JANNIINA VLASOV

Reflecting Changes
in Early Childhood Education
in the USA, Russia and Finland

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I dedicate this book to my darling daughters, Peppiina and Jessiina

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On a sunny Sunday afternoon in Tampere – August 19, 2018

Janniina Vlasov

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation was to examine and reflect how institutional early childhood education (ECE) has developed in cross-cultural settings from the early 1990s until now. More precisely, the study focused on sociocultural changes regarding institutional ECE, its implementation and pedagogy, the changed role of the parents and the perceived changes in parent-teacher co-operation. So far, knowledge and research concerning the described cross-cultural changes in ECE has been limited. The dissertation in hand seeks to fulfil this gap. To pursue its aim, the study was conducted in three different sociocultural contexts: the USA, Russia and Finland, each representing a variety of ECE policy options.

In all of the studied societies, ECE systems differ greatly in their origins, governance and demands. In the United States, institutional ECE is market driven, and child care choices are dependent on the family's preferences and financial resources, without federal or state interference. On the contrary, in Russia and Finland, the services rely on the principle of universality, and the majority of ECE is publicly provided.

The dissertation is compiled with three sub-studies, each having its own, yet interrelated, set of problems. The data for the dissertation was obtained from three different phases – 1991, 2011 and 2014 – with multiple methodological strategies. During the period studied, the increased complexity of global ECE services and the growing body of knowledge about cross-cultural methodologies created a need to react to these changes and to further develop the research design. After the second data collection phase in 2011, an epistemological shift was taken concerning the methodology. The quantitatively acquired data was used as a stimulus material for focus group discussions. In each studied society context, child care centre directors analysed the quality evaluations collected from the parents and teachers by surveys, and reflected what had possibly changed in their ECE and why. The aim of the developed and applied reflective emic analysis (REA) method was to enhance the knowledge production process, and secondly, to increase the cross-cultural sensitivity of the study through the use of cultural informants.

The findings of this study indicated interrelated changes in the studied societies concerning the task of ECE, the pedagogical goals, the roles of parents and changes

in co-operation between parents and teachers. The societal expectations and demands towards ECE were shown to have grown in each society context, reflected not only through reformed policies and research but also through the expectations of the parents. The results suggest that the internal educational goals of ECE and the pedagogical aspirations of the professionals differed to some extent from the expectations of ECE set by the society. However, this notion was perceived differently in each of the studied societies. In the USA, the pressure to increase children's learning outcomes and the demands for teacher accountability were seen to contradict with the pedagogical aspirations of the teachers. In Russia and Finland, the emphasis on children's individuality had been strengthened in the level of curricula, yet the insufficient societal investments towards ECE prevented professionals from working in accordance with this ideal.

Furthermore, the role of parents as clients of ECE was perceived to have changed in each studied society. The increase in the perceived customer orientation of the parents and the demands to increase parental participation in ECE create a need to redefine the goals for co-operation in the ECE. In addition, the new perception of parents' active agency in ECE challenges the field and calls on professionals and politicians to define what the agency of the parents' means in ECE. The perceived changes call for strong professionalism within both teachers and directors, along with the ability to apply new types of educational thinking.

The cross-cultural approach of the dissertation may be helpful in enhancing understanding of ECE both at national and international level from the point of view of ECE decision-making, the future development goals as well as the outcomes of ECE. Setting the results to a wider social, cultural and historical framework will help to understand how national early education systems have been formed and thus help to better identify the strengths and development targets of each system.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä väitöstutkimus tarkastelee varhaiskasvatuksen kehittymistä erilaisissa yhteiskunnallisissa järjestelmissä viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana. Vertaileva tutkimus toteutettiin kolmessa yhteiskunnallisessa kontekstissa, Amerikan Yhdysvalloissa, Venäjällä ja Suomessa. Tutkimus tuottaa tietoa siitä, miten varhaiskasvatuksessa ja sitä ympäröivässä yhteiskunnassa tapahtuneet muutokset ovat haastaneet paitsi varhaiskasvatuksen toteuttamista ja pedagogiikkaa, vanhempien roolia varhaiskasvatuksen asiakkaina sekä viime kädessä vanhempien kanssa tehtävää yhteistyötä. Kansainvälistä vertailevaa tutkimusta sekä tietoa varhaiskasvatuksen kulttuurisista ja yhteiskunnallisista muutoksista on saatavilla varsin rajallisesti. Tämän väitöstutkimuksen tarkoitus on vastata tähän tarpeeseen.

Kaikissa tutkimusmaissa varhaiskasvatusjärjestelmät ovat erilaisia sekä tämän tutkimuksen että historian valossa tarkasteltuna. Yhdysvalloissa varhaiskasvatusjärjestelmä on hajanainen ja palvelut tuotetaan pääosin yksityisesti. Perheiden tekemät valinnat varhaiskasvatuspalveluiden suhteen ovat riippuvaisia perheen toiveista, varallisuudesta ja palveluiden saatavuudesta. Valtiollista ohjausta varhaiskasvatukseen ei ole. Venäjällä ja Suomessa tilanne on toisenlainen: varhaiskasvatuspalvelut ovat valtaosin julkisesti järjestettyjä ja perustuvat universaaliuden ideologialle.

Väitöskirja on artikkelimuotoinen ja koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta, jotka kukin vastaavat tutkimustehtäviin toisiaan täydentävistä näkökulmista. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin monimenetelmäisesti kolmessa eri vaiheessa, vuosina 1991, 2011 sekä 2014. Pitkä tutkimusprosessi, varhaiskasvatuksen kehittyminen sekä vertailevan tutkimustiedon lisääntyminen haastoivat muuttamaan ja kehittämään käytettyä tutkimusmetodologiaa. Vuoden 2011 aineistonkeruun jälkeen tutkimuksen epistemologinen painopiste muuttui ja kvantitatiivisesti kerättyä aineistoa hyödynnettiin focus group -haastattelujen keskustelumateriaalina. Tutkimusmaittain toteutetuissa ryhmäkeskusteluissa päiväkodin johtajat analysoivat vanhemmilta ja henkilöstöltä kerättyjä laadunarviointiaineistoja ja pohtivat, mikä varhaiskasvatuksessa oli muuttunut ja miksi. Tämän reflektiivisen menetelmän tarkoituksena oli tuottaa kulttuurisesti relevanttia tietoa varhaiskasvatuksessa tapahtuneista muutoksista. Tutkimuksessa kehitettyä menetelmää kutsuttiin

reflektiiviseksi emic-analyysiksi ja sen tarkoitus oli vahvistaa vertailevan tutkimuksen kulttuurista luotettavuutta.

Väitöstutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että varhaiskasvatusta koskettavat muutokset institutionaalisessa varhaiskasvatuksessa, vanhempien roolissa suhteessa varhaiskasvatukseen ja vanhempien kanssa tehtävässä yhteistyössä linkittyvät vahvasti toisiinsa. Yhteiskunnan sekä vanhempien odotukset varhaiskasvatusta kohtaan nähtiin kasvaneen jokaisessa tutkimusmaassa, mutta tulokset antavat kuitenkin viitteitä siihen, etteivät ympäröivän yhteiskunnan odotukset sekä varhaiskasvatuksen sisäiset kehittymispyrkimykset kaikilta osin kohtaa. Paineet tulosvastuullisuuden kasvamiselle varhaiskasvatuksessa etenkin Yhdysvalloissa olivat ristiriidassa varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisten pedagogisten pyrkimysten kanssa. Venäjällä ja Suomessa lasten yksilöllisyyttä korostavaa pedagogiikkaa on vahvistettu opetussuunnitelmissa, mutta yhteiskunnallisten investointien riittämättömyys koettiin estävän tämän ideaalin toteuttamista.

Kaikissa maissa vanhempien rooli varhaiskasvatuksen asiakkaina nähtiin muuttuneen ja siinä korostui kuluttaja-asiakkaan rooli. Vanhempien muuttunut rooli sekä vaatimukset lisätä vanhempien osallisuutta varhaiskasvatuksessa haastavat kehittämään kasvatusyhteistyön tavoitteita ja periaatteita niin ohjausjärjestelmän kuin pedagogiikan toteutumisen tasolla. Varhaiskasvatuksen muutokset edellyttävät entistä vahvempaa ammatillisuutta sekä uudenlaisen kasvatusajattelun omaksumista niin opettajien kuin johtajien keskuudessa.

Tutkimuksessa sovelletun vertailevan tutkimusotteen tuottaman ymmärryksen kautta voidaan nostaa tarkasteluun varhaiskasvatuspoliittisen päätöksenteon näkökulmasta keskeisiä kysymyksiä niin kansallisella kuin kansainvälisellä tasolla sekä tarkastella mahdollisia tulevaisuuden kehityskulkuja ja vaikutussuhteita. Tutkimustulosten asettaminen laajempaan yhteiskunnalliseen, kulttuuriseen ja historialliseen kehykseen auttaa ymmärtämään, kuinka kansallinen varhaiskasvatusjärjestelmämme on muotoutunut ja siten tunnistaa paremmin sen vahvuuksia ja kehittämisen kohteita.

Avainsanat: varhaiskasvatus, kulttuurien välinen tutkimus, muutos, reflectiiviivinen emic-analyysi

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This doctoral dissertation is based on the following three co-authored articles,[1] which have been reprinted with the permission of the publishers.

Article I

Vlasov, J., Hujala, E., Essary, J. & Lenskaya, E. (2016). Longitudinal study of changes in teachers' views of early childhood education in the USA, Russia, and Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education and Research (JECER), 5*(1), 202–222.

Article II

Vlasov, J. & Hujala, E. (2016). Cross-cultural interpretations of changes in early childhood education in the USA, Russia, and Finland. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 24*(3), 309–324.

Article III

Vlasov, J. & Hujala, E. (2017). Parent-teacher co-operation in early childhood education – Directors' views to changes in the USA, Russia, and Finland. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ), 25*(5), 732–746.

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[1] Janniina Vlasov has had the primary responsibility for every article, concerning the study design of the particular article, data analysis, and composing of the manuscript. Professor Eeva Hujala (articles I, II & III), as the supervisor of the candidate and head and owner of the research project, has contributed to the study design in each article. Dr Jessica Essary and Professor Elena Lenskaya (article I) contributed to the interpretation of the results as native experts.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECE = Early Childhood Education

EECERA = European Early Childhood Education Research Association

FINEEC = Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

IRB = Institutional Review Board

NACCRRA = National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

NAEYC = National Association for the Education of Young Children

OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QRIS = Quality Ratings and Improvement Systems

REA = Reflective Emic Analysis

USA = United States of America

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   The rationale of the research

This dissertation is an analysis of sociocultural changes in early childhood education (ECE) in cross-cultural settings. The study period spans over twenty years during the past three decades, which has been a time of rapid evolvement of institutional ECE. In many countries, ECE has become the interest of the politics in the aftermath of an increasing body of research linking (quality) early education to children's later learning and success in life (e.g., OECD 2015). Additionally, the increased complexity of societies has added great pressure and expectations towards early education and thus to all the stakeholders – children and their parents, professionals and policy makers – involved in it (Rury 2016). However, the knowledge and research concerning such changes in international ECE is yet to emerge. The dissertation in hand seeks to fulfil this gap.

This study was undertaken to examine how institutional ECE has changed in cross-cultural settings, and how these changes have subsequently affected the actual enactment of ECE, the pedagogical thinking of the professionals and also the interplay between the public and the private, that is, educational co-operation between parents and teachers, and the role of the parents. To achieve this goal, the study was conducted in three very different society contexts, namely, the USA, Russia and Finland. The rationale for using these specific society contexts as cases for this dissertation is that they represent a variety of ECE policy options. It is known that different structures of ECE produce different types of services and, consequently, different types of childhoods (e.g., Fleer, Hedegaard & Tudge 2009; Penn 2011a; b).

In the USA, institutional ECE is market driven, and the choices families are able to make in regards with child care, depend on their preference and financial resources, without federal or state interference (Barnett 2010; Bennett 2011; Michel 2015). On the contrary, in Russia, society has traditionally imposed a strong

ideological power over families and education, and the ECE system has a long history and position as a public institute; there are very few private ECE centres (Gradskova 2010; Nikolaev & Chugunov 2012; Taratukhina et al. 2006). In Finland, ECE services are governed and administered on the state level, but the distribution of ECE services is the responsibility of the municipalities, based on the needs of the children and their families (Act on ECEC 36/1973; Karila 2012; Onnismaa & Kalliala 2010). The sphere of privately organised ECE has been limited until recently, but the private sector is growing, according to the latest reports (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2017; FINEEC 2017). In all of the studied societies, ECE systems are different, as assessed not only through the present study but historically as well, which provides an interesting, yet challenging, entry to this study.

Institutional ECE offers a valuable and interesting insight to analyse societal changes viewed from both local and global perspectives. As Tobin (1999, 114) states, *'…in modern societies they [preschools] are cultural institutions that stand at the interface between parenting and education and thus which can reveal core cultural values and concerns.'* ECE institutions can be viewed as intermediators between the society and the individual, whether the focus of the study is on children or their parents, or like in this dissertation, in the changes that have taken place in institutional ECE and thus affected educational co-operation in the intersection of macro and micro. Changes in families, labour markets and educational policies affect the field of ECE and the stakeholders involved with it. The economic, social and educational systems reflect the political and norm guidance and thus affect the families both directly and indirectly.

Although the dissertation focuses on the sociocultural changes from the perspective of ECE, it is understood that the field of ECE is actively engaged in the changes of the surrounding society, and the effects take place in constant interaction (Alasuutari & Alasuutari 2012). Penn (2011b) argues that as we tend to be mainly concerned about the present, we rarely come to think of all the rationales behind the changes that have led to the present situation, both with regard to the practice as well as on the policy level. In addition, the historical and cultural roots of the societies have a great effect on how the globally circulating ideals or suggestions are turned into prevailing policies or actual practices. The origins of how the national ECE policies have been formed are often forgotten, yet they continue to influence the current provision of the services. This is referred to as 'path dependency', meaning that policy decisions made in the past still influence the decisions yet to be made (Campbell-Barr & Nygård 2014; Onnismaa, Paananen & Lipponen 2014; Penn 2011b; Pierson 2000). Once the decisions about the policies have been made, they

are soon accepted as norms (Penn 2011b). Therefore, studying the past may offer keys to understanding the present or even help in predicting the future.

In addition to studying changes in institutional ECE, the dissertation follows the development of the co-operation between parents and ECE. Co-operation is considered one of the global ideals of ECE professionalism and an embedded goal of ECE (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart 2004; Cottle & Alexander 2014). Furthermore, parent engagement and co-operation has been considered an important part of the quality of ECE and it has thus been widely studied for decades (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake 2009).

Parents are generally positioned as advocates and experts on their children, yet parents' involvement in their children's early education process is understood differently in different societies (Hujala et al. 2009) and also in different cultures within societies (Huntsinger & Jose 2009). This study seeks to further our understanding of how ECE professionals define co-operation in their societies and the role of parents in this process. Most importantly, the study investigates how educational co-operation as a construction has developed within these ECE contexts. Whereas the traditional view has emphasised co-operation from the point of view of parental involvement (Fan & Chen 2001), and the parents were seen to support the work carried out in the institutions, the discourse has now shifted towards forming a joint 'democratic space' for both professionals and parents (Penn 2011b, 60), also referred to as parent-teacher partnership or educational partnership (e.g., Fan & Chen 2001; Hujala et al. 2009; Karila & Alasuutari 2012; Alasuutari 2010; Karila 2006; Tiilikka 2005).

In addition to the investigation of empirical changes in ECE, this dissertation aims to examine and develop a culturally sensitive approach to cross-cultural research. Despite the significance of cross-cultural research in today's globalizing world, this dissertation argues that there is a need to critically analyse the methodology applied. Instead of solely comparing different ECE systems or focusing on the inferiority or superiority of a specific way of governance of ECE, this dissertation has adopted features from anthropology in its attempt to understand the phenomenon from the inside of each ECE system. This understanding is guided by the theoretical emic-etic approach (Pike 1967; 1990), where emics are seen to represent culturally essential and unique knowledge to each society, and etics are more universal and general and can be applied across cultures.

With this task, the dissertation strives to enhance understanding of some of the methodological challenges often related to cross-cultural studies. By examining changes in ECE from the perspective of 'emic insiders', the study pursues to point

out those cultural, historical and social traditions of each society, which have influenced the ECE system and affected perceived changes. This strives to a better understanding of cross-culturally obtained data and, eventually, a better interpretation of the results.

