

CHAPTER 14

Supervising Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland

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Abstract

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care takes a stand on premises, learning environment, qualification of personnel, aims, quality assessment, and supervision. Pursuant to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a national regulation that provides guidelines for the national steering of ECEC. On a governmental level, supervision is very important when it comes to management, and in addition to that, assessment and supervision of the supervisory authorities are a part of the ECEC director's tasks. Supervision is a part of strategic leadership. From the beginning of the year 2020, the Regional State Administrative Agency has implemented a supervision programme in which the focus is to check that there is adequate staffing throughout the day. There is a systematic sampling of children's and personnel's presence in early education centres of the municipal ECEC. By examining the adult-child ratios, senior officers in the Regional State Administrative Agency judge if the situation is satisfac-

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tory. The study was conducted to see whether municipalities are complying with the law. A low ratio affects the quality of early childhood education and care. The supervisory authority may issue an admonition for future operations to the organiser of ECEC. The sampling is ongoing, but the results so far show that municipal ECEC follows the ratio very well. During 2020, the Regional State Administrative Agencies supervised 1596 municipal day care centres. The adult–child ratio overrun percentage was only 0.45 per cent.

Keywords: municipal early childhood education, supervision programme, adult–child ratio, the Regional State Administrative Agency

Introduction and Background

In Finland, many changes have occurred in recent years concerning early childhood education and care (ECEC). The management of ECEC was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Culture and Education from the beginning of 2013. On 1 August 2015, a new law—the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care—came into force. This has resulted in some changes. For example, the adult–child ratio was lowered (‘fewer adults per children’) from 1:7 to 1:8 in groups of children aged 3 and over (Government Decree on Early Childhood Education, 753/2018). In addition, the child’s right to ECEC was limited to 20 hours per week.

In Finland, the law relating to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 2015 was totally updated in 2018, and it came into force on 1 September (Act on ECEC, 540/2018). Subsequently there have been small changes. On the 1 August 2020, the adult–child ratio (1 adult to 7 children over 3 years of age) and the so-called subjective right were restored (Soukainen, 2018). In addition to the aforementioned changes in ECEC, there have also been changes on governmental level. The reform of the regional state administration was introduced in 2010. Two new authorities emerged: the Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI) and the Centre for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment (ELY). The Regional State Administrative Agencies are responsible for ensuring the legal rights of citizens and businesses. Officers see to this by processing complaints, rectification requests, and permit applications. The Regional State Administrative Agencies monitor, supervise, and assess the accessibility of basic services. The actions of public administration affect the lives of everyone

and the activities of companies in many ways, and it is important to ensure that public authorities function properly and legally (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020a, Soukainen, 2018.)

The Regional State Administrative Agency and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) supervise ECEC in the public and private sectors. Municipalities also supervise private ECEC services. The Regional State Administrative Agency monitors problem areas in ECEC and intervenes based on reports of grievances (Act on ECEC, 540/2018). (Figure 14.1.)

As far as the quality of ECEC is concerned, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) plays an important role. It has defined indicators for the quality of ECEC, and it also carries out external

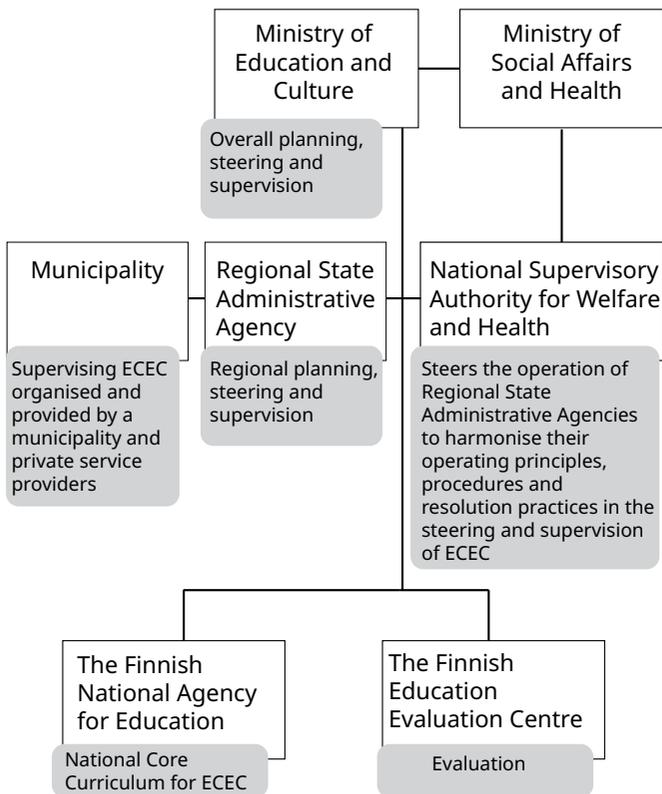


Figure 14.1: Central government steering system (Aluehallintovirasto, 2019).

