focused on taking care of the child's overall wellbeing and interests. The expertise of a third professional group, Childcarers as team members, was built on caring and looking after children.

**Implications:** It can be concluded that relational expertise and common knowledge is built in the context of initial professional education. Recognising relational expertise strengthens the collaborative work of different professional groups and should be taken into account in the IPE programmes.

### Challenges and opportunities in ECEC

**Source:** Kangas, Jonna, Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola, Katja Sirvio, Hanna Hjelt, and Elina Fonsén 2022 (see *References* for further details)

**Aims:** The aim of the research is to find out what kind of challenges Teachers face in ECEC work and what kind of development proposals Teachers present to their work.

**Methods:** The research was carried out as a survey and targeted Teachers who have made the decision to change careers or who are considering it. 469 Teachers who work or have worked as Teachers in ECEC answered the survey. The data was analysed with a multi-method approach. Factor analysis was used to summarise the most important work challenges, such as the lack of appreciation and the decrease in the meaning of work. Development possibilities were examined through both societal and unit-specific factors.

**Results:** The Teachers in ECEC felt that they were in control of the new requirements of the job, but the unit-specific working conditions were felt to make the implementation of the work challenging. From a societal point of view, improving pay emerged as the most critical job development target.

**Implications:** The organisers of ECEC services have woken up to the challenges arising from the shortage of ECEC professionals and are striving at least to some extent to improve issues related to the attractiveness of the profession. Research supports the identification of these factors.



## Conceptual changes in multi-professional teamwork in Finnish ECEC over time (2002-2022)

**Source:** Karila, Kirsti, and Päivi Kupila 2023 (*see References* for further details)

**Aims:** The article analyses the theoretical, practical, and political interpretations of multi-professional teamwork in Finnish ECEC during the years 2002–2022.

**Methods:** The research was carried out using a semi-systematic approach to provide an overview of teams, teamwork, team composition, and multi-professionalism in Finnish ECEC. The data consisted of 1) key policy documents that regulate or guide multi-professional teamwork and 2) a systematic literature review of multi-professional teamwork in Finnish research studies. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis.

**Results:** The results were constructed in a narrative timeline, which indicates two main themes regarding multi-professional teamwork in Finnish ECEC: 1) an emphasis on multi-professional teamwork as a resource combined with the challenges in implementing it, and 2) an emphasis on pedagogy and the clarification of professional profiles.

**Implications:** The research indicates that the discussion around multi-professional teamwork in Finnish ECEC should move in the direction of building a shared understanding about the responsibilities and division of labour of different professional groups. The researchers consider that more development projects and studies are needed to develop the practices of a multi-professional team that enable the team members to use their own competences and qualifications for the benefit of children attending ECEC.

## 10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

Massive changes have been taking place in the Finnish ECEC system over the past ten years. Prior to that, the development of ECEC had been limited and, as an example, the same law guided the Finnish ECEC system for about 40 years. Since 2013, the Ministry of Education and Culture has turned the development direction of ECEC away from social welfare towards the education system. The significant challenge for the workforce is the **change in the paradigm of ECEC** and its effects on the staff structure and the operating culture of ECEC. The inclusion of ECEC in the education system requires the reconstruction and reorganisation of the entire system. ECEC development work has been carried out systematically at the administrative level, but the implementation of change in ECEC practices is slow and challenging. It seems that there is a strong effort to develop the quality of ECEC, but the practical implementation of ECEC is not developing at the same pace. The development work is met with both acceptance as well as resistance and fears among various occupational groups of ECEC.

The biggest challenge in changing the ECEC system is the **lack of trained Teachers in ECEC**. Under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finnish ECEC personnel focused on staff members with a qualification in social and health care. In addition, the number of teacher trainees was not monitored and the training capacities were insufficient. As a result, about half of those working with the job title of Teacher in ECEC have completed a degree in social work. According to Statistics Finland, in the past ten years (2010–2021), the number of people who have received a “Teacher in ECEC” qualification with a Bachelor in Social Services has doubled in ECEC (n= approx. 3,000 → 6,000). At the same time, the number of teachers with a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education has remained the same (n= approx. 6,500) (Statistics Finland 2023).

The number of people trained in the social sector has not been able to prevent the teacher shortage in ECEC. However, the course of development has led to shortcomings in pedagogical quality, which is stated in FINEEC's report (Repo et al. 2019).

The shortage of Teachers in ECEC has been addressed through, among other things, increased university student intake as well as the provision of various forms of multiform teacher training. However, the challenges of recruitment and retention in the ECEC sector reduce the motivation to engage with the field and the professionals' commitment to the work.

The job description of Social Pedagogues is also unresolved in the field of ECEC. Due to ambiguities related to the division of labour, the **struggle between professional groups** and their unions continues.

Finnish ECEC has been purposefully developed in the direction indicated by the OECD, among others, during recent years, and it seems that the Finnish ECEC system is now strongly connected to the education system. However, this direction of development is not complete in all respects. The skills gap in ECEC is slowing down and challenging the **implementation of change**, and a certain group of policy makers sees the loosening of eligibility criteria as a quick solution to the trouble. There is a particularly strong lobbying for the restoration of the qualification of Social Pedagogues to work as Teachers in ECEC. However, Social Pedagogues are educated in the social welfare field, so from the point of view of the development of the education system, teacher education provides a stronger foundation for a Teacher's work. Global crises, which are weakening Finland's economic situation, also challenge political decision-making and produce pressure to cut costs, which brings its own challenges to the national development of ECEC.

Finland needs to stick to the direction of development it has chosen regarding ECEC. It is disquieting to note that the 2023-2027 government programme includes a proposal to relax the eligibility criteria for ECEC Centre Leaders. The state administration should not choose quick solutions to solve problems that weaken the quality of ECEC. In order to further develop ECEC in Finnish society, the need to reform the legislation in such a way that early childhood education and care and pre-primary education would be legislatively linked together is being increasingly discussed. Along with a law reform, changing pre-primary education from one to two years is seen as the next step in the development of Finnish ECEC.

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