Cross-culturally conducted research, including this one, aims to form a broader picture of how education systems function worldwide and how they interact with the surrounding social, political and cultural contexts (Arnove 1999). According to Crossley and Watson (2003), international comparisons allow researchers to satisfy their intellectual and theoretical curiosity about other cultures and their education systems, thus facilitating a better understanding of one's own education system. As Triandis (1994) frames it, the only way we can become aware of our own culture is to look at and reflect on another culture. The different ECE systems, therefore, serve as reflecting mirrors to one another, and they allow both differences and similarities to become visible (Piattoeva 2010). By enhancing the comparative understanding of the sociopolitical formation of one's own ECE system may lead to new kind of forward-looking, reflective approach to pedagogical work, which is much needed for ECE professionals to be able to meet the needs of the dynamic field proactively rather than reactively.

To pursue its aim of enhancing understanding of the development of ECE, this dissertation is compiled with three sub-studies (I, II and III), each having its own, yet interrelated, set of problems. The data for the sub-studies was acquired between 1991 and 2014 with multi-methodological strategies. During the long research process, the increased complexity of ECE systems and the evolvement of cross-cultural methodologies created a need to further develop the research design. The first set of data was obtained in 1991 and the second in 2011, using repetitive methods, i.e. using the same methods each time. The qualitative data collected from ECE teachers attending focus group discussions was used in sub-study I to examine the changes in teachers' views of ECE. The quantitative survey data acquired in 1991 and 2011 from the parents and teachers formed the basis for sub-studies II and III. The quantitative survey data was utilised as a stimulus material for the focus group discussions of ECE centre directors in 2014 – firstly, to enhance the knowledge production process, and secondly to increase the cross-cultural sensitivity of the study by using cultural informants (i.e., ECE centre directors) in interpreting the perceived changes in their societies (Matsumoto & Leong Jones 2009). This process was called the reflective emic analysis (REA). Through the REA process, this study proposed to gain a deeper and more culturally sensitive understanding of the studied phenomena.

This dissertation summarises and synthesises the results of the sub-studies mentioned above. Firstly, the dissertation begins with a presentation of the ontological engagements of the study, and introduces the theoretical background as well as the key concepts of the study. This is followed by an explanation of the epistemology of the dissertation, along with a short introduction to earlier cross-cultural ECE research. In chapter 2, the research aim and specific objectives of the dissertation will be presented. Chapter 3 will contextualise the study by introducing the ECE systems in the studied societies before moving to chapter 4, which describes the detailed execution of the inquiry. Chapter 5 discusses the results of this dissertation. A reflection on the results and the proposed methodology are the focus of chapter 6. Finally, the ethics of the study and the future research directions will be discussed. The original publications are listed at the end of the dissertation, after the references and the appendices.

1.2　Ontological engagements

This chapter encompasses the ontological engagements of the study by explaining the theoretical underpinnings that guided the research process. Additionally, the key concepts relevant to this study are defined in this chapter. As Denzin and Ryan (2007) state, it is important to crystallise the philosophical set of questions which frame the selected theories in order for the reader to form a path of analysis eventually leading to the results and conclusion.

Contextual paradigm as a theoretical frame. This dissertation examines ECE from the contextual perspective (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008). The theories and concepts selected for this study aim to shed light on the research phenomena from various perspectives, and the contextual paradigm provides the ontological roots for this dissertation. In order to understand the different ways of organising ECE, the effects of the cultural, historical and social roots and traditions should be acknowledged and examined to better identify how the systems have developed (Triandis 1994; Tudge 2008).

Contextual theory examines children's growth and well-being as interaction between children and their growth environment, and the upbringing of a child is seen as a co-operative process of parents and teachers (Hujala 1996). According to the contextual paradigm, the studied phenomena can only be understood as part of the context and the sociocultural reality it functions in (ibid.), which in this dissertation is considered one of the key issues. The theories behind the contextual

theory derive from the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). The systems theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's or the contextual theories derived from it, aim to describe how all organised entities, such as societies, are perceived to be formed from different parts or systems which are interrelated (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008). The interrelated systems essential to this study are: the microsystem as the one being the closest to the child (home and parents, ECE centre), the macrosystem describing the level of the society, and the mesosystem as the interaction between the microsystems.

Contextual theorising based on the systemic understanding provides the backbone for this dissertation by expanding the understanding of the constant interaction and the causal connections between the different systems within the respective societies (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008). However, it is understood that there is a need to move away from micro-macro -reductionism towards creating an understanding of more complex and intertwined mechanisms in ECE (see also Paananen 2017).

Therefore, instead of solely relying on contextual theorising, the study utilises systemic thinking in investigating the interaction of the different systems on a broader level. To this in mind, the focus is on the integration (mesosystem) of the home and child care centre (microsystems) and the changes within the systems in constant interaction with the surrounding sociocultural context (macrosystem). The study argues that the changes in ECE consequently affect the mesosystem, that is, the integration of the child's two most important microsystems, the home and the child care centre – and vice versa. Thus, the co-operation between parents and teachers becomes essential, and it is one of the main focuses of this study.

Change over time. Another key concept, the concept of change, is understood as a process within the context of ECE, which is not separate from the changes of the society but rather a very significant part of it. It is understood in this dissertation that ECE is not passively reacting to changes of the surrounding society, but rather, as an institution, it is actively engaged in the changes of the surrounding society (Alasuutari & Alasuutari 2012). Additionally, following the systemic ideas, the definition of macrotime is used here to conceptualise the changes within sociocultural contexts during the study-period (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the dimension of time encompasses the chronosystem at the macro level that influences the cultural and historical changes of the society and thus affects the shared values and beliefs. In this study, the changes in the field of ECE are connected to the macrotime effects, although *'Changes at the level of macro-time do not filter down to all microsystems at the same rate or with the same effects,*

mostly because old cultural patterns of activities (proximal processes) continue to exert an influence, particularly as the individuals involved (teachers, when thinking about schooling) for the most part stayed the same' (Elliot & Tudge 2007, 98). As Mason (2014) suggests, there is a great risk in comparative research when assessing change in the cultural systems. Straightforward conclusions that change between times has been either significantly worse or progressively better are difficult to maintain. The context itself changes, and so does the early education system itself, which always reflects the broader trends of the society or the surrounding cultural context in a specific point in history. Therefore, this cross-cultural study should be understood as a snapshot of the societies in question in a certain time and context.

Child care centres as representations of institutional ECE in their respective societies. Following the contextual theorising of ECE, the changes in institutional ECE are studied through child care centres. Although this study focuses on the changes in ECE at the broader level, the data was collected from child care centres as part of the ECE system. As per the contextual paradigm, the field of ECE can be perceived as a social environment, which represents the norms, values, power and structure of the societies they function in (Hujala 1996; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989; Tobin 1999; Tudge 2008;). In addition to children's immediate families, child care centres are considered to be one of the most important microsystems of a child's life, and they have been given multiple tasks, such as supporting parents in their parenting tasks, supporting children's learning and overall development and supporting children's growth into members of their societies (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008). Furthermore, child care centres can be seen to represent societies in a very significant way as they are generally viewed as being full of cultural elements (Tobin 1999), which both restore and support societal constructions such as national traditions (see, e.g., Pukk 2015). In this regard, child care centres can be seen to maintain the cultural traditions more tightly, whereas the society around them changes more rapidly.

Co-operation as an embedded goal of ECE. The mesosystem in this dissertation is conceptualised and studied as educational co-operation between home and institutional ECE, or, more specifically, between parents and teachers. Although co-operation is one of the key issues studied, it is considered to be embedded in the goals of ECE. Educational co-operation in this study refers to those formal or informal relations or encounters parents have with ECE services (OECD 2012). Using the term 'parent' instead of 'custodian' or even 'family' is done to stay in line with the research literature, but not to undermine the variety of family structures.

Co-operation, the position of parents in this process, and societal features will be discussed in more details in the chapter 3.

Hybrid national cultures and complex sociocultural systems. It is acknowledged in this dissertation that culture – being one of the key concepts of the study – is a complex and developing system. However, as Alexander (2012) argues, culture is a significant variable to consider while determining changes within ECE systems in different sociocultural contexts. In line with the contextual theorising, the field of ECE and the changes within it can only be understood as part of their sociocultural context. In this study culture is conceptualised broadly as a group that shares values, beliefs, a sense of identity, practices, access to resources, power relations and social institutions (Alexander 2012; Tudge 2008). To further this idea, Alexander (2012, 5) argues that *'national education systems are deeply embedded in the national culture.'* Yet, it is well understood in this study that national cultures, or cultural identities of the participants, are hybrid in nature, and even the word 'culture' should be treated with care (Mason 2014). Mason (2014, 236) argues that *'culture, or cultural context, is best understood in terms of what it does, rather than what it is; and that culture influences people as much as they shape culture.'* In this sense, cultures are constantly evolving because there is a constant tension within the cultural group who share the elements that determine culture (Papatheodorou & Moyles 2012; Rosenthal 2003). Generations do not just pass down these cultural artefacts but also transform them to suit their context in the historical time (Tudge 2008).

The conception of sociocultural context in this thesis is related to the societies of the USA, Russia and Finland, where the research data was collected from a specific city or state. Following the ideas of Tudge and Odero-Wanga (2009, 148), it is well understood in this dissertation that members of a society are simultaneously members of more than one cultural group, and the politically defined cultural borders cannot be explicitly defined but are rather seen as vague and transforming.

Deriving from the contextual orientation, this dissertation does not seek to represent the overall population of ECE services in the studied societies or to formulate unnecessary generalisations. Rather, the research contexts selected must be understood as multiple case studies. In order to enhance the comprehensibility of the complex study design and the presentation and discussion of the results, the studied contexts are referred to as 'USA', 'Finnish' and 'Russian'.

Despite the contextual nature, there is novelty value to this study, as it will yield new and important information about some of the society-related changes reflected within the study frame and the different sociocultural contexts.

1.3   Cross-cultural nature of the study

Whilst the previous chapter explained the ontological engagements of the study, this chapter will seek to deepen the epistemic standpoints of the dissertation by explaining the theoretical engagements of the cross-cultural methodology applied in the study. Having three such different society contexts with different approaches to ECE arrangements needs careful planning of the research design as well as argumentation of the methods used.

By exploring changes in cross-cultural ECE settings, this dissertation seeks to provide a unique, cross-cultural look at the studied phenomena. Pedagogical practices, pedagogical thinking of the professionals as well as co-operation with parents are considered within the wider socio-cultural realities, i.e. in three different countries.

It is known that comparing is a natural part of human thinking, an intuitive and structured process, which helps us to understand the surrounding world and our experiences of it (Phillips 1999). We tend to use comparative terms constantly and often unnoticed (Kekkonen 2008). Cross-cultural and comparative studies have traditionally been considered research strategies, which aim to point out the similarities and differences of the selected items (Phillips 1999). However, comparing should only be a practice, not the goal or the end itself (Raivola 1984). Therefore, this study relies on the concept of cross-cultural research over comparative research for two reasons. Firstly, the aim of this dissertation is not designed to underline the inferiority or superiority of the ways in which ECE is organised in the studied societies. Secondly, the study aims to enhance understanding of the unique features of these systems by contrasting and reflecting them against each other, thus painting a picture of how ECE has evolved through the effects of each system and society. Although comparisons between the three socio-cultural contexts are not in the focus of the study, they are at times used while describing the results to either highlight the changes or the effects of different societally organised ECE models.

As noted by Mahon, Anttonen, Bergqvist, Brennan and Hobson (2012), while conducting studies on cross-cultural or comparative means, there should be enough similarities to make comparisons meaningful but also sufficient differences. The differences in the social policy regimes and the organisation of ECE services allow peculiarities to stand out (ibid.). In each studied society, the international trends have guided the development of ECE, but the structures of the societies and the place of ECE within their systems have shaped the realities of ECE in a unique direction.

This dissertation seeks to elucidate on the issue of how and into which directions the changes have developed.

Cross-cultural methodology has many advantages and is especially important in today's multicultural world. In order to understand the 'others' and their everyday habits and opinions, it is important that we expand our knowledge from what is familiar to us towards the unfamiliar (Phillips 1999). As Johansson and Moss (2012, 25) argue: '*Comparing policies, provisions and practices in different countries can stimulate critical thinking and new perspectives by making the familiar strange and provoking questions. But it can also be dangerous. Ignoring context can lead to misinterpretations and unwarranted generalisations. While looking at other societies through our own national lenses of understanding, seeing only what we want to see can result in a partial picture and confirmation of our own prejudices.*'

In order to formulate a better understanding of the changes in ECE in the studied society contexts, the epistemological engagements of the dissertation derive from the emic-etic approach, originally coined by Pike (1967). Emics and etics are often considered synonymous with the terms of insider and outsider, which have been recently revisited and re-examined in cross-cultural and comparative studies (Robinson-Pant 2016; Milligan 2016; McNess, Arthur and Crossley 2015; Kelly 2014).

The interest in insider and outsider – or emic and etic – perspectives has increased in the field of international comparative research due to the shifting focus towards seeking more inclusive, collaborative, participatory, reflexive and nuanced research strategies (McNess, Arthur and Crossley 2015). In their recent book *Revisiting Insider/Outsider Perspective in International and Comparative Education* (Arthur, Crossley and McNess, 2016), the editors ponder the importance of refocusing our attention on the issues relevant today, when the mobility (both virtual and actual) has increased within people, politics and research. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the concepts of *insider – outsider* or *emic – etic* (Robinson-Pant 2016; McNess, Arthur and Crossley 2015). This dissertation aims to reconceptualise how the role of the researcher as well the research subjects are identified and positioned in the research process – as insiders, outsiders or something in between (Milligan 2016). This epistemological standpoint was chosen in order to highlight the 'local voice', that is, the insider emic-knowledge of the participants, and thus gain deeper contextual understanding.

Drawing on the ideas of Pike (1990), emic knowledge in this dissertation is understood as culturally essential and unique, meaning that the knowledge gained in the research process is something special to the insiders of a given culture. In other words, emics represent the ideas, behaviours, items and concepts that are culturally specific for the participants. Etics, on the other hand, are the same aspects but

viewed from a universal level, and they can be perceived as being general across cultures. According to a dualistic view, we become aware of our own emic culture by comparisons with the universal etics – for example, by defining communalities across cultures. The terms 'emic' and 'etic' have been widely applied across comparative studies. They have been critically argued (e.g., Harris 1976; 1990; Helfrich 1999) and further developed and empirically tested (such as Berry 1989; 1999).

In this dissertation, the emic-etic approach is not a simple distinction between insiders and outsiders of different societal contexts, as it was for essentialist dualists such as Pike. Therefore, the dissertation aims for fluid and reflexive use of the terms instead of considering them stagnant and dichotomising. Sociologically viewed, it is possible – and even desirable – to adopt different positions simultaneously, both emic and etic. By applying the concepts through a more socioconstructivist epistemology, the dissertation seeks to highlight the local emic voice and gain a deeper contextual understanding, but it does not claim that this knowledge is solely 'owned' by the locals. As Pike (1967; 1990) argues, the two perspectives of emic and etic do not constitute a dichotomy in the data used; rather, they present a phenomenon from two points of view. Our own cultural imaginaries tend to blend with the new interpretations when we read, travel and find other ways engage with different cultures (ibid.).

Earlier cross-cultural and comparative ECE research
In recent years, the quantity of cross-culturally conducted research and internationally composed policy documents has increased in the field of ECE (Urban 2012). Cross-cultural studies and internationally developed indicators can be seen as beneficial for societies by offering wider contexts for viewing and assessing local policies (Penn 2014). A large number of cross-cultural studies have been conducted to offer knowledge on ECE, for example, on the policy and policy guidance levels (Einarsdottir, Puroila, Johansson, Broström & Emilson 2015; Cleveland & Colley 2013; Ho, Campbell-Barr & Leeson 2010), from the teachers' perspectives (Izumi-Taylor, Lee & Franceschini 2011; Izumi-Taylor, Ito, Saito & Kaneda 2009) and focusing on parental views (Yamamoto & Li 2012). These studies chose topics for comparisons in a way that made it possible for the researchers to compare them with various strategies, such as by document analysis or through quantitative surveys. In order to accomplish this, the studies generally applied the etic perspective. However, as Penn (2014) argues, international comparisons are of importance if the collected data is compiled in a manner that enables direct comparison across countries. This

is never easy in complex areas such as ECE, where there is great variation amongst societal policies and services offered. Although Penn was referring to larger international data sets, the same problem is found within smaller cases, such as the ones presented above.

Much of the cross-culturally conducted ECE research has been carried out by using standardised measurement tools, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and its various versions (see, e.g., Cryer, Tietze, Burchinal, Leal & Palacios 1999; McMullen, Elicker, Wang, Erdiller, Lee, Lin & Sun 2005; Sheridan, Giota, Han & Kwon 2009). The internationally recognised ECERS was originally developed in the USA (Harms & Clifford 1980), and it has been modified to serve cross-cultural comparisons of the quality of ECE services. The epistemological premises of the instrument derive from the principle that although the quality of ECE is always context- and culture-bound, it can be seen to be formed of certain basic elements (e.g. Cryer, Tietze & Wessels 2002; Sheridan, Giota, Han & Kwon 2009). The idea of the ECERS instrument and its versions considers that all items measured are valid across cultures, and the knowledge produced is universal and, to some extent, generalizable. However, as noted by Fenech (2011), the instrument can only offer a very simplistic picture of the perceived quality, and not necessarily reveal the reality experienced by the staff, parents or children. It can be stated that the examination of the results of the studies presented above often remain at the etic level.