evaluations of the quality of ECEC. Heikka et al. (2021, p. 21) write that ‘[d]iverse ways of regulating and measuring ECE quality is based on different ways to refer to ECE as an economic investment for the future benefits in societies’. Quality is more than just an economic investment for the future. High-quality ECEC supports children’s well-being. National standards for high-quality ECEC, quality assessment, and supervision of ECEC enable uniform quality throughout Finland. Quality standards set the boundary conditions for ECEC, in which the best interests of the child must be considered as a matter of priority.

In the Regional State Administrative Agencies, information steering of educational and cultural services has increased because of some legislative changes. The need for proactive guidance has increased because of, among other things, amendments to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. During 2019, information steering and in-service training focused in particular on amendments to the Library Act and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, three-tier support and demanding special support, and themes related to safety and well-being. In the Regional State Administrative Agencies, ECEC is situated in the division of education and culture. In addition, there are education, libraries, sports, and youth work (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020b). As well as the provision of proactive guidance, the supervision of ECEC has been intensified. This chapter examines the first results of the ECEC monitoring programme launched in 2020.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland

According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Act on ECEC, 540/2018), municipalities shall organise the ECEC referred to in that specific Act within the scope of and in types of activity that meet the needs in the municipalities. A municipality or a joint municipal authority may produce the services by organising the services themselves or they may procure them from another service provider on the basis of a contract. Service vouchers may be issued to the users of ECEC. [Table 14.1](#) shows the changes between 2017 and 2019 in terms of organising and participating in ECEC. The data in the table have been compiled by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.

Table 14.1: Statistics on ECEC in 2017 and 2019.

| Category | 2017 December | 2019 January |
|---|--|--|
| Municipalities as organiser | 299* | 300 |
| Private ECEC | in 169 municipalities (57%) | in 159 municipalities (54%) |
| Private care support | in 155 municipalities (52.5%) | in 140 municipalities (47.5%) |
| Service vouchers | in 68 municipalities (23.1%) | in 92 municipalities (31.2%) |
| Private day-care centre service providers | 501 providers | 468 providers |
| Private day-care centres | 907 day-care centres | 993 day-care centres |
| Municipal family day-care childminders | 5200 persons (2016) (including family day-care centres) | 4611 persons (including family day-care centres) |
| Private family day-care childminders | 1542 persons (including family day-care centres) | 1601 persons (including family day-care centres) |
| In municipal day-care centres | 187,547 children (68.1%) | 192,918 children (70.9%) |
| In municipal family day care | 23,111 children (8.4%) | 18,529 children (6.8%) |
| In municipal open ECEC activities | 20,057 children (7.2%) | 10,732 children (4.0%) |
| In private ECEC | Total: 44,850 children (16.2%) of which •private care support: 17,254 children •purchasing service: 5752 children •service vouchers: 21,844 children | Total: 49,748 children (18.3%) of which •private care support: 14,318 children •purchasing service: 4898 children •service vouchers: 30,532 children |

*295 municipalities in mainland Finland in 2017, response rate 100% (Karvi, 2020a, 2020b).

The total number of children participating in ECEC has decreased: since 2017, the change is 3638 children. The total number of children participating in municipal ECEC has also decreased (8536 children). By contrast, participation in private ECEC has increased since 2017 by 4898 children (Karvi, 2020a, 2020b).

The Role of the Regional State Administration Agency

There are six Regional State Administrative Agencies in mainland Finland. In Åland, the corresponding operator is the State Department of Åland. The task of regional administration is to promote people's rights, well-being, and security. The Regional State Administrative Agencies ensure the legal rights of citizens and businesses by processing complaints, rectification requests, and permit applications. The Regional State Administrative Agencies come under the Ministry of Finance, but other ministries steer the activities of their own administrative branches. The Regional State Administrative Agencies' tasks are regulated by several laws concerning various industries. The areas of activity of the regional government agencies are based on the division of provinces. Areas of responsibility are the following: basic public services, legal rights and permits, education and culture, occupational health and safety, environmental permits, and rescue services and preparedness. The agencies' tasks and operational objectives are always linked to the current government programme (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020a).