Some of the studies that have discarded the generalizable units of comparisons and focused on the similarities and differences derive from inside the culture, that is, from the emic perspective. An example where a culturally sensitive research approach was applied is Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's (1989) study, 'Preschool in three cultures.' The ethnographic data was obtained from the USA, Japan and China, and the main focus of the study was on eliciting meanings instead of searching for purely statistical differences between times or cultures. The researchers developed a method of 'video-cued multivocal ethnography', attempting to overcome the cultural barriers by intertwining both insider and outsider voices – emic and etic – in their study design. The project was not just about three different cultures; it was simultaneously a narrative of three cultures where the natives from each societal context reflected on and interpreted their own actions and those of the others (Mason 2014).

Similar ideas of a culturally sensitive emic approach were applied in a cross-cultural and longitudinal study of the ecology of young children conducted in the USA, Russia, Estonia, Finland, Korea, Kenya and Brazil (Tudge 2008). The ethnographic data was compiled by co-researchers and observers, all of whom

represented their own societies and cultures and thus provided the emic perspectives. Additionally, the first sub-study of this dissertation was designed and carried out by illuminating some ideas presented above. A multicultural research team was formed, with the cultural backgrounds of the authors representing the studied societies. Applying the core ideas of triangulation, the researchers from different cultural realities jointly interpreted the results collected by focus groups to add to the emic knowledge construction.

Despite its benefits, there are many problems inherent within the methodology of cross-cultural research, including how knowledge is constructed using its processes (see, e.g., McNess, Arthur & Crossley 2015). Cross-cultural ECE research often stems from an epistemic assumption that in order to search for comparable communalities, units of comparison must be compressed into the universal 'truths' identified by researchers. The units determined by the researchers seldom describe the complex and often contradictory realities of our societies, the (early) education systems or the realities of the children (Urban 2012). Merely focusing on universal and measurable issues runs the risk that the methodological considerations do not acknowledge particular cultural sensitivities or sufficiently take into account the local imaginaries. In the chapters to come, this dissertation suggests an approach of reflective emic analysis as an alternative method to overcome the described challenges related to cross-cultural research paradigms. Next, the research aim and the objectives supporting it will be presented.

2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this dissertation is to *enhance understanding of the changes and development of institutional ECE in different societal arrangements.* Additionally, this dissertation seeks to examine and develop cross-cultural methodology in ECE research. To pursue this aim, the study was conducted in three different sociocultural contexts: the USA, Russia and Finland. The data was obtained in three different phases – 1991, 2011, and 2014 – in order to gain a better view of the changes that occur.

To achieve the aim of the study, four objectives were set:

1. To examine what the generally perceived changes have been regarding institutional ECE from the professional point of view in the USA, Russia and Finland in the light of this study frame
2. To examine how the role of the parents in institutional ECE has changed in the studied societies according to the professionals
3. To investigate professionals' perspectives of how parent-teacher co-operation in ECE has evolved over the studied time in the studied societies
4. To evaluate the use of 'reflective emic analysis' method in cross-cultural ECE research

The research aim and the objectives are addressed through three peer-reviewed articles, each of which formed an individual sub-study. These sub-studies are referred to in the text with Roman numerals (sub-study I, II or III). The research process was progressive, and proceeded gradually by building the sub-studies on top of each other. The tasks of the sub-studies published as individual articles are presented in table 1.

In addition to the empirical task, the dissertation had a twofold methodological aim. Firstly, it aimed to address methodological challenges related to cultural validation of the cross-cultural ECE research. Secondly, the dissertation tested a methodological approach in which quantitative and qualitative research strategies were applied to complement each other. The proposed method was developed

during the course of the 'Education in a Changing Society' research project (Huttunen 1992), and it was applied and tested during sub-studies II and III. The meta-analysis of the use of the methodological approach is presented in chapter 5, section 5.5. The theoretical foundations of this approach lie in the emic-etic approach (Pike 1967), and thus the approach was named the 'reflective emic analysis' (REA) method.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	SUB-STUDY	RESEARCH QUESTION(S) of the SUB-STUDIES
The sub-study I addressed mainly the first research objective concerning the general changes within this study frame.	Article 1: Longitudinal study of changes in teachers' views of early childhood education in the USA, Russia and Finland	How have teachers' views on children's needs changed in the USA, Russia and Finland from 1991 to 2011? How has teachers' professional work in supporting children's well-being changed over the study period in the studied societies?
The sub-study II addressed the first and second research objectives concerning the general changes within this study frame and changes in the role of parents, as well as evaluated the use of the REA method.	Article 2: Cross-cultural interpretation of changes in early childhood education in the USA, Russia and Finland	What were the perceptions of childcare centre directors regarding the changes that have taken place in parents' quality assessments for the past 20 years in the USA, Russia, and Finland?
The sub-study III addressed the third research objective concerning the co-operation between parents and teachers, and evaluated the use of the REA method.	Article 3: Parent-teacher co-operation in early childhood education – directors' views to changes in the USA, Russia and Finland	From the perspective of child care centre directors, how has educational parent-teacher cooperation changed over the last two decades in the early childhood education contexts of the USA, Russia, and Finland?

Table 1.   The tasks of the sub-studies

Sub-study I examined and identified societal-level changes in teachers' views of the needs of children in the ECE context in the USA, Russia and Finland between the years 1991 and 2011. Additionally, teachers' views about their roles in the process of child-rearing within formal ECE institutions were studied to better understand points of comparative change. The results gained from sub-study I supplemented, first and foremost, the first research objective in order to map the changes regarding professional ECE. The data was collected from child care centre teachers by applying the qualitative method of focus group discussions. With three different cultural and societal contexts in mind, the following research questions were addressed in sub-study I: How have teachers' views on children's needs changed in the USA, Russia and Finland from 1991 to 2011? How has teachers' professional work in supporting children's well-being changed over the study period in the studied societies?

Sub-study II aimed to investigate the general changes that had taken place in the centre-based ECE in the USA, Russia and Finland between the years 1991 and 2014. The findings of sub-study II mainly addressed the first and second objectives by broadening the understanding of the general changes in professional ECE, but also by investigating the changes in the roles of the parents. Additionally, sub-study II tested a different kind of methodological approach, REA, where child care centre directors as native experts from each society interpreted the cross-culturally obtained quantitative data. The results for the second sub-study were derived from that reflective data. The following principal research question guided the sub-study II: What were the perceptions of child care centre directors regarding the changes that have taken place in parents' quality assessments for the past twenty years in the USA, Russia and Finland?

The task of *sub-study III* was to deepen the results of the second sub-study by specifically focusing on the integration of the home and institutional ECE. This empirical investigation aimed to answer the third objective in order to form a better understanding of how parent-teacher co-operation within institutional ECE services has changed in the studied societies, and how parents were positioned within the services. Similarly to the second sub-study, the proposed REA method was applied in this sub-study as well. The principal research question sub-study III addressed was: From the perspective of child care centre directors, how has educational parent-teacher co-operation changed between 1991 and 2014 in the ECE contexts of the USA, Russia and Finland?

3   CHANGING SOCIETIES AND THE TASKS OF ECE

Setting the scene for this study, this chapter focuses on introducing three different ECE models and the societal arrangements of ECE. By discussing and differentiating the societal tasks set for ECE in each studied society, the purpose, objectives and function of institutional ECE will be described, thus framing the research context for the study.

In each of the studied societies, institutional ECE has been set to answer the needs of the society from the perspective of labour force policy, social welfare policy and family policy (see, e.g., Alila 2013; Puroila & Kinnunen 2017). The emphasis and focus of these tasks vary in each context when viewed historically or through the needs of today's societies. In this study, institutional ECE refers to integrated programmes within the child care context that offer both early education as well as all-day child care. Thus, the other forms of both formal and informal care arrangements are being omitted from this study.

The type of ECE services families are entitled to in the USA, Russia and Finland varies significantly. Both accessibility and quality of the services are dependent upon how ECE is organised in the society. This has evident effects both to the role of parents as well as to the co-operation between families and professionals. Provision of ECE in the USA is primarily representative of the market-driven model (Moss 2009), where individuals have traditionally had power over their instructional experiences. Finland claims to offer universal ECE services, which emphasises the equal treatment of children, thus enhancing social justice as an ideological principle within the society (Karila 2012). The Russian ECE model is federally organised, and preschool education has a long history and strong position in society. The private sector has remained marginal. The universal system aims to guarantee equal opportunities for children to attend ECE, thereby enhancing the equity of children (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2010). Within this study frame, the dissertation aims to further our understanding of the changes in ECE regarding the different backgrounds of the systems.

Traditionally, due to publicly supported and universal ECE systems in Finland and Russia, out-of-home child care has become a social norm and thereby culturally approved. In the USA, however, it is understood that the publicly

supported system is primarily aimed for those who are less fortunate socio-economically (Barnett 2010). The different societal models of ECE define the roles of parents in ECE, yet there is limited knowledge available on this matter.

3.1　ECE in the USA

In the USA, institutional ECE services are mainly implemented and organised at the state or local level (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel 2007). Institutional ECE can be seen to comprise a wide range of programmes, which can be either partial day or full day, and the administration of these services may fall under the educational, social welfare or commercial auspices. ECE programmes are delivered and funded by the public or private spheres with an emphasis upon either 'education' or 'care' – or both. The mainstream funding generally comes from sources other than federal taxes (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel 2007). The programmes discussed in this dissertation include child care centres which are set to offer both preschool education and child care on an all-day basis.

ECE policies and state regulations vary significantly from one state to another (Connors & Morris 2015). In the absence of a federal ECE policy, the states have developed their individual policies and regulations to monitor ECE (ibid.). Federally funded programmes such as Head Start, on the other hand, are exceptions, as they follow federal rather than state standards (ibid.). In addition to the academic goals of ECE, Head Start programmes include goals with nationwide components related to the care part of ECE, such as health and nutrition, mental health and special education. Most publicly funded child care services, including Head Start as one of the biggest ones, are foremost targeted to the children from disadvantaged family backgrounds, with goals of increasing equality amongst children (Barnett 2010; Ludwig & Miller 2007).

The private sector, including both for-profit and non-profit, is the main provider of ECE and child care services, and the range of the availability and quality of ECE is great (Barnett 2010). Affordability to parents is an issue, as the monthly fees are as high as a mortgage (Barnett 2010; Bennett 2011). This creates inequality concerning the quality and type of ECE that families can obtain. In addition, this study is interested of the possible consequences of the privately organised and market driven system compared to the public systems in Russia and Finland. For example, the extensive fees that parents must pay, and what kind of effects it has to their role as educational partners or clients of the services

The professionals working in the field of ECE form a diverse workforce, and the expectations and requirements for the staff qualifications vary significantly across the country, depending on state regulations (Allen & Kelly 2015). More than half of the states only require that their licensed ECE providers possess a high-school diploma (Child Care in America: 2016 State Fact Sheet). As institutional ECE is not guided by federal institutions, the national qualification and training requirements of the ECE sector are also dependent on state regulations and not regulated within the profession itself, unlike in most fields (Mitchell 2000; NACCRRA 2010).

The roots of institutional child care in the USA are in the welfare and reform movements and date back to the late nineteenth century (Scarr 1998). ECE was originally developed out of the concerns for child welfare, the needs of special education and workforce policies (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel 2007). From the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the USA (as well as in Europe), day nurseries were established to care for children whose mothers had to enter the workforce because they could not depend on a male breadwinner for one reason or another (Michel 2015). These nurseries offered primarily custodial services for poor and working-class families (ibid.).

The starting point, which differentiates American families from their peers in Russia or Finland, is that American families have traditionally been positioned in a very autonomous relationship with the federal government. The well-being and upbringing of children have been considered strictly private family matters, unless concerns are raised related to child protection (Penn 2011b; Scarr 1998). Because the roots of child care are in social welfare, the increase in the usage of centre-based care in an average American family has been slow to develop, and arguments have been raised that institutional out-of-home care even contradicts the traditional view of family (Fuller, Bridges & Seeta 2007; Spodek & Saracho 2006). Therefore, the status of child care as a welfare service and as a form of special education and support remain stronger than the perception of children's universal right to quality early education (Halfon, Russ, Oberklaid, Bertrand & Eisenstadt 2009). Although the importance of early education is now acknowledged, there is little consensus within the federal government regarding how to organise and target needed services (Barnett 2010). According to Penn (2011b), the societal ideologies and cultural traditions described above both explain and maintain the organisation of the ECE system in the US context.

As child care and early education have developed separately, the integration of the two components of ECE has yet to emerge. Historically, the goals of care and education have not met and are often viewed as conflicting (Kamerman & Gatenio-

Gabel 2007). Families in the USA have free choice over their child care needs, and private markets tend to ensure the 'adequate supply of provision' (Penn 2011b, 90). Such traditions and ideologies are deeply grounded in societal values and, therefore, difficult to change. Despite the historical roots of ECE in the USA, the number of children participating in some kind of early education programme has been constantly increasing, and today the majority of children attend institutional programmes before entering kindergarten as the first step of formal school (Hustedt & Barnett 2011).

The way ECE markets are organised in the USA, evidently defines the role of parents as clients of ECE differently than within the ECE systems in Russia and Finland. This dissertation is interested in pointing out those features, while they have been rarely studied within ECE.

3.2   ECE in Russia

Unlike in the USA, the Russian ECE system is coordinated and financed on the federal level, and its administration is through the Ministry of Education. The public sector is the main provider of the services; the private sector covers only two percent of the total (Nikolaev & Chugunov 2012). The administration has been conducted by the local authorities, such as the municipalities and local government bodies, who have the prime responsibility for universal ECE services (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2010). The early childhood education sector is heavily regulated by the law 'On Education', the 'Model Provisions on Preschool Education Establishments' and other binding documents (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2010; Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015). Preschool teachers commonly have secondary-level training from either pedagogical colleges or institutes. Child care centre directors might be university graduates, with a major in pedagogy or psychology (Savinskaya 2015).

Similarly to the Finnish system, ECE and all-day child care in Russia are considered fundamental rights for children, while at the same time it enables mothers to work after maternity leave (Belfield 2006; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2010). Although institutional ECE is not mandatory, most children under seven attend early education (ibid.), as children's education and development have been traditionally emphasised in Russia (Elliot 2009).

The public child care system is intended for children from two months until school age, which is the year a child turns seven. Infants and young toddlers are cared

for in the nurseries, while pre-school is for children between two and six, and preparation groups, i.e. the pre-primary year groups, are targeted for the year group of six to seven. Child care services are commonly provided in four types of child groups: General, Compensatory, Combined and Health Improvement. (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2010.) The Russian child care system has not traditionally supported inclusion; however, in recent years, children with special needs have been integrated into groups of general education (Ryzhova 2012).

A publicly supported, systematic and universal ECE system was created in 1917, when the 'Declaration of the Preschool Education' became effective (Rubtsov & Yudina 2010, Savinskaya 2015; Taratukhina et al. 2006). The first public child care centres had already opened in Saint Petersburg at the end of the nineteenth century (Shmis, Kotnik & Ustinova 2014; Taratukhina et al. 2006). During the Soviet era, one of the important principles was the equality of all, including women and children. As women entered the workforce, a need for out-of-home child care was created. In addition to the emancipation of mothers, the aims for collective education of the youngest necessitated the development of a strong and federally organised ECE system (Taratukhina et al. 2006).

During the late Soviet period (1970–1991), the basic principle of education (and all social institutions) was unification, with goals to educate 'proper' Soviet citizens, the future builders of Communism (Elliot 2009; Gradskova 2010; Ryzhova 2012; Taratukhina et al 2006). The national 'Programme of Kindergarten Education' laid the structure and norms for national ECE, binding together all developmental and educational programmes for below-school-aged children. Teaching methods were designed and strongly grounded in the research of well-known psychologists, such as Vygotsky and Zaporozhets (ibid.). The practical and theoretical foundations for preschool education were created during this era, and the world's first children's education and development system was established (Ryzhova 2012). Thus, in the Russian context, ECE is widely referred to as early childhood development (ECD), emphasising the holistic nature of ECE.