As can be seen in [Figure 14.1](#), the role of the agency concerning ECEC is regional planning, steering, and supervision. In 2018, many grievances concerning care for the elderly were filed. Also, the families among ECEC became more aware of rights and quality in education. At the same time, private ECEC increased in volume—more children participated in private ECEC, though the total number of children participating in ECEC has decreased (since 2017 to 2019, the change is 3638 children). Participation in private ECEC increased by 4898 children from 2017 to 2019 (Karvi, 2020a, 2020b). The shortcomings in care for the elderly and ECEC became the subject of exceptionally wide media attention in the early part of 2019. Media contacts and the number of requests for information increased significantly (Aluehallintovirasto, 2019).

The need for proactive guidance in educational and cultural activities increased with amendments to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, among other things. The aim was to increase proactive guidance, self-monitoring, and risk-based supervision, and to deepen information management. However, this was not possible, and the focus remained on ex post control. With increased human resources

in ECEC in the Regional State Administrative Agencies, the opportunity for proactive guidance improved. At the end of 2019, there were nine senior officers to steer and supervise ECEC in the Regional State Administration Agencies (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020b, 2020d).

Cooperation between the regional administrations was increased during 2019 to harmonise the agencies' working methods and to promote a flexible use of resources. The forms concerning private ECEC were updated. The development of the ECEC registration procedure occurred in every regional government agency so that changes could be made to the procedure in accordance with the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), which came into force on 1 September 2018. In-service training for teaching staff and ECEC guidance is handled regionally, but with a uniform content. Every other year the Regional State Administrative Agencies assess access to basic services (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020b).

During 2019, the focus in the Regional State Administrative Agencies was on guidance and the supervision of activities related to the legal security of social and health care and ECEC, as well as patient and customer safety. The guidance emphasised the operators' self-monitoring and the municipalities' primary responsibility for control over the services they procure (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020a).

Table 14.2: Number of municipalities in different Regional State Administrative Agencies' areas. Source: avi.fi.

| Regional State Administrative Agency area | Number of municipalities |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Eastern Finland | 44 |
| Lapland | 21 |
| Northern Finland | 38 |
| Southern Finland | 62 |
| Southwestern Finland | 44 |
| Western and inland Finland | 85 |
| Total in mainland Finland | 294 |
| In addition, Åland | 16 |

Western and inland Finland also contains a Swedish-speaking section, which operates in Swedish-speaking municipalities. As can be seen in [Table 14.2](#), the number of municipalities differs considerably. Although there are only 21 municipalities in Lapland, the geographical area is large. The differences influence the work of senior officers when it comes to supervising ECEC (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020a).

Supervision Programme from the Beginning of 2020

Parliament responded to the government's proposal to Parliament regarding the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as some related laws (67/2018), with the requirement to implement some priority tasks. Parliament demanded that the government supervise and assess the effects of the reform of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care on the equal provision of adequate ECEC services and the consideration of the best interests of the child throughout the country and in all demographic groups. If necessary, the government was also to take measures to implement the objectives of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Eduskunta, 2018).

Parliament also demanded that the functionality and effectiveness of the provision on staff sizing in day care would be monitored in future. If necessary, adequate legislative arrangement should be made to ensure the best interests of children (Eduskunta, 2018).

As a result of the above, the Regional State Administrative Agencies and Valvira have jointly developed an ECEC supervision programme. Supervision under the programme was introduced on 1 January 2020. The programme describes the principles and annual priorities for the supervision of ECEC. The aim is to create harmonised operating models for the guidance and supervision of ECEC and to clarify the roles of supervisory authorities (Aluehallintovirasto, 2019).

The premise of the supervision programme is that the supervisory authorities primarily carry out proactive supervision of ECEC. The implementation of the programme is supported by organising various regional events, education, and steering in municipalities and ECEC centres. Versatile guidance and counselling ensure high-quality ECEC, and they also reduce grievances (Aluehallintovirasto, 2019).

According to the supervision programme, the focus during 2020 was on the sizing of personnel (adult–child ratio). In 2021 and 2022,

the supervision of ECEC was to focus on the realisation of group sizes in ECEC centres as well as compliance with staff qualification requirements.

The key principles of the supervision programme are: the Act on ECEC; the best interests of the child; nationally harmonised supervision; primary guidance and counselling; clarification of the responsibilities and tasks of the supervisory authorities; defining annual priorities, also risk-based; and systematic monitoring of the implementation of the supervision programme (Aluehallintovirasto, 2019).

As the data in this research have been collected from the ECEC supervision programme, the research question was: Is the adult–child ratio being realised in municipal day-care centres?

Method

Section 35 (‘Number of staff in early education centres’) in the Act on ECEC (540/2018) states:

Early education centres shall have a sufficient number of staff for tasks in upbringing, education and care relative to the number and age of children in early childhood education and care and the time the children spend daily in early childhood education and care, and these staff members shall be qualified as teachers, social pedagogues or child carers in early childhood education and care as laid down in this Act. Further provisions on the number of staff are issued by Government decree. The decree can set separate ratios for children aged three or older and for those aged under three years of age, and separate ratios for children aged three years or older who spend a maximum of five hours a day in early childhood education and care and for those who spend more than five hours a day in early childhood education and care.

Government decree has defined the ratio in such a way that the ECEC centre must have at least one person—with professional qualifications provided in sections 26–28 of the Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018) in upbringing, teaching, and care duties—for a maximum of seven children who participate in ECEC for more than five hours a day and are over three years of age. For children under three years of age, the adult–child ratio is 1:4. This decree came into force on 1 August 2020. Earlier, the ratio with children over three years of age

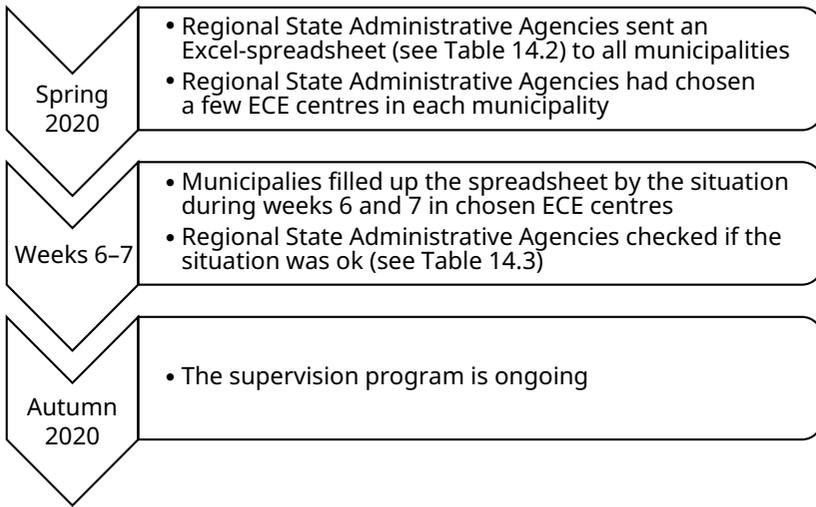


Figure 14.2: The process of survey.

was 1:8. The supervision programme began on 1 January, so the first results were collected under the old ratio (1:8).

Personnel sizing is monitored through surveys conducted in municipalities (Figure 14.2). The surveys determine the number of kindergarten staff in relation to the number of children. Also, the Regional State Administrative Agencies carry out unannounced and announced inspections according to the regional situation. During the spring of 2020, the survey covered weeks 6 and 7. Senior officers sent Excel spreadsheets to the chosen municipalities. The dates (3.2.2020–16.2.2020) were marked beforehand on the Excel spreadsheet (see Table 14.3). Every ECEC centre had its own sheet on which the director wrote the numbers of children and personnel. The Excel spreadsheet counted the ratio automatically after the numbers were typed. If the ratio was over 8, the number became red.

Table 14.3: An example of the Excel spreadsheet.

| Early Childhood Personnel Supervising Control Form | | | | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Municipality | | | N.N. | | |
| The name of ECEC centre | | | Strawberry | | |
| ECEC in shift (yes/no) | | | | no | |
| Date | Under 3 years | Over 3 y, ≤5h | Over 3 y, >5h | Personnel | Ratio |
| 3.2.2020 | 14 | 3 | 100 | 24 | 5.41 |
| 4.2.2020 | 16 | 2 | 104 | 25 | 5.49 |
| 5.2.2020 | 15 | 2 | 105 | 25 | 5.45 |
| 6.2.2020 | 17 | 1 | 106 | 25 | 5.62 |
| 7.2.2020 | 8 | 2 | 86 | 25 | 4.12 |

This type of supervision system is an ongoing one. The Excel spreadsheet is updated to match the new ratio from the beginning of August. During the autumn, there is no specific week, so every senior officer may choose the suitable two-week period for surveillance. The data of each survey are collected into the same file. By doing so, the results are easy to see.

Results: There Are Enough Personnel in the ECEC Centres

By 1 September, senior officers had investigated 137 municipalities (46.6 per cent). In the larger municipalities, not all ECEC centres have been included in the survey. The data contain the information for 635 ECEC centres in mainland Finland. The ratio was overrun on 21 days. This means that the percentage of overrun adult–child ratio is 0.33. (Aluehallintovirasto, 2020c).