In the post-Perestroika era (1991–2000), state control was dismantled, and radical transformations in the education sector took place (Ryzhova 2012). The standard education programme was abandoned, and variation in the implemented programmes was now allowed (Ryzhova 2012; Taratukhina et al. 2006; Veraksa & van Oers 2011). According to Ispa (2002), the relinquishment of the single standard programme had a great impact on Russia's post-Perestroika child care centre directors and teachers. ECE personnel now had more freedom to plan their

activities, although the age-appropriate objectives were still regulated at the state level. The national programme, i.e. the curriculum for ECE, forced teachers to use adult-led educational thinking, which has been strongly preserved in Russian child care to this day, even though the educational policies are changing towards a more child-sensitive and child-initiative approach (Rubtsov & Yudina 2010; Ryzhova 2012). Despite the extensive changes in the Russian curriculum, and how it has affected the work of teachers, there is limited research available *in English,* and aimed to the international scholarly audience.

Since the turn of the millennium, the systematisation and development of ECE processes have strengthened in line with the new federal regulations, which aim to bring the Russian preschool education closer to the European and Western ideologies (Rubtsov & Yudina 2010; Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015). The New Federal Standard for Preschool education was launched in 2013, and it serves as a framework for local programmes (Savinskaya 2015). The new principles and values of the standard are now more in line with the OECD standards. This can be perceived as a significant change to previous curriculum (ibid.). A few key points of the regulations include recognising the importance of education, teaching and care; embracing the diversity of childhoods and acknowledging the uniqueness of childhood as a valuable period in life and an important stage of human development. According to the new standard, the focus is more on individualisation and respecting the unique personalities of each child, taking into account the ethnocultural background of child and his/her family. There is now more emphasis on programme variability, including age-specific programmes consisting of children's play, cognitive and research activity and creative tasks. The allowed variation within programmes differs greatly from the Soviet period, which aimed heavily at unification and lessons that took place simultaneously throughout the entire country (Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015).

According to Savinskaya (2015), during the Soviet era, parents' opinions traditionally had little impact on ECE, but they have gained more importance in the post-Soviet years. Formerly, the main customers of institutional ECE were considered to be the state and regional and local authorities (Savinskaya 2015). In the New Federal Standards (2012; in Savinskaya 2015), parent-teacher co-operation is emphasised more than in earlier times, providing an interesting and valuable start for the study in hand. Although the changes in the steering system appear significant, very little research concerning the topic was targeted for international scholars outside Russian context.

3.3   ECE in Finland

Similar to the Russian system, Finnish ECE forms an integrated system, which offer both early education and child care. The majority of Finnish ECE is publicly provided, and about 85 percent of ECE institutes are public (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2017), and thus subsidised by government funding streams. The governance of ECE services is centralised on the state level, but the responsibility of their distribution and organisation lies within municipalities (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). All staff members are required to have appropriate qualifications in ECE on either a tertiary level for teachers or secondary-school level for nursery nurses. Adult-child ratios and staff qualifications per child are defined in the ECE legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973).

In recent years, Finnish ECE has undergone significant changes in its governance concerning the administration of the services as well as reforming the curriculum (see more, e.g., Fonsén & Vlasov 2017). The administration of ECE was moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013. Due to these changes, the early educational paradigm has clearly strengthened the public discourse of the educational policy task of ECE (Onnismaa, Paananen & Lipponen 2014). In addition, the responsibility of the content development of ECE was transferred from the National Institute of Health and Welfare to the Finnish National Agency for Education. Following these administrative shifts, the revision of both the law and the National Core Curriculum took place. The newly reformed curriculum is now a normative and binding document for the first time. The National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care (2016) and National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (2014) steer the planning, development and evaluation of the content of the activities carried out in ECE. The normative steering aims to promote equal provision and quality of ECE throughout the country. After the curriculum reforms, ECE, pre-primary year and basic education now form a pedagogical continuum, following a child's holistic and progressive development (e.g., Eurydice 2016). Despite the historical roots of viewing Finnish ECE as a social service, its early educational status has clearly strengthened due to the changes in the governance and the guiding policies. The strengths and reputation of Finnish ECE can be seen to lie in the systematic organisation of the services and the recent development tenures (Hujala, Valpas, Roos & Elo 2016). However, very limited cross-cultural research is available concerning Finnish ECE system, and especially examined on both micro and macro level.

Systematically organised ECE has a long tradition in the Finnish context. The first child care centre was opened by Hanna Rothman in 1888, but the foundations for organised ECE system were laid after World War II, when Finland faced significant changes in its social structure (Kinos & Palonen 2012; Niiranen & Kinos 2001). Rebuilding the post-war society, the decline of agriculture as the main income, growing urbanisation and the increase of working mothers promoted a need for child care (Kinos & Palonen 2012). The ideological basis for systematised ECE is grounded strongly in the labour and social policies but also in the political agenda of child welfare (Alila & Kinos 2014; Kinos & Palonen 2012; Välimäki 1998). The current form of the Finnish child care system was created in 1973, when the Children's Day Care act was launched (36/1973).

An internationally unique feature of Finnish child care policies is the welfare state's strong role in supporting a variety of options for caring for the youngest children (Karila 2012; Repo & Kröger 2009). In addition to municipal child care, families with children have a legal right to obtain support for private care or care for children at home. Although the different care arrangements are not the focus of this study, the way family services for children under school age are organised in Finland differ significantly from the American and Russian systems. According to Repo and Kröger (2009), child care in Finland is part of the care regime, in which the universal services are supported by public funding, which again compensates for the costs of the care arrangements between families. On one hand, the alternative forms of support are seen to allow families the freedom to choose the best care option for their children, but on the other hand, this kind of system may result in children's marginalisation from ECE and its developmental and stimulating activities (Karila 2012). Research has shown that the choices of parents concerning their children's care are complicated and dependent on such things as contextual factors concerning the services of the municipality, as well as parents' educational background and their labour market status (Hietamäki et al. 2017).

Finland, like other Scandinavian countries, is commonly seen to represent the Nordic welfare model, and more specifically, the social democratic welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990; Karila 2012; Mahon 2008). The Nordic model emphasises the universality of welfare services, in which the government has a significant role as a provider of those services, including child care. Based on the welfare ideology, the state's responsibility to promote welfare, health and security is a constitutional matter. Therefore, child care services have traditionally been considered a responsibility of the public sector, and the share of private actors has been marginal, mainly small entrepreneurs or associations (ibid.)

However, during the past few years, the private share of ECE providers has significantly increased in Finland. According to the National Institute for Health and Welfare (2017), privately organised ECE covers about 15 percent of the field. Private services are subsidised by the government or the municipalities, and their fees for the parents are thus at a reasonable and competitive level when compared with the strong public sector. Private services are under the authority of the municipality, which is obligated to monitor the private sector (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). The way the main-stream ECE services are organised in Finland separates the Finnish parents from their American counterparts. It is not known, how this affects the role of parents, nor how the roles have changed within different ECE models.

The emphasis on parent-teacher co-operation in Finnish ECE has increased steadily since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Kekkonen 2012). Today, educational co-operation is widely seen as one of the most important goals of the ECE curriculum. Co-operation is described as a conscious commitment of parents and teachers to enhance the well-being and balanced development of a child (National Core Curriculum on ECEC 2016).

As described in this chapter, the position and role of parents in ECE, the professional status and education of teachers, and the societal arrangements and models of ECE vary significantly in the USA, Russia and Finland. Although the importance of co-operation between parents and teachers as an embedded goal of ECE has been consistently emphasised in the studied society contexts, the research pointing out the changes within such cross-cultural settings is yet to emerge.

4   METHODS OF THE STUDY

In this chapter, the procedures used in the acquisition and analysis of the data are explained. Additionally, the chapter discloses the evolvement of the epistemological and methodological paradigms of the study.

The dissertation was conducted as part of a larger research project, which forms a specific research context and frame for the dissertation. In order to achieve the research aim and objectives, the study utilises multiple data sets collected with multiple methods during three different phases. The first set of data was acquired in 1991, the second in 2011 and the third one in 2014. The complete research design is presented in figure 1.[2]

Data collection country by country in:

1991	2011	2014
Focus group discussions for teachers	**Focus group discussions for teachers**	**Focus group discussions for ECE directors**
Questionnaires for parents and teachers	**Questionnaires for parents and teachers**	

Data collection procedures by repetitive methods

Results of focus groups presented in sub-study I

Results of questionnaires applied in sub-studies II & III

Data collection by method of "reflective emic analysis"

Results presented in sub-studies II & III

Figure 1.   Research design, including data collection phases and data sources.

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[2] The undersigned dissertation researcher joined the project during the second data collection phase in 2011 (figure 1). The third data collection phase in 2014 was planned in co-operation with the project leader and executed solely by the undersigned dissertation researcher.

The collection of the first data set in 1991 (figure 1) was planned and led by Professor Eeva Hujala, the leader of the 'Education in a Changing Society' project (research proposal published by Huttunen in 1992), and it was designed to examine how home and institutional child care were integrated in international ECE settings. The project was inspired by the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and his book, *Two Worlds of Childhoods – The U.S. and U.S.S.R.* (1970). Elaborating the idea of Bronfenbrenner's study, the data for the project was collected from child care centres not only in the USA and Russia but also from Finland as a third society context. The cross-cultural research design aimed at broader comprehension of how ECE was conceptualised and constructed in different societies.

The epistemological assumptions of the study during the first and second phases followed an approach that derives more from the neo-positivist paradigm (Tudge & Freitas 2012). The procedures for acquiring the data were identical during the first two phases and consisted of focus group discussions for teachers as well as questionnaires for both parents and teachers (Figure 1). The data collection procedures aimed to produce knowledge that was generalised to some extent, replicable and comparative in nature. During the first and second phases of the study, the topics of the focus group discussions and the items used in the questionnaires derived mainly from one cultural context used for all of the studied societies, and the studied research phenomenon was mainly assessed based on identical 'etic' criteria.

In the next chapter, before introducing the data acquisition, it is essential to describe and justify the selection of the research contexts, in which the study was conducted in 1991 and 2011. Following this, a complete description of the data collection methods of the first and second phase is provided.

4.1   Data collection in 1991 and 2011 – repetitive methods

The research contexts were originally chosen by the leader of the 'Education in a Changing Society' project. The main criteria for the selection of the research municipalities in each society context mandated that they were to represent demographically an average, urban municipality in their society. Unlike metropolitan cities, the selected smaller municipalities were believed to be culturally more cohesive and thus represent something average in their respective societies. Additionally, there

was a university in each municipality in order to form contacts with the local researchers, and thus help to get in touch with the child care centres.

The selection of ECE centres in each municipality was based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study. The centres were contacted through local research partners in each phase. Additionally, each child care centre selected had to meet the criterion of offering an all-day programme for three- to five-year-old children. The cases for the study were selected through purposeful and convenient sampling techniques, thus representing a nonprobability sample (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood 2015). Purposeful sampling methods allow the selection of cases that are both information-rich and closely related to the phenomenon of interest (ibid.). With the purposeful sampling, the focus was directed at enhancing the depth of the data instead of its breadth (Patton 1999). Additionally, in cross-cultural research, the selection of samples is often purposeful because the work is conducted in co-operation with local researchers, and their networks play a role in the selection of the research scene.

However, the purposeful sampling has certain shortcomings and limitations, which need to be addressed in order to enhance the quality and credibility of the data acquisition as well as the analysis. Patton (1999, 1197) has identified limitations that offer a comprehensive viewpoint to the issue. Firstly, the methodological limitations of purposeful sampling may be related to the studied cases, which have been purposefully selected based on the defined criteria. In this dissertation, the research participants were not randomly selected and thus do not represent a complete sample of the entire population of their respective societies. The selectivity of the cases distinguishes purposeful sampling from probabilistic sampling, and therefore overgeneralising of the results of this study must be avoided. Secondly, the temporality and contextuality issues set obvious limitations for the study, which in this study multiplies, while the data collection took place in three different phases and countries. Therefore, as explained in the section 1.2, this study should be understood as a snapshot, describing the studied phenomena in specific time and socio-cultural contexts.

The researchers visited each society context and each participating centre in person during both phases in 1991 and in 2011. Prior to the data collection in each centre, general written information about the study was provided for the participants, including statement of the voluntary nature of participation. However, the research cultures were found to be different in the studied societies. For example, the consent to participate was requested and received either undersigned (required in the USA) or orally (in Russia and Finland) from each participant. The directors and the staff

members in each child care centre were informed and trained in the study procedures, as their help was needed to carry out the data collection. The ethical procedures of the data collection are discussed more deeply in chapter 6, section 6.3.

In the USA, the data was obtained from child care centres from two municipalities in two different states, Virginia and upper New York. In 1991, there were originally five centres chosen for the study. All of the centres were from the same municipality in the state of Virginia. Three of the selected centres were non-profit centres, including one which was operated by a religious organisation. The two other centres were profit-orientated programmes. Before the second phase of the study, in 2011, two centres had gone out of business, and two centres declined participation for various reasons. In 2011, only one centre remained in the study from Virginia, and two new centres were recruited to participate from a municipality in the state of New York.

The Russian sample was collected from a municipality situated northeast of the Moscow metropolitan area. In 1991, five centres participated. Three of them were operated by the state, and two were owned by factories. In 2011, three out of the original five centres participated, and due to the political changes in the society, instead of state ownership, they were now owned and run by the municipality.

The Finnish research municipality was located in Eastern part of Finland. Due to the nationally organised ECE system, and based on legislation, all of the participating child care centres were owned and operated by the municipality. In the first phase of the study in 1991, seven child care centres participated. During the second phase in 2011, one of the centres had changed its programme and did not meet the selection criteria anymore, thus leaving six remaining centres.

In Russia and Finland, the child care centres were all public centres, and they remained the same during both study phases; only the number decreased between the cohorts. In the US context, only one centre remained the same during the study phases. As it was not likely that the teaching staff or the families would have remained the same, this was not considered as a problem from the point of view of the research task. The study was not interested in personal perceptions of parents or teachers, and there was no need to follow specific individuals. Rather, the focus of the study was on the changes in ECE on a broader societal level.

Focus group discussions for teachers in 1991 and 2011

In 1991 and 2011, the qualitative data set was obtained from child care centre teachers in each society by applying the method of focus group discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). This data formed the basis for sub-study I. The results of the focus group discussions conducted in 1991 and 2011 were published in the first article supplemented for this dissertation.

The aim of the focus group method during the first data collection phase was to generate knowledge amongst the teachers concerning specific aspects of ECE in their societies. The questions under discussion concerned children's needs, the well-being and position of children in their societies, the importance of early education, and the role of the teachers' professional work in ECE. By examining these issues, the study sought to form a holistic understanding of the societal role and changes of ECE, both within the children's microsystems and in the constant interaction with the surrounding macrosystem (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008).

The focus group discussions in 1991 and 2011 were semi-structured, and they were composed by the teachers within the same child care group. Teachers, including all educators (n = 2–3) of the same group, were invited to discuss together during their regular working day, at a time most suitable for them. They were given written instructions and discussion topics and asked to formulate their joint answers to the questions asked. The study was not interested in the interaction of the teachers in their discussions; rather, the focus was on the end results of the discussions. Therefore, the data produced during the focus groups was collected from the teachers in a form of written answers based on their discussions. This type of data collection method followed a more positivist approach.

Due to the differences in the structural factors of ECE within the societies, the amount of focus group discussions varied between the studied countries. There were great differences in the staffing of the child groups, which then affected the number of teachers joining the focus group discussions. In the USA, there were generally two adults per child group, whereas in Finland the number was three, including both teachers and nursery nurses. In Russia, only the teachers were counted into the number of caregivers, leaving out the assisting staff members. The numerical information related to focus group discussions is presented in the table 2.

Society context	Data collection phase	Centres (n)	Focus groups (n)	Participants (n)
USA	1991	5	14	29
	2011	3	8	17
RUSSIA	1991	5	11	34
	2011	3	14	28
FINLAND	1991	7	14	42
	2011	6	21	60
Total	1991	17	39	105
	2011	12	43	105

Table 2. Number of participating child care centres, focus groups discussions and participants in the studied societies in 1991 and 2011

Questionnaires for parents and teachers in 1991 and 2011

In addition to the qualitative focus group data, quantitative data was collected in 1991 and again in 2011. The quantitative survey data was obtained from parents and teachers of three- to five-year-old children by using printed questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of several types of items and individual instruments addressing ECE from various perspectives. The research questionnaire was developed in the early 1990s by the leader of the 'Education in a Changing Society' project, and it had practical connections with projects conducted in the USA, such as *Child care and family* (Scarr, Eisenberg & Deater-Deckard 1994) and *Measurement for assessing early childhood programs (*Abbot-Shim & Sibley 1987).

The printed questionnaires were composed in English, translated into Finnish and Russian and then carefully language proofed by back-translation. The instrument was particularly focused on child-specific assessments, meaning that both parents and teachers were asked to answer the questions from the point of view of each individual child and family. Therefore, teachers filled out questionnaires for each child in their classrooms, considering their individual ECE needs. The return rates for the questionnaires are presented in table 3.