Table 14.4: An example of the answers.

| Early Childhood Personnel Supervising Control Form | | | | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Municipality | | | N.N. | | |
| The name of ECEC centre | | | Strawberry | | |
| ECEC in shift (yes/no) | | | no | | |
| Date | Under 3 years | Over 3 y, ≤5h | Over 3 y, >5h | Personnel | Ratio |
| 3.2.2020 | 14 | 3 | 100 | 24 | 5.41 |
| 4.2.2020 | 16 | 2 | 104 | 25 | 5.49 |
| 5.2.2020 | 15 | 2 | 105 | 25 | 5.45 |
| 6.2.2020 | 17 | 1 | 106 | 25 | 5.62 |
| 7.2.2020 | 8 | 2 | 86 | 25 | 4.12 |

As can be seen in [Table 14.4](#), the Excel sheet was very easy to complete. Except for the days that the ratio was overrun, the readings were low. In the ECEC centres where ECEC was organised in shifts, the ratio was at its lowest: only 1—of course, if there is even one child present, the ECEC centre must also have staff.

Findings and Discussion

During the spring of 2020, the Regional State Administrative Agencies supervised 732 municipal day-care centres in total; 116 of them were day-care centres providing ECEC in shifts. The result was that the ratio was overrun on only 26 days of the total inspected 7784 days. During the autumn, the inspection covered 9296 days, with the ratio overrun on 52 days. The ratios were low. For example, the ratios of two towns varied between 1.38 to 3.38 and from 2.17 and 6.25, when it could have been 7 (Aluehallintovirasto, 2021).

The purpose of the quality indicators defined by the FINEEC is to lay the foundation for nationally consistent policies and principles in accordance with which the evaluation of ECEC can be carried out. At a pedagogical level, the indicator for adequacy, availability, accessibility, and inclusiveness of ECEC is that '[t]he leader of the day-care centre ascertains every day that a sufficient number of staff as required by

law and considering the number of children is present, ensuring that the children's safety and the permanence of interactive relationships can be guaranteed, and the objectives set for early childhood education and care are reached' (FINEEC, 2019, p. 13). Based on the results, this indicator has been well implemented. However, it should be noted that this is only one quality factor that has been relatively easy to assess by carrying out a survey in municipalities. Do the results really indicate that ECEC is of high quality throughout Finland?

The results of the supervision programme have been criticised. According to the trade unions, good results cannot be true. The trade unions are contacted in situations where an employee says that they have been alone with a large number of children. The ratios are considered for the whole ECEC centre and for the whole day. Shift planning plays a big role. It's important that the providers and parents understand the importance of telling when the child comes to an ECEC centre and when they are going to bring the child home. After all, the ratios were low. It means that there have not been as many children present as there could have been.

Conclusion

What do the results of 'the first loop' of surveillance tell us? Do they tell us that the chosen weeks were somehow abnormal? Senior officers in the Regional State Administrative Agencies reviewed the results and concluded that the needs of children have been considered, and that is why the ratios were so low. Another cause of the low ratios may be that the municipalities had already prepared for the future change that took place in August. Or some municipalities may never have changed the ratio from 1:7 to 1:8. That was possible when the government decree changed last time on 1 August 2016. One conclusion could be that ensuring the right ratios is the first step on the way to high-quality ECEC. Then it is an economic investment for the future. The better the ratios, the better the interests of the child are considered.

In any case, the reasons for the low ratios may remain a mystery. Surprisingly, the personnel express their resilience. On visiting ECEC centres, there is a sense of oversized groups. The personnel feel tired. Could this be due to a lack of expertise or have the changes taken place too rapidly? Before the year 2017, there was no norm for the contents of ECEC. The Finnish national agency for education ordered the first

core curriculum for ECEC in 2016. The municipality, joint municipal authority, or other service provider had to prepare and adopt a local curriculum compliant with the core curriculum on 1 August 2017 at the latest. In many municipalities, the introduction for the curriculum was not realised. The personnel should have had more time to discuss the pedagogy described in the curriculum. The new curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and all the new operating models need time and a strong leader. Directors of ECEC centres should have a plan for implementing the curriculum among the personnel.

Also, there are still some issues to be considered at the national level. For example, more instructions are needed in relation to organising the shifts in ECEC. Planning the shifts for the personnel is challenging because of the unpredictable attendance of children. Also, the option of choosing a weekly or monthly time for the child leads to changes in groups of children. There are some children who are absent for two days a week, for example, and other children take their place. It is almost amusing how the Act on day care (36/1973) did not change for 40 years, and then the changes came with no end to be seen.

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