In order to answer the research questions, two instruments were selected for the dissertation from the completed questionnaires. The first one focused on parents' satisfaction with ECE. As an instrument focusing on the quality of the services, it was used to gain information on the general organisation of ECE as well as the pedagogical processes. The second instrument was addressed to both parents and teachers and focused on parent-teacher co-operation.

Society context	Data collection phase	Parents		Teachers	
		Return rate (%)	Final sample (n)	Return rate (%)	Final sample (n)
USA	1991	57	88	100	166
	2011	78	97	100	122
Russia	1991	99	172	94	173
	2011	89	200	96	215
Finland	1991	79	117	100	150
	2011	55	145	98	249

Table 3. Research activity of the participants in the studied societies in 1991 and 2011 (quantitative survey data)

The first instrument applied in this dissertation consisted of twenty-seven items, which examined how satisfied parents were with the child care and how well the early education was perceived to have been implemented from their child's perspective. The instrument used in the study follows the quality evaluation model of ECE (Hujala-Huttunen, 1995; Hujala, Parrila, Lindberg, Nivala, Tauriainen & Vartiainen 1999), where ECE quality was examined through four subscales (factors): structural, intermediate, process and effect. Each item was scored on a five-point Likert type scale, with 1 indicating dissatisfaction and 5 indicating high satisfaction.

The first factor of the instrument, the structural elements of ECE (ten items), forms the basis for the physical and psychological circumstances of the ECE activities. Structural factors create the boundary conditions for the processes that children experience in child care, and they are easy to measure and control. In this study, parents' satisfaction with structural factors was surveyed with items scoring, for example, adult-child ratio, appropriate indoor and outdoor facilities and health and safety regulations and their elimination. Structural factors provide a solid foundation for the process factors, and they remain relatively stable from day to day (Hujala et al. 1999; Hujala, Fonsén & Elo 2012). The structural elements of ECE were considered important for this dissertation because they are likely to be subjected to the slowest changes in different ECE systems. Additionally, the structural elements provide valuable information of the organisation of ECE in different systems.

The second factor of the instrument, the intermediate factor (four items), aims to assess the guidance of the child's educational process through items that guide and support ECE indirectly. Intermediate factors have a functional role in the planning process; they either prevent or promote it (Hujala et al. 1999; Hujala,

Fonsén & Elo 2012). In this study parents' satisfaction with intermediate factors was examined by assessing home-school co-operation, directors' competence, parents' possibilities to influence the programme and centre rules and policies.

The implementation of the educational process is assessed by a third subscale, the process factor (twelve items). The process factor regulates how children experience child care (Myers 2004), and these items have a clear impact (outcome) on the child and, thus, to the whole family (Hujala et al. 1999; Hujala, Fonsén & Elo 2012). The parents assessed the quality of child care through items such as how satisfied they were with teaching, free play, children's possibilities to learn new things, individual attention and teachers' affection towards the children.

The second instrument was compiled of several items focusing on co-operation between parents and teachers. Both respondent groups, parents and teachers, were asked about their satisfaction with parent-teacher co-operation and about the children's satisfaction with child care as they – teachers and parents – perceived the children's satisfaction. The items addressed the questions of how satisfied parents and teachers were with the co-operation on a 1-to-5 Likert scale.

Additionally, some of the items selected measured how congruent the views of the parents and teachers were about the children and their upbringing, co-operation and satisfaction with child care. In the questionnaire, parents and teachers were asked to evaluate what kind of upbringing suited the child the most in the child care context. The items focused on views that valued upbringing from the perspective of a group or an individual, adult authority with regard to strict or flexible rules and the scale of adult-led or child-centred education. Additionally, the congruence of the views of parents and teachers regarding the children and their personalities and temperaments was examined.

4.2   Data collection in 2014 – developing the method of reflective emic analysis (REA)

As societies evolve, so do research paradigms and research designs. The increased complexity of ECE services and the growing body of knowledge about cross-cultural methodologies increased the need to react to these changes and to further develop the research design. An epistemological shift was therefore taken from the neo-positivistic approach towards a non-positivist perspective (Tudge & Freitas 2012).

During the third phase of the study, the REA method was developed. The purpose of the method was to elaborate on how and why something has changed in

ECE in the studied societies instead of just noting what has changed. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to discard the principles of methodological fundamentalism and move towards methodological eclecticism (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009; Heikkinen, Huttunen, Niglas & Tynjälä 2005; Suoranta 1995). Whilst the methodological fundamentalism represents strong paradigmatic perspective, in which the ontological and epistemological principles prohibit the combining of the methods, the methodological eclecticism does not view the two paradigms contradicting as such (ibid.).

In the dissertation in hand, this meant that instead of strictly comparing the three sociocultural study contexts, a more holistic and contextual picture of the studied phenomenon was sought. According to Pike (1967), the etic data is merely the starting point for the analysis: it provides an access to the system under investigation. In this case, the data collected in the first and the second phases of the study represented the etic access to the study, whilst the aim of the dissertation was to enhance understanding of the changes and development of institutional ECE in different societal arrangements from the emic perspective.

Therefore, instead of a deductive analysis process of the survey data, the study shifted towards an inductive approach in enhancing the understanding of which parts of the ECE processes were universal and which parts were unique to the specific contexts. In order to understand the perceived changes in the ECE field in the three studied societies and their implicit and cultural embedded features, it was necessary to develop the research strategies to meet these demands.

An exploration of different methods was carried out with certain criteria in mind in order to find a suitable strategy to enhance the cultural validity and emic interpretation of the etic data, that is, the quantitatively collected survey data. Focus group discussions are commonly seen as methods that elicit perspectives of the participants from their subjective perspectives (Hennink 2014; Morgan 1997; Stewart et al. 2007; Wibeck, et al 2007). Yet, compared to individual interviews, it was believed that focus group discussions enabled participants to refine their own views based on the insights and discussions of others.

One of the advantages of focus group discussions to serve as the reflective emic analysis method was their ability to act as a social moderation of the views of the participants. Focus group discussions can – to some extent – serve as both a quality and a fact check (Hennink 2014), which was considered important in this particular study and methodological inquiry, where the focus was on the participants' perspectives on the quantitative data. By engaging in intensive discussions, the interaction amongst the participants increases, which may again result in raising

additional topics or different perspectives, sharing similar experiences and thus increasing the clarity, depth and richness of the discussion (ibid.). Additionally, as the discussion proceeds, professionals from the ECE field could check and balance each other's views of the perceived changes that had taken place over the past twenty years.

The origins of the focus group method can be traced back to sociological research conducted in 1940s, when the method of 'focused interviews' was used to examine people's responses towards the US government's wartime radio propaganda programmes during the World War II (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson 2001; Hennink 2014). The investigation was developed to enhance the existing quantitative data, and the purpose of the discussions was to collect the subjective views of the participants. The pioneer work differed from the previous group interviews of its time as it was aimed at participants who had been involved in a particular situation and therefore shared an otherwise subjective experience. The historical roots of the use of focus group discussions as an exploratory qualitative research strategy were similar to the course of this study and provided a frame of reference to pursue with the method.

Based on the arguments above, the method of reflective emic analysis was then developed. The idea of the method was to organise focus group discussions in each of the studied society, where the selected participants reflected the quantitatively obtained data.

Selecting the cultural informants

To ensure the selection of participants who could participate in the focus group discussions and serve as 'cultural informants' (Matsumoto & Leong Jones 2009) from their societal perspective, and who would have sufficient knowledge of changes in ECE, child care centre directors were selected. Firstly, it was believed they hold a more holistic view of the ECE field in their societal context compared to teachers or parents, whose perspectives might be more focused on the individual group or child. Secondly, due to the differences in the provision of ECE in the studied societies, centre directors were a unified group, whereas the positions of upper-level leaders were not necessarily comparable within different systems. In order to be able to discuss the changes in ECE, extensive management experience was preferred, but not mandatory. This was seen as adding richness to the study, as child care centre directors were perceived as a homogenous group in relation to their professional background and status, but heterogeneous in relation to their experience counted in years of service in the field.

According to methodology literature, particular care should be placed on the selection of the participants for the focus group discussions in order to enable a free flow of discussion and produce rich, and versatile data (Morgan 1997; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook 2007). A purposeful sampling technique was therefore used to identify and select the child care centre directors, namely the ECE experts, who were perceived as especially knowledgeable and experienced in relation to the research topic (Palinkas et al. 2015). Thus the problems related to purposeful sampling are always inherent these were critically discussed in the previous section 4.1.

Preparing the reflective emic analysis discussions
After selecting the suitable research method and identifying the suitable cultural informants to interpret and reflect the quantitative data, it was important to decide how many participants should be included in each discussion and how many discussions were needed in order to gain enough data. Research literature commonly suggests that the number of participants per focus group discussion should be five to ten, although there is no clear consensus (Morgan 1997; Palinkas et al. 2015). Some endorse the use of very small focus groups with three to four participants (Morgan 1997; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran 2009) in order to ensure the dialogic nature of the discussions (Freeman 2006). Small groups work best if the participants are interested in the same topic and possibly know each other outside of the discussions (Morgan 1997), which again increases group cohesiveness and thus adds to the richness of the discussions (Stewart et al. 2007). Most importantly, the optimal number of participants depends on the research task and the nature of the discussion topic. The fragmented system and lack of organised ECE networks in the US context created a situation in which child care centre directors were difficult to reach, and therefore a decision was made to proceed with approximately three participants in each focus group.

Before the actual data collection, a preliminary focus group discussion was arranged in Finland to pre-test the REA method. Child care centre directors from nearby municipalities were invited to join the discussion, and altogether five directors were able to join. The idea was to test the feasibility of the method and to see how the participants understood the stimulus materials and how their discussion progressed during the session. The results were promising and provided a frame of reference to proceed with similar focus group discussions in other study contexts.

After careful planning, the focus group discussions were then conducted, country by country, during 2014. With fewer participants in each discussion, it was necessary to organise four to five different sessions in order to achieve the saturation point

and thus gain a valid amount of data. Discussions were implemented in cities other than where the quantitative data was collected in order to allow the participants to recede from the data and reflect on the results more objectively.

Society context	Data collection phase	Focus groups (n)	Participants (n)
USA	2014	4	18
Russia	2014	5	14
Finland	2014	5	15
Total	2014	14	47

Table 4.   The number of focus groups and participants in 2014

In the USA, child care centre directors or head teachers (n= 18) from the state of New York participated in the study. Because the ECE system is so diverse in the USA, four focus groups were formed by utilising a statewide ECE network. Three of the focus group discussions in the USA were held during a conference[3] for ECE professionals of this network, and one discussion was held outside the conference. However, the directors participating in this separately organised discussion worked for two centres that were part of the same network. All of the centres of the particular network were not-for-profit and received funding from the state through the Operating Grant and the Child Care & Development Block Grant. These operating grant funds were targeted for the operating costs of the centres, including salaries, supplies, equipment and meals for children. All of the directors represented centres that were licensed by the NYS Office of Children & Family Services. Additionally, the directors represented centres that were accredited by National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

The Russian focus group data was obtained from a city in Siberia during five sessions held for child care centre directors (n = 14). The directors participating in the focus group discussions represented different child care centres around the municipal region. The discussions were organised through a continuing education

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[3] Due to the schedule of the conference, the number of focus group discussions was smaller, yet the number of participants was greater than in Russia and Finland. However, as data analysis later showed, this was not problematic from the point of view of the research design.

institute targeting the directors. The directors were invited to participate according to their willingness. Due to the undersigned PhD researcher's language barrier in the Russian context, an interpreter joined the discussions. In order to minimise the effect of both the facilitator and the interpreter, and to compensate for the language barrier, the data collection procedures needed to be carefully designed for the entire cross-cultural study. The language barrier in the Russian context determined that role of the facilitator as well as the interpreter was to stay objective and not interfere in the flow of the discussions with either verbal or non-verbal communication. However, without unnecessary disturbance, their role was also to ensure that the discussion stayed on the topic and the equal rotation of participation amongst the individuals took place.

In Finland, five focus group discussions were organised in a southern urban city for child care centre directors and those in a similar position (n = 15). All of the participants represented public centres of the same municipality. The directors were contacted through the ECE administration of the municipality, and their participation was voluntary.

Stimulus material for the reflective focus group discussions
Preparing the stimulus material for focus group discussion was carefully considered and planned. An overview of the existing studies was conducted in order to gain valid ideas for the material. Freeman's (2006) exploration of 'poetic displays' as a trigger for dialogue in the focus group discussions was inspiring and provided a baseline to continue with the development of the stimulus material. Freeman applied poetic displays based on previous focus group transcripts as triggers to increase interactive discussion amongst parents while investigating standardised testing at schools. The study design resonated well with the aims of this dissertation and thus Freeman's results encouraged the presentation of quantitative data to stimulate discussions.

Because the idea of the reflective emic analysis was to enhance the contextual and cultural nuances of the quantitative data, it was important to present the results of the surveys in ways that prompted the selected ECE professionals, specifically, the child care centre directors, to understand them and thus enter into intensive discussions over the selected topics. Instead of perceiving the focus group discussions simply as a methodological tool, they were viewed as a forum to construct socially shared knowledge.

The reflective discussion session aimed to promote dialogue amongst the participants. Therefore, the results of the quantitative data needed to be presented

as clearly and visually as possible, but in an in-depth way, to enable the exchange of perspectives and collective knowledge production. The quantitative survey data chosen for this study was analysed based on the mean scores, in order to make the changes visible between the years and the society contexts[4]. The presentation of the stimuli material needed to be as concrete and simple as possible to evoke the discussion among the participants.

The first part of the focus group discussion dealt with the parents' quality assessments and how these assessments had changed over the study period. The general questions guiding the discussions were as follows: How do you assess the changes that have taken place within the last two decades considering the quality of ECE according to parents? What are your interpretations of what has possibly affected the changes in the assessments? How do the results reflect the overall quality of early childhood education? (see Appendix 1). The stimulus materials presented focused on the changes in 1991–2011 and were presented as bar charts describing either positive or negative changes in parental assessments or as diagrams expressing the item values (see Appendix 2).

The second part of the discussion focused on parent-teacher co-operation (see Appendix 3). The general questions asked were the following: How satisfied are parents and teachers with the co-operation, and how have the views changed between 1991 and 2011? How congruent are the views of the parents and teachers about children, their upbringing, co-operation and the child's satisfaction with child care? In analysing teachers' and parents' views regarding these topics, their rankings were weighted, and then these summative rankings were used in comparing the congruence.

4.3   Data analysis

This section describes the analysis of the preliminary data, i.e. the data obtained through focus groups in 1991, 2011, and 2014. While the procedures were different during the study phases in 1991 and 2011 than in the latter phase in 2014, this section will provide an overview of the analysis. The processes of each individual sub-study are described in each article with greater details. Despite the differences, the paradigmatic principles of the analysis were alike in each phase, which allowed the

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[4] Some of the quantitative data collected has been published elsewhere using statistical methods. See for example Hujala, Vlasov & Szecsi (2017).

researcher to conduct a meta-analysis of the results of the sub-studies, and hence formulate a clear picture of the overall results.

The focus of each sub-study differed in relation to the research questions, which then guided the selection of the analysis methods, thus allowing a deeper interpretation of the data. The epistemological orientation of the data analysis was inductive within every sub-study. Inductive analysis is a process, in which the coding frames do not pre-exist, and the researcher's analytic preconceptions have a non-existent or at least a minimum effect (Braun and Clarke 2006). However, pure inductive approach is rarely possible, since the concepts used, the research design applied, as well as the methods selected are always based on the decisions of the researcher, and thereby have an evitable effect to the analysis process and eventually to the results (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009).

In the first sub-study, the analysis process followed the objective hermeneutical method adjusted for educational research by Siljander and Karjalainen (1991). The method is based on the idea of shared meaning structures, which appear either on conscious or latent level. Although the informants of this study have contributed to the data through their own subjective meaning making frames, which are evidently based on their personal beliefs of ECE, their beliefs are simultaneously representations of the objective meanings of their surrounding socio-cultural context. The theoretical roots of the method were seen to align and support the aims of the study in hand, to share ideological similarities with the emic-etic approach applied in the study (Pike 1967), and thus provided a suitable backbone to carry out the data analysis.

According to Siljander and Karjalainen (1991), the possibilities of the researcher to reach both the conscious and latent contents of the data is dependent on the cultural competence of the researcher. In other words, how much insider emic-knowledge the researcher has of the socio-cultural context under study. While the primary investigators represented Finnish context, the hypothesis was, they would not have sufficient emic-knowledge of the two other study contexts. Therefore, native researchers from the USA and Russia were engaged with the analysis process as experts of their ECE culture holding the information of the ECE research in their society.

In the second sub-study, the data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009) in which the analysis is based on the interpretation and reasoning of the data, and where the process proceeds from empirical material towards forming a conceptual view of the phenomena. The focus of the analysis was on the general changes, and the aim was to highlight the changes

in ECE from the point of view of the users and management of services, pedagogy and society. The method (ibid.) was chosen, while it provided a broad, yet systematic tool to organise, reduce, cluster and abstract the cross-culturally obtained data.

In the third sub-study, the qualitative data analysis was carried out by applying a thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method, which can be used in identifying, analysing and finally reporting themes within data (ibid.). Following the research aim, the method was found especially useful in identifying and analysing latent patterns (themes) that described educational co-operation within the data-set. However, identifying the themes was found difficult at first. As explained earlier in this study, co-operation is an embedded goal of ECE, and while many times it was not explicitly mentioned by the participants during their focus group discussions, many of the topics had latent relations with the theme of co-operation.

The obtained data contained material in three different languages, which needed to be addressed with care. Before entering the analysis process in each sub-study, the data was transcribed by using a close transcription style (Freeman 2011) in order to formulate a detailed, culturally sensitive description of the data. When analysing data in foreign languages, the fine nuances, idioms and cultural aspects of the data require close attention (Pietilä 2011). The English and Finnish data were analysed in their original languages.

The Russian data was translated and transcribed into Finnish by an interpreter, and all of the translations were tested and validated by back-translation by an additional interpreter. Working in intensive co-operation with the interpreters was necessary in order to discuss and negotiate issues dealing with the translations, such as concepts specific to the study that were difficult to translate. Issues with translations and concept equivalence were important to take into account when carrying out the analysis. All of the interpreters were native Russian speakers, as it was believed they held the needed emic knowledge considering the cultural particularities of the spoken language. The problems related to the languages are critically discussed and ethically considered in the section 6.3.

The analysis process in each sub-study was carried out by following a similar pattern. Each phase started by carefully reading and becoming familiar with the transcribed data. It was important that the analysis was carried out systematically country by country, and at first, by one discussion at a time. With this procedure, the aim was to get familiar with the data of each discussion and to obtain a holistic picture of the discussed topics and themes in the different society contexts. At the same time, any cross-cultural comparisons between the ECE systems in the studied

countries during the first analysis phase were avoided. In the sub-studies II and III, the field notes collected during the data acquisition processes served as a preface to the actual analysis and helped in coding the data. The field notes were used in identifying key points and themes that the participants emphasised during their discussions.

During the first phase of the analysis, the discussions were coded based on relevant and reduced expressions that indicated changes in ECE in accordance with the research questions of each sub-study. After listing the reduced expressions, initial thematic subcategories were identified. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a description of a theme (or a subcategory) is that it captures something of value from the data in relation to the research question. It can be seen to represent some level of patterned response within the data set in hand (ibid.).

The analytical focus during the analysis process in each sub-study was directed to the internal consistency in the participants' responses and the topics they discussed. The extensiveness of the discussion topics and their frequency was taken into account when forming the subcategories or the themes, but they were not systematically counted. Instead of the quantification of the data, the analysis was carried out at the semantic level. For this reason, quantification would not have done justice to the topics discussed between the different society contexts.

In the second phase of the analysis, the initial subcategories or themes from each individual discussion were merged and main themes of the same society context were formed. These main themes described the main changes in the studied countries at the societal level. After identifying the main themes in each studied country, the results were brought together for cross-cultural discussion.

Even though the first and second phases of the analysis followed the procedures described above, the third phase of the analysis had a different focus in each sub-study. This is a part, where the used methods of analysis particularly differentiate.

In the first sub-study, the cross-cultural discussion and interpretation of the results was carried out by native researchers from each society context. The results of the first sub-study are thus a reflection of the ECE reality of each study context, as a dialogue of the etic (e.g., focus group data) and the local emic (e.g., knowledge in each context) (see also Pike 1967).

After organising the data, and conducting preliminary content analysis, main themes to the research questions were formulated. (e.g. Research question: Children's basic needs – theme: emotional wellbeing – fragment of the data: *'Children need love, patience and guidance. To listen and acknowledge their feelings while being consistent'*).

Following the preliminary phase of organising the data, native researchers were engaged in the process as experts of the ECE culture and research in their society. The purpose was to validate the findings by revealing the latent meanings and social constructions through an interpretation and cultural meta-analysis of the results (Siljander & Karjalainen 1991). During the analytic discussions the researchers (i.e. the co-authors of the first article, including the undersigned PhD researcher) were interpreting the data, and searching for clues to the research questions of *what* had changed in their respective socio-cultural ECE context and *why*. The approach of objective hermeneutics offered a useful tool in interpreting the data on both semantic and latent level, and identifying the difference of the subjective and objective, i.e. the historical and cultural levels of the data. The analysis process was a three-dimensional cross-cultural data analysis combining three societies, native interpretations of the results, and the time dimension. The aim of the analysis procedure was to validate the data analysis culturally and enhance the reliability of the study.

In the second sub-study, the content analysis begun by coding the data and identifying the main themes by each country at a time in order to inductively detect the generally perceived changes in ECE within this study frame. (e.g. code: increase of regulations – fragment of the data: *'…Cause the regulations are here and we're going way up there. With the standards.'* USA-FG3, R5). When conducting the cross-cultural examination between the societies, the country-specific themes were merged together, and four main themes common to all countries were formulated. The cross-cultural analysis revealed that the most frequently discussed themes were the same in all of the three studied countries, but the content of the themes varied. This confirmed the supposition that the contents of the themes represented the emic knowledge of each cultural context.

In the final sub-study, the themes identifying the main changes of educational co-operation were different in each studied society. During the analysis process, the analytical focus was directed at detecting themes that described educational co-operation on the latent level. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), analysis at the latent level goes beyond the obvious or the semantic content of the data. The themes are rather representations of the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations or ideologies of co-operation, in which the semantic content of the data becomes visible.

Thematic analysis of the third sub-study begun by first identifying codes, which described co-operation and how it had changed (e.g. code: changed communication

strategies – fragment of the data: *'The type of communication between, teachers and parents I think was much different.'* USA-FG1, R1)

Following this, the second phase of the analysis was carried out country by country, and the codes were now sorted into broader potential themes. When proceeding to the third phase of the thematic analysis, the themes from each societal context were first reviewed, analysed and reported separately. After this, the main themes were identified, which dealt with the perceived co-operation and how it had potentially changed within this study frame. In the discussion, the results from each society context were brought together and the discussion consisted of elements of cross-cultural comparisons.

Finally, when composing the synthesis to answer to the research objectives of the dissertation, a meta-analysis of the results from every sub-study was conducted. The meta-analysis was carried out by first detecting the main results of each sub-study. The main results were then merged and brought into wider discussion. These final results are presented and discussed in the chapters and sections to follow.

In addition to the empirical results, this cross-cultural dissertation aimed to test the REA method (sub-studies II and III) developed specifically during the research project. The analysis of the proposed method is based on the meta-analysis of the focus group data and supported by field notes. The analysis and the reflections of the proposed method are presented with more details in the section 5.5.

5   RESULTS

In this chapter, the results from all three sub-studies are brought together for discussion in order to provide an answer to the aim and objectives of this study. The main aim of the study was to enhance understanding of the evolvement of ECE and the kinds of changes detected within this study frame in the society contexts. The objectives of the study were (1) to examine what the generally perceived changes have been regarding the institutional ECE from the professional point of view in the light of this study frame, (2) to examine how the role of the parents in institutional ECE has changed according to the professionals, (3) to investigate professionals' perspectives of how parent-teacher co-operation in ECE has evolved over the studied time and (4) to evaluate the use of 'reflective emic analysis' method in cross-cultural ECE research. For clarity, the brackets explicate in which of the sub-studies the results were originally published in (i.e., sub-study I, II or III).

The chapter begins by describing the main findings from each individual sub-study. Following this, the results from all three sub-studies are merged together in order to form a synthesis of the focal changes seen in institutional ECE, as well as in the role of parents and in the co-operation between parents and teachers. Finally, the reflections of the used REA method are presented at the end of this chapter.

5.1   Main findings of the sub-studies

Article I – Longitudinal study of changes in teachers' views of early childhood education in the USA, Russia, and Finland

The first sub-study focused on changes in teachers' perspectives on children's basic needs and the things teachers believed should be changed in their societies to meet these needs in order to promote the children's general well-being and quality of life. Additionally, the study investigated how teachers' perceptions of professional work in supporting children's well-being have changed. The aim of the first sub-study was to investigate institutional ECE in each country and connect the studied and perceived changes in the broader societal frame. This was done to make connections

with what was emphasised in the ECE by the teachers to how it reflected the changes in society in general. The main findings of sub-study I suggested major changes both on the micro and macro levels of ECE. In all of the studied societies, the professional work of teachers and how teachers perceived children's needs had changed greatly. Although individuality of children was idealised in each society, the inadequate resources and investments in ECE prevented teachers from achieving their most desired goals.

Article II – Cross-cultural interpretation of changes in early childhood education in the USA, Russia, and Finland

In the second sub-study, the perceived changes in ECE were examined on a general level. The purpose was to allow the trends from each sociocultural context and each discussion to facilitate a broader understanding of what has changed in ECE within each system and how it was reflected in the quality assessments within this study frame. Based on the initial readings, the data was arranged from four perspectives: the users, the society, the pedagogy, and the management of the services. When the subcategories from each society context were formed, they were merged together in a cross-sectional examination. After this examination, four main results common to all society contexts were identified. Within this study frame, the most prevalent changes were related to (1) the changed role of parents as customers, (2) the change in external factors and regulations affecting the services, (3) the change in pedagogic orientation and (4) the changed role of the director. The first three main results listed above were seen as the main causes for the changes in the parental quality assessments. The fourth main result, regarding the director's role, can be viewed as a consequence of these changes. Parents' satisfaction with the directors' competence as leaders had decreased in every societal context, which was discussed and speculated on in every focus group. When the results were examined on the emic level, it was noted that the changes were closely tied to the historical, cultural and societal realities of each study context. In addition, the broader interpretation of the changes can be examined against each system, and it can be used to analyse what kind of ECE is produced by the different ways of organising the services.

The purpose of the third sub-study was to examine how parent-teacher co-operation has evolved in the three studied societies. Based on the quality assessments, child care centre directors in each society reflected the stimuli material, and discussed changes regarding parent-teacher co-operation. The perceptions varied between the societies, for example, in how parents were positioned and how much power they were permitted concerning their child's education process. The main results from each society indicate that parents' awareness of institutional ECE had increased, but the goals and ideals concerning child-rearing both in the home environment as well as in the institutional ECE did not seem to meet. The results suggest that the professionals tended to position themselves over parents, and the communication strategies seem to work from the top down. This was more visible in the US and Russian contexts than in Finland, where the tradition of viewing parents as equal partners concerning institutional ECE seemed to be most visible.

5.2   Changes concerning institutional ECE

Changes in the early educational and pedagogic goals
When examining the changes in institutional ECE in each societal context, it can be seen that the changes were mostly related to the goals of ECE, namely concerning the perceived educational needs of children as well as children's individuality. This focal finding revealed a gap between the professional expectations for ECE versus the expectations for early education, either by the parents or by society in general. According to the results of each sub-study, there were difficulties in reconciling the demands of the society to the tasks set for ECE, compared with the internal development efforts of the field. Furthermore, the pedagogic goals of the professionals and the expectations of the societies for ECE did not seem to meet.

Although the implications were apparent in all of the societies' contexts, this finding seemed to be the most evident in the US context. When teachers were asked to describe children's most salient needs and what they would change in their respective societies to meet these needs, the most emphasised need amongst the US teachers was connected with children's emotional well-being. This applied consistently for two decades (sub-study I). The teachers in 1991 emphasised the importance of children's emotional needs to be at the core of ECE. At the same

time, they requested investments in ECE in order to strengthen the system and its quality. In the US context, where the roles and responsibilities between the state and the individual had traditionally been strictly divided, based on the results, the role of the institutional ECE can be seen to have strengthened since the 1990s (sub-studies I and II). The growing importance placed by society on early education and the increase in the demands of child care seemed to have raised the status of the ECE services.

However, despite the perceived strengthening of institutional ECE in the US context, the societal expectations towards ECE seemed to have shifted further from those of professionals working in the field. The growing demands for outcome-based results of the effectiveness of ECE seem to have overruled the internal and important goal of ECE, which, according to both teachers and directors (sub-studies I and II), is to focus on children's emotional needs as well as support children's well-being and learning in developmentally appropriate ways. As demonstrated in the second sub-study, the push for academics in ECE was perceived to have increased significantly since 1991 due to the push towards measuring child outcomes and adding to teacher accountability. This finding aligns with several others confirming that the rather neoliberalist discourse at the societal level has evidently increased in the US ECE context (Brown, Lan & Jeong 2015; Russell 2011). There seemed to be a unanimous concern amongst the directors that the surrounding society seemed to focus more on outcomes, while the field was more concerned with the pedagogical process and developmentally appropriate practices (sub-study II).

In addition to the US context, the societal aspirations to increase both the human capital resources as well as productivity seemed to cause pressure on both the parents and the professionals in Russia and Finland as well (sub-studies I, II, III). As noted by the Russian directors, *'Parents don't appreciate playing, which is actually a very topical and important issue and probably the most basic concept. They [parents] still appreciate teaching much more.' (Rus-FG5, R1).*

According to the directors (sub-study II), parents felt pressured by the demands of society in educating their young children, and this pressure was then passed on to the ECE providers. Despite the growing expectations of the societies towards early education, the resources invested in ECE by the society were seen to be insufficient. There seemed to be friction in seeking to balance the expectations of the society and the pedagogical goals of the professionals. Although teachers in all of the society contexts expressed a desire to work according to their educational ideologies, the inadequate resources and lack of sufficient investments in ECE prevented them

from achieving their most desired goals (sub-study I). This was evident within every society context, although the emphasis and the reasons seemed to vary.

When examining the focal changes concerning institutional ECE in the Russian context, the most evident changes were related to the altered educational goals of ECE and the challenges related to reaching these goals (sub-study II). Based on the results from all of the sub-studies, Russian ECE has been at a crossroads, trying to figure out its new position. Along with the legislative and curricular reforms, the individualistic and child-centred approach is now a guiding principle of the ECE pedagogy (Rubtsov & Yudina 2010; Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015).

However, the possibilities for successfully implementing the ECE reforms in the Russian context were seen to be limited due to several reasons. Firstly, both the teachers (sub-study I) and the directors (sub-studies II and III) were concerned with the lack of resources invested in Russian ECE. Whilst both recent research and the governing instruments place heavy expectations on an individualistic approach, the increased size of child groups, insufficient child-teacher ratios and the spread of the ideal of inclusion have added pressure on professionals. The limited resources were actually seen as preventing the professionals from working according to the ideals of the new curriculum. Secondly, the older professional generation of Russian teachers were seen to have difficulties in adopting the new educational philosophies, as both their education and experiences have been heavily influenced by the more traditional adult-centred pedagogy and the superior role of ECE programme developed in the Soviet times (sub-studies I and II). Thirdly, even though the ECE pedagogy had shifted towards a more constructivist and playful learning approach, this goal was not seen to be meeting the expectations that parents were perceived to have towards ECE (sub-study II). According to the directors, the pressure for academics and school readiness had been increasingly emphasised in the society and amongst the young parents. This again was seen to add pressure on ECE, as parents were seen to prefer straightforward teaching over play (sub-study II).

Finnish teachers' and directors' views on professional ECE differed slightly from their US and Russian colleagues. The systematic development of the national ECE system in Finland as well as the curriculum reform in the beginning of the new millennium was reflected in the results of every sub-study. According to the Finnish directors (sub-study II), the most significant driver for the development of ECE during the past decades had been the National Curriculum Guideline, which went into effect for the first time in 2003. Whereas in 1991, teachers emphasised the care aspects of ECE, focusing mainly on children's physical needs as the basis for their balanced and holistic development, by 2011, this deliberation had moved towards

emphasising the individualism and active agency of children as well as the emotional aspects of ECE (sub-study I). The results from the second sub-study indicated that the development of the ECE curriculum had not only strengthened professionalism and the pedagogical awareness of the staff but also increased parents' awareness of ECE.

On one hand, when comparing the Finnish results from the first sub-study to the second sub-study, some differences between the topics discussed amongst the directors and teachers can be detected. The optimistic and slightly idealistic discourse amongst directors differed from the discussions of the teaching staff. In 2011, Finnish teachers suggested that the basic physical needs of the majority of children could be met; however, the lack of resources to meet individual pedagogical needs was seen as problematic. Large child groups and high ratios were seen as major obstacles in implementing the individualistic ideal, which had been consistently emphasised in the national curriculum. Additionally, whilst in the beginning of 1990s teachers called for the child's subjective right to ECE, in 2011 they expressed a desire to restrict it (sub-study I).

The increased regulations concerning the quality and the safety of the services
In addition to the changes in the educational and pedagogical goals and different expectations, another significant change was perceived to be the need to regulate and assess the quality of the ECE services. Despite the variations in how institutional ECE was governed in each studied society, the external regulations of the ECE sector were seen to have increased significantly. The notion of changes in the structural features of ECE (such as ratios, group sizes, facilities) and increased regulation was particularly explicit in the second sub-study, but the changes in the structural factors of ECE were evident in the two other sub-studies as well.

As noted by the directors in the US context, the market-driven and private service system had increased the demand for external regulation from the perspectives of promoting and ensuring the quality of the ECE services. In the Finnish and Russian context, the regulation was different, as the governance of ECE services had a strong legislative basis.

The US directors expressed concerns regarding how the decentralisation of the ECE governance and the lack of universal ECE policies had created both opportunity and demand for the external licensors to enter the field. In order to meet the minimum quality standards of the state and to be able to operate as a certified and licensed ECE service provider, centres needed to apply for additional accreditation from external organisations. Amongst the biggest ones are such actors

as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or national rating operators as the Quality Ratings and Improvement Systems (QRIS; see, e.g., Connors & Morris 2015; Sabol & Pianta 2015). The external accreditation was needed to increase and show the level of the programme quality, but it also added to the market value of the programme. A frequently discussed topic amongst the directors from the USA (sub-study II) was that the external accreditation processes were seen to add significantly to the workload of both the director and the staff. Additionally, in order to maintain the accreditation, centres were required to meet and maintain the specific accreditation criteria set by the external evaluators, which again placed constraints on the implemented policies and pedagogies of the centres.

A significant counter effect of the increase of the regulations was that it was found to narrow the possibilities to implement pedagogical practices according to the ideals of the professionals (sub-study II). As can be seen through this example: *'The last incident that happened with us. My licenser said 'make sure she understands and soon as that parent walks out the door that child is yours, and you go by regulation'. So, your licenser right there is saying, I don't care what that parent thinks or feels.' (USA-FG1, R2).* This finding aligns with previous research (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow 2008) and adds that regulation may hinder or even prevent the implementation of desired pedagogical processes. Additionally, the regulations were seen to restrict other ideals of ECE professionalism, such as possibilities for educational co-operation with parents. The hindering of the pedagogical processes was especially evident in the US context, where the licensing regulations were seen to have significantly increased, according to the directors (sub-study II).

In the Russian and Finnish ECE systems, the regulations preventing pedagogical practices were seen to be related merely to the health and sanitary regulations or to liability or responsibility issues (sub-study II). Children's safety was naturally emphasised in every society context, but the increase of the safety regulations was seen as especially problematic amongst the Finnish directors in their focus group discussions. The regulations were considered to direct the attention to the health and safety of the children in a negative way: what was originally meant as a precaution seemed to turn into guidance or prevention of pedagogical practices. According to directors in all of the studied societies, the regulative pressure and the questions concerning liability issues dictated the work of the professionals, and narrowed their pedagogical decision making.

In the Finnish context, the societal-level regulations and factors affecting the implemented pedagogy were related to the safety and the sanitation of the physical

facilities. The issues regarding the ageing of the facilities and the increased public discourse about indoor air problems were critically addressed in every focus group amongst the Finnish directors (sub-study II). Due to the poor conditions of the facilities, many centres were forced to run their programs in alternative locations, which again made it challenging to provide quality ECE. Some of the facilities were not seen as suitable for implementing ECE in line with the goals set for the practices, which again was seen to restrain the pedagogical autonomy of the professionals. While poor indoor air is a serious health issue, the failure to solve the indoor problems of the child care facilities was seen to add to the workload of the professionals. According to the directors (sub-study II), the demands for increasing the quality of ECE and developing pedagogical practices were seen as impossible, while the investments directed to building and designing new learning environments were insufficient.

The changed role of the professionals
Changing societies, changes in ECE and changes in the roles of parents challenge the field and force changes in the professionalism and leadership of ECE. In all of the studied society contexts, parents' satisfaction with the directors' competence had decreased. This issue was discussed greatly in every focus group in sub-studies II and III and triggered the respondents to reflect on their work on multiple levels. However, this topic needs to be addressed with care, as the diminished views of leadership may have caused the directors to defend themselves during the focus group discussions. This was especially evident in the US context. The fact that there was a decline in parental assessment of leadership, led the respondents to reflect on the overall reasons for changes in ECE quality from various perspectives. Critical quality assessments caused deep reflection within the respondents, and the changes in roles of the directors were discussed, analysed and even justified.

It was noted that the demands and expectations for leadership had grown in the past years, as the changing societies and consequently changing ECE organisations challenged leadership. Despite the changes and increase in both managerial and pedagogical tasks, the availability of leadership training or immersion programmes were insufficient. The growing demands placed on ECE leadership versus the lack of professional support and training were discussed in nearly every focus group in every society context (sub-studies II and III). The perceived increase in managerial tasks, combined with the need to focus more on budgeting than on pedagogical leadership tasks, seemed to cause frustration amongst the directors. Balancing between the tasks and increased expectations seemed to tire the directors out, which

again – according to the directors – had led to the decrease in the parental ratings of directors' competence.

The differences between the societies were evident, and the variation can be seen to reflect the features of both the market- and public-driven systems. Directors in the US context found it important to consider the customer needs and to keep this in mind when hiring staff due to high competition in the ECE. In addition to their good educational proficiency, the staff were expected to have good customer services skills to be able to meet the needs of the parents while serving as representatives of their employer. It seemed that although they were educating children, it was important to keep the parents satisfied as they were the ones choosing and paying for the services.

Similarly to their US colleagues, many of the Russian directors noted changes in their work. Whereas two decades ago, the subject expertise of the directors was considered their primary leadership task, their managerial duties have now grown. According to the directors, parents of today have more knowledge on ECE, and they express their hopes and wishes concerning their child's early education more actively than in years past.

In the Finnish context, the directors perceived their roles to have changed significantly, as a majority of the directors are now appointed as full-time directors instead of working in the child groups. This substantive change, in addition to the increase in the administrative tasks, has led to a situation where the directors are not in personal, daily contact with the parents as they were twenty years ago (sub-study II). According to the Finnish respondents, this change was represented in the parental assessments, as it has become more difficult for parents to accurately evaluate directors' work.

5.3   Changes in the role of parents

The second research objective examined how the role of parents in institutional ECE had changed. In the discussions in every society context, remarks were made about the societies becoming more open, which had then generally increased people's active agency considering their lives as well as their willingness to influence on matters concerning them. The field of ECE was considered to reflect this notion as well, which in turn is evident in parents' increased activity towards ECE.

When conducting deeper analysis on the level of the micro-system, namely the child's family in each society context, the notion of the parents' increased role as

customers of ECE services became prevalent over other topics (sub-study II). The customer orientation of the parents was perceived to have increased in all of the studied society contexts, despite what the model for provision of the ECE services was in the studied society context. Unlike twenty years ago, parents were no longer expected to simply adjust to the service they were provided. Instead, they were perceived to be more demanding, and their expectations were higher. According to the directors (sub-study II), this manifested as criticism towards ECE and was reflected in parents' quality assessments.

The notion of parental expectations was reflected by one of the US respondents, although this excerpt describes well the thoughts of their Russian and Finnish colleagues: '…*parents are so much more educated. About what they want for their children in early childhood I don't, I really do think there's been an upsurge of people who don't, even something as simple as calling it daycare. A lot of parents calling, even prefer education, early childhood centres. Early education, early learning. The whole concept of it has changed incredibly. From a parent point of view. And they're educated more about what they want their children to receive. Their standards are higher. So they expect more quality, they expect more education when they get their child in here, it is not as simple as plopping your kid, at the neighbour's house in front of the TV, while mum goes to work. Parents don't want that any more. So, I think that as their expectations have grown with the industry, I think, maybe they're not as satisfied 'cause it's not quite there yet. We haven't reached, maybe what their expectations are.*' (USA-FG 1, R2)

In addition to high-quality ECE, parents were clearly seen to expect more individualised, instant and responsive service for their family needs. Based on the results of the second sub-study, today's parents do not just settle for things as they are – they demand. In all of the studied society contexts, the directors described child care centres as 'the Supermarkets of Choice' (sub-study II), where parents go and request services suitable for their individual needs. This was considered a remarkable difference compared to the situation in the early 1990s.

In the US context, one of the reasons for the increasing the consumerism in parents was seen to be the lack of a universal ECE system, along with the privately organised markets as well as the high levels of the child care costs. According to the US directors, the freedom to choose ECE services, the increased marketisation of ECE and the emphasis on individualism in the society in general have increased since the 1990s. The changes were perceived to affect parents' roles as paying clients and increased their roles as customers selecting and demanding services. The directors emphasised that the ECE field needs to be acknowledged as an industry, and it has to react to the needs of the society. The society has not been able to respond to the demands to increase the amount of affordable child care, as more and more mothers,

as traditional primary caretakers of the children, have entered the workforce (sub-study II). However, it can be noted that market-driven ECE increases not only the freedom of choice in the selection of suitable ECE services but also the responsibilities in making these decisions. According to both teachers' and directors' opinions, parents did not seem to have adequate information regarding ECE or child development to evaluate the services and make decisions regarding their quality when making the important decisions of which services to choose for their families (sub-studies II and III).

Similarly, in the Russian context, the role of parents was seen to have strengthened (sub-studies I, II and III). Compared to the two other countries, the societal changes at the macro level have been the greatest, and these changes have given people more power over choices concerning many aspects of their lives, including education, unlike in the Soviet times. Regarding the respondents, the educational services were not questioned during the Soviet times, as people were subordinate to the state. Today, parents have begun to demand quality services and more individually tailored solutions for their family needs (sub-studies II and III). Society becoming more open was seen to allow this on one hand, but on the other hand, as the changes in educational institutions are commonly seen to happen much slower (e.g., Ryzhova 2012), this was seen as an issue that caused friction between the parents and the professionals (sub-study III). The active agency of parents was perceived to have increased, and the focus has shifted from a subordinate parental role to a more co-operative stance. It was evident that *the political and societal shift has made it necessary to reconsider the responsibilities of the state and the individual'* (sub-study I, 209). Whereas in the 1990s the Russian teachers emphasised the state's role in ensuring the education and overall well-being of children and their families, twenty years later the focus had transferred to the family. The findings align with several others (Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015) which emphasise that Russian parents have become increasingly engaged with ECE. According to Taratukhina et al. (2006, 5) during the Soviet era, *'the State actually usurped the function of education and upbringing, displacing the family. Parents were considered helpers of the educators rather than equal partners in children's education and upbringing.'* Despite the legislative acts to change this, as well as guiding policies and teachers' education (Ryzhova 2012; Savinskaya 2015), there seemed to be disagreement amongst the directors (sub-study II) regarding whether parents have been offered enough opportunities to engage and co-operate with the programs. According to the directors, one of the reasons is that the ageing of the staff hinders the development of the practices, they tend to hold to the old ways, thus preventing the parents from taking a more active role (sub-study II).

Since the 1990s, in the Finnish context, there have been great structural changes in organizing ECE services. Similarly to the US context, ECE in Finland has been traditionally considered from the point of view of the social welfare service, in which the provision of public child care was targeted only to low-income families. According to the directors (sub-study II), the parents in the 1991 study were satisfied if they simply qualified to receive child care, whereas twenty years later, child care has become a universal norm. Generally, parents do not just settle with what has been offered, and their increased expectations were seen to be reflected in their decreased satisfaction with the quality ratings: *'In general in the society, the fact that people want to affect and be in charge of their own matters has changed, and people don't settle with just what is offered.' (Fin-FG2, R2).*

5.4   Changes in educational co-operation

After interpreting changes in the institutional ECE and the role of the parents, the focus was then directed to the crossroads of the children's two microenvironments and to the third objective of the study, focusing on the perceived changes in educational co-operation between parents and teachers, that is, in the changes in the mesosystem. This chapter is mostly based on the findings of the third sub-study but is supplemented with the results from the other two sub-studies.

The findings demonstrate that in all of the studied societies, the importance of educational co-operation and its significance in supporting children's learning and development was considered to have increased over the past twenty years (sub-studies I, II and III). This finding quite naturally follows the strengthening of the global ideals of ECE concerning parent-teacher co-operation, increasing parental involvement in the programmes and moving towards forming reciprocal partnerships. The trends can be seen, for example, in the development of the OECD 'Starting Strong' documents, where the significance of parent-teacher co-operation was not stressed in the beginning of the millennium (OECD 2001), whereas ten years later, co-operation was perceived to be one of the most pivotal chapters (OECD 2012).

The data analysis of the three societies revealed how differently the generally perceived goals and the global ideals of co-operation were enacted in each society context. The history and societal task of ECE, as well as the differently organised systems, seemed to overrule the global ideals set for co-operation, thus leading to different interpretations of the expectations for co-operation from the professional

point of view (sub-study III). Although parent-teacher co-operation was perceived to form the basis for quality ECE, parents' actual opportunities to influence the activities were still seen to be limited in all of the society contexts. There were many factors preventing the fulfilment of this goal, such as a lack of time, internal politics and structural problems. For example, in the US context, directors were concerned about co-operation from a different stance than in the Finnish context. It seems that the different expectations for the goals of ECE and the push for academic achievement created different expectations for co-operation as well.

Additionally, the variations between the society contexts regarding how much directors were willing to relinquish power to the parents were significant. In line with the findings by Sims-Schouten (2016), the results of sub-study III revealed some stigmas and labels regarding how parents were judged in the co-operation process, which were then perceived to be hindering collaboration. This was shown in the focus group discussions, as the directors tended to position themselves over parents, for example, in relation to how much knowledge on child development parents were perceived to have. The directors, especially in the US and Russian contexts, seemed to judge parents on their activeness in participating, their perceived priorities or their deficiencies (sub-study III). Parents were viewed as lacking willingness or time to engage with the co-operation, such as the institutionally defined activities offered for them. This then, was seen to hinder co-operation.

According to the directors from all of the society contexts (sub-study III), differences between the generations regarding issues such as child-rearing were seen to cause discrepancies between the professionals and the parents, which again hindered co-operation. This was demonstrated in the paternalistic tone used by the directors in their focus group discussions while reflecting on the changes in their societies. Such as this example shows: *'Their background is not in child development … And then a lot of times too … they don't like to face certain facts either. Like if you think that their child needs services or things like that, and you're trying to help, 'no not my job, nope'. They just put a wall up. Because, I don't know that they're not necessarily educated in it or they just, they don't want to accept things. If you're trying to help them. But it is very different, we have, we know what we know and they don't necessarily, know those same things. They know how to do, accounting.' (USA-FG4, R2).* The paternalistic tone was especially apparent amongst the US directors, and to some extent in the Russian discussions, but not so much amongst the Finnish directors (sub-studies II and III).

The results indicated that the respondents positioned parents in relation to the goals and objectives of ECE from the professional point of view. The definitions of educational co-operation seemed to vary between the society contexts and how the

criteria for 'good parenting' were formulated. The professionals tended to evaluate parents, or more specifically their parenting, as 'good' or 'bad' in relation to how well they fit into the expectations of the centres or the professionals. The differences in the upbringing ideals and goals of parents and professionals were seen to be caused by the changed expectations towards the ECE institutions. The directors agreed unanimously that the parenting styles of today's parents have changed, and they were often viewed as conflicting with the upbringing strategies of the centres.

In the USA, the directors characterised educational co-operation mainly as trying to increase parents' involvement in special events or learning tasks supplied by the professionals. However, due to the heavy regulation, educational co-operation between parents and teachers was often times perceived to be one-sided – mainly information and instruction provided by professionals. In their discussions, directors frequently referred to the 'Parent Handbook', which the NAEYC-accredited centres were required to have. Generally, the handbook consists of general information for parents, centre policies, maintaining health issues, daily routines and early learning curriculum and process (see more, e.g., www.naeyc.org). According to the directors, parents were required to read the handbook and accept the care and learning conditions of the centre. This led to a situation where the wishes and expectations of parents could not be taken into account at the level that professionals would have liked to respond to them, if the wishes contradicted the regulations. Although directors agreed unanimously that engaging parents with ECE was both a prerequisite of quality and highly emphasised in both the state and NAEYC, the implementation of actual co-operation seemed to be rather one-sided and focused mostly on supporting learning or developmental outcomes of the children. It was acknowledged that parents wanted the best for their children, but the views of 'child's best interest' were not congruent between the parents and the teachers.

According to the Russian directors, parents have been actively invited to join ECE activities together with their children and teachers. There is now more information available for parents concerning ECE as a system than there was twenty years ago. It seems that the appreciation of childhood has increased in the society, and parents are now more interested and eager to express their demands and opinions to ECE professionals. Additionally, parents have offered resources and help for the centres, either in material form or by building and constructing the learning environment. As some of the parents were more active than others, the directors were urged to constantly search for new strategies for involving and activating parents.

Although parents were encouraged to engage in ECE, some of the Russian directors were reluctant to allow parents to have too much influence, for example, concerning the curriculum work and planning processes of the centres. As noted by the Russian directors *'Parents can influence some individual activities, but not the activities that are separately planned and organized … child care centres have to meet the expectations of the municipalities … Parents cannot influence the parts of the programme [curriculum] that are mandatory, because they exist and we must follow them … I am sure, though, that if this question is raised in ten years' time, the answer will be different…' (Rus-FG5, R1, R2).*

There seemed to be a dichotomy between responding to the increased individual needs and the strong tradition of collective thinking, where individual needs (i.e., child's or family's needs) should never be superior to the needs of a group. In addition, teachers' everyday encounters with parents were considered problematic because of the structural resources of the groups. There were usually two teachers working in a child group, but because they were working in different shifts (one at a time), the directors felt there was not enough time for daily sharing with parents. Additionally, directors perceived difficulties in circulating information between the teachers due to these working shifts.

In Finland, the fundamental role of educational co-operation in ECE was repeatedly emphasised in every discussion (sub-study III). This can be seen to reflect the prevailing ideologies, where ECE is based on partnerships with parents. According to the Finnish directors, the launching of the National Curriculum Guidelines in 2003 was the beginning of the increasing consideration of the importance of reciprocal partnership with parents; however, research on the importance of co-operation dates back significantly further (Huttunen 1984; Tiilikka 2005). In line with the guidelines, parents' roles as their children's primary caretakers and experts, holding the best knowledge of their children, was underlined consistently in every focus group discussion. According to the Finnish directors (sub-study III), educational co-operation was seen to be based on trust, a sense of equality and having a connection for communication, even if the perceptions of educational goals differed between the parents and the educators.

The systematic development of co-operation practices has been on the national ECE policy agenda for a long time, and the topic has been a major interest of research (e.g., Kekkonen 2012; Karikoski & Tiilikka 2017). At the same time, various participatory approaches to engage parents have been developed, such as parent-teacher conferences, where an individual education plan for every child is drawn up (Karila & Alasuutari 2012). These democratic practises were seen to have created an atmosphere wherein the role of the authoritarian role of the teacher changed into

activating parents into dialogue. As discussed by the Finnish directors: *'It is actually wrong to say that we [parents and teachers] should have a shared vision of the child and what he/she is. Why couldn't there be a multi-perspective view? … After all, it is good that we both see the various aspects of a child, and then form shared educational goals together, which we can support and develop for the child.' (Fin-FG5, R2).*

However, in some discussions, the directors did agree that the true influence parents have on ECE is limited, and there are only certain aspects of the ECE work that parents should and can influence. The participants acknowledged the importance of understanding the holistic nature of the child's development and the interdependency of the different microenvironments to be in the centre of the pedagogy and education in ECE. The social pedagogical traditions have seemed to develop the foundation for such co-operation to be created.

As a conclusion of the results, the societal role of ECE was seen to have strengthened in each study context, along with enhanced parental awareness of ECE and therefore their expectations of the services. In each society context, the perceived changes can be seen to follow similar trends, but when examined more closely, they feature both the governance of the ECE systems and broader discourses in each society. The results indicate clear connections between the general changes in the societies and the prevalent public discourses.

5.5   The use of REA as a cross-cultural research method

Whereas the previous chapters presented the results of the empirical part of the study, this chapter addresses the methodological research objective set for the study: to develop a REA method suitable for cross-cultural ECE research. The reflection of the method is derived from the use of the proposed method during sub-studies II and III.

The reflection of the applied REA method is based on the meta-level analysis of the focus group discussions and the undersigned researcher's (i.e., focus group facilitator's) field notes. This reflection pursues to exemplify how the local emic interpretations of the changes were contested, deconstructed and reconstructed by the participants during the focus group discussions. The analysis of the applied REA method aims to broaden the understanding of how child care centre directors' discussion, reflection and analysis of the quantitatively obtained quality assessments provided an insight into how they perceived the changes in their local contexts and thus their emic perspective. The aim was to generate knowledge that would have

been difficult or even impossible to derive solely through statistical analysis of the etic data.

When the participants started to discuss the changes in their own societal contexts, their attention was easily (and naturally) drawn to the greatest changes in the quality assessments. Although it was noted by the participants that the changes between the time periods were minor (see Appendix 2), those perceived changes were merely a starting point for a much richer discussion. Therefore, it can be seen that the stimulus material, namely the rough survey data, served as a statement or a trigger from which the discussion then led further, often to issues that were not explicitly expressed in the assessments. The respondents identified connections and causal relationships between the quality items presented in the material and thus provided more in-depth and nuanced explanations of how, why and in what direction the ECE services had changed, as this example shows:

> R1: The other thing, though I thought of with that number 14 with the rules and policies of the centres is, we know fully well that we've got more regulation. More restrictions. So there are things where we used to have more flexibility with parents. Whereas now, I don't know how many times a day I say to the parent 'but this is a regulation'.
> R3: Right, we've become more strict in their eyes. Which probably leads to number 12 [Director's competence to lead] which is, they don't think we're competent because we're not letting them do half of what we, what you, I used to do this all the time. And now I can't do it, why won't you… you don't know what you're doing. [utters a laugh]
> R5: Or we have to back it up in saying, we have to strictly be in compliance with regulations. (USA-FG3)

Instead of focusing on the numerical assessments of the quantitative data, the participants were trying to form a holistic understanding of the changes in their sociocultural realities and rationalise issues that might have affected the parents' quality ratings. The numerical quality ratings seemed to be unimportant, and the participants focused on understanding the changes in actual everyday life, so the topics were thus elaborated on more profoundly. The participants not only sought to share their experiences and knowledge of ECE in their societal context in comparison with the parental evaluations but also to find and construct new information and fresh perspectives to supplement the quantitative results, as this excerpt exemplifies:

> R2: So, let's take number eleven first… the co-operation between parents and caregivers.

R1: [Yes, but] everything appears to be normal here.

R2: I do agree with this, because it [the change] has really happened. First, I would say that the pedagogical awareness of parents has changed to some extent. They appear to be more interested, and the child care centre is not only seen as a place where a child is fed and taken for a walk; it is considered more as the first educational institute.

R3: But this depends on how the pedagogues advertise their child care centre to them [parents], what happens there – does the parent just drop of her child or does she have to take part in the pedagogical processes of the centre … (RUS-FG2)

Often, the participants did not just take the results of the assessments at face value; instead, they engaged in dialogue over the controversial issues to argue over and reconstruct the supplementary material. This happened more frequently with the Russian respondents than with their US and Finnish counterparts. The disagreement with the results or the contradictory opinions of other participants led to more in-depth reflections and the formation of alternative explanations. Most of the time, the participants receded from the data and moved the focus of the discussion to general issues related to ECE in the search for a deeper understanding of the assessments, either at the societal level or, such as in this example, at the local level:

R1: So… Location of the centre relative to your home and work.

R2: I think this is another controversial question.

R3: It depends so much on the district.

R1: In our district, this is a problem, and the value [of the assessment] would be even higher…

R3: Same thing with ours [district].

R1: Our district is large and when children live in [removed], they are given a place at a centre in another district…

R2: It happens, yes.

R1: … so, these transitions are problematic.

R3: Some districts are old, and where there are many old [buildings], it is impossible to build child care centres. And, in the newer districts, they haven't had time to build new centres. This then raises many concerns… about the lack of centres, and it is a very topical question… (RUS-FG 3)

In the guidelines provided to the focus group, the participants were asked to discuss the changes from a societal perspective. The respondents reflected on the societal changes in relation to their local surroundings, whether it was the

municipality in Finland or in Russia, or the statewide network in the USA. In their discussions, the US participants acknowledged the differences in the ECE realities between the states, but most frequently, the topics raised were related to general issues that were seen to be true or problematic throughout the country. However, the examples the participants referred to were often derived from their immediate working environments and their own experiences. It seemed that they were trying to identify why the parents felt that the quality of ECE had changed, and how these changes were interlinked, for example, with the enactment of leadership.

Therefore, the emic understanding of the study was not only derived from their national and sociocultural background, but most profoundly from the participants' own professional identity. Robinson-Pant (2016, 47) refers to this issue as 'big culture' versus 'small culture' in defining the difference in the perspectives or the positioning of participants when they refer to the changes at the societal level (big culture) or at their own professional level (small culture). Similarly, the respondents took the outsider, or etic, position when referring to parents or parenting from a professional perspective, although they were all emic insiders of the same sociocultural context.

> R3: We do a lot of communicating, but.. early childhood in general, they do a lot of communicating. Do the parents know that we have to do all those checks before we can hire anyone? Ours do, because we tell them in the handbook. But how many.. parents..
> R1: Understand that everyone has had CPR and first aid and, everyone has had a background check and been fingerprinted and.. the umpteen dozen other things that we have to do.
> R3: (--) [0:41:41] centre and..
> R1: Yes. I don't know. You're right.
> R3: So how much are we actually responsible for this? Due to our, as we got more complicated, did we as a field, communicate to the parents how we're growing? (USA-FG1)

During the focus groups, the discussion often led to reflection on the pedagogical practices carried out in the participants' own centres. While reflecting on the quality ratings, the participants remarked on how the ECE practices in general or in their own centres could be developed and improved. The discussions revealed new argumentation by the participants about the aspects they disagreed with, and offering contextual and deeper information about ECE quality. Hence, the reflective REA method was seen to enhance the participants' professional and organisational learning while they were defining problems or development areas through the use of quality evaluation material. In most discussions, the stimuli material triggered the

respondents to reflect on their own and centres, and the perceived strengths or weaknesses of their own practices:

> R2: It is pretty amazing that parents experience it this way… have been given such good [quality] ratings, because this is a good number. Number 24 [caregivers' warmth towards the child] is especially interesting…
>
> R1: It is somehow such a fundamental issue, it appeared to me that it is… it is a good thing, and the value has risen, but…
>
> R2: And the value has risen, but I started thinking how this issue appears to parents. Does it show [to them] in what kind of discourse the caregiver is producing for the child, for the parents, and about the everyday encounters with them? However, it is nice that it has risen so much. It is a nice detail, the warmth of the caregiver. (FIN-FG1)

6   REFLECTION OF THE STUDY

The aim of this dissertation was to examine how institutional ECE has developed from the early 1990s until now. More precisely, the study focused on sociocultural changes regarding institutional ECE, the changed role of the parents in institutional ECE and the perceived changes in parent-teacher co-operation in ECE. Additionally, the study had a methodological aim, which was to enhance the cultural validation of the dissertation from the perspective of 'emic insiders.' The investigation was carried out in three societies differing greatly in their origins, governance and demands for ECE services. This was done in the society contexts of the USA, Russia and Finland. In order to highlight the changes in ECE, the data was collected in three different time periods: 1991, 2011 and 2014.

Based on the contextual theorising and systemic thinking (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008), ECE in this study was defined as a co-operative and interactive process between all of the stakeholders involved in early education within the immediate social environments (microsystems) and broader social (macro) system. It is well understood that the dichotomising nature of the systemic thinking is not a simple matter in the very complicated web of ECE and its surrounding society. However, this theory was found useful while interpreting the results in three very different societies.

Although the boundaries between different societies have blurred with the increased mobility of both people and information, the societal, cultural and historical features and differences between the societies can still be identified. This study sought to point out those specific features. With this approach, it is believed that it is possible to enhance intercultural understanding both within and between the socio-cultural contexts and thus learn from the others on multiple levels.

6.1   Discussion of the results

When investigating changes in the institutional ECE, in the role of parents and in the educational co-operation, the interconnectedness of the studied aspects was apparent. All of the perceived changes within this study frame are somewhat

interlinked, and it is thus difficult to judge what is the cause and which the effect. According to the results, increased complexity of the societies as well as structural and cultural changes within the societies have had a strong impact on ECE. With the demands to increase the societies' human capital (Campbell-Barr & Nygård 2014), the expectations of ECE were seen to have grown in each society context, reflected, for example, in reformed ECE policies, in increasing scholarly interest and research in the field of ECE and in the expectations of the parents. The changes and expectations have then created – quite naturally – a pressure to further develop the institutional ECE services and the pedagogical practises carried out within them. Additionally, the changes in the roles of parents as clients of ECE were seen to challenge the educational parent-teacher co-operation.

The results of this study suggest that the internal educational goals of ECE and the pedagogical aspirations of the professionals seem to differ to some extent from the expectations of ECE set by the society. However, this notion was perceived differently in each of the studied societies.

In the USA, the societal expectations of ECE seem to be heavily guided by ECE policies, which are often framed in economic rather than democratic terms (Brown, Lan & Jeong 2015; Haslip & Gullo 2018). After the launching of the 'No Child Left Behind Act' and the 'Common Core State Standards Initiative' (Bowdon 2015), the societal push for accountability, competitiveness and increasing individualism were seen to complicate the work of the professionals. This was especially apparent in the US context, where the push for academics in ECE was more prevalent than in Russia or Finland.

The results thus indicated contradicting expectations between two pedagogical orientations, academic and developmental, which seemed to challenge the field of ECE in the US context. Whilst many of the policies steering ECE in the US follow the developmentally appropriate practises (NAEYC 2009) and emphasise supporting children's learning through play instead of straightforward teaching, the pressure of preparing children for school coupled with teacher accountability seemed to affect more on how the professionals were able to implement their work. According to the US directors, whilst the professionals were against the academic expectations overruling the play-based pedagogy, the ability of the professionals to fight against this was nearly non-existent. The finding is similar with the results of Brown, Lan and Jeong (2015, 9), who conceptualised teachers in their study as *'autonomous beings who make decisions about their instruction based on their beliefs of best practice, [however] it appears that their beliefs are being shaped by and are aligning with the same documents and policies they feel they can reject.'* The changes in ECE, whether resisted or accepted, eventually blend

into prevailing practises and are shortly accepted as norms (e.g., Penn 2011b). Teachers autonomy of planning the content of ECE pedagogy seemed to be diminished. This resonates with previous research, which has shown that the increased use of prescriptive curricula has been seen to narrow such approaches of ECE in the US context, which focus on child-centred, exploratory and art methods (Haslip & Gullo 2018). This again, may cause decrease of the children's joy of learning (ibid.). Additionally, the heavy burden of accountability has been shown to reduce the teachers' work-related well-being (see also Rooney 2015), which was repeatedly brought up by the US respondents of this study.

In the Russian ECE context, the changes in the societal level ECE guidance have been major. Recent reforms in both curriculum and legislation were perceived to challenge the work of the professionals, the parents and, consequently, the co-operation amongst them. In their reflective discussions, the Russian ECE directors expressed concerns about the major changes in the objectives set for early learning as well as the principles guiding the ECE pedagogy, which differed from the traditional societal values that had previously guided the work of the professionals.

Although the reforms and changes in the pedagogic orientation were gladly welcomed and accepted by the Russian respondents of this study, the actual implementation of the new pedagogical goals was not considered an easy task. As has been shown, the old habitual practices of the different professional generations and different professional groups are often difficult to change (e.g., Karila 2013; Ryzhova 2012), which was seen to prevent, or at least slow down, the educational practices from developing, as was noted by the Russian directors of this study. Whilst the professionals might agree with the development of the curriculum, and accept the changed ideological basis of it, they simultaneously reflect the social situations, values and perceptions of their own generations (Karila 2013). Therefore, the personal values of the professionals might differ from the goals set forth in the ECE legislation or curriculum, which they should implement through their pedagogical practises (Ryzhova 2012). Developing ECE practises and enhancing professional growth of the teachers thus requires continuing education programs. This is especially significant in the Russian context, where the societal values have been so strong that the changes appear inevitably slowly.

The old and strong traditions and values of Russian society were reflected in the discussions of the Russian directors and demonstrated, for example, in the way they talked about the 'modern parents.' The results indicated that the directors seemed to represent the professionals of the ECE institute, whose values seemed to differ from those of the surrounding society – for example, from the upbringing styles of the

parents. The understanding of the goals and values of ECE were not shared between the parents and the professionals, which was again seen to cause confusion and create tension between the parents and the teachers.

In the Finnish context, the ongoing reforms concerning both legislation and curriculum on ECE have challenged the field increasingly during recent years (Puroila & Kinnunen 2017; Onnismaa, Paananen & Lipponen 2014). Although the reforms had not yet been fully implemented during the period of data collection, the administrative shift from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture had already taken place in 2013, and the winds of change were clearly blowing in the field of ECE. According to the results, one of the biggest changes concerning the pedagogical and early educational orientation dealt with the increased individualised approach of ECE. In line with national ECE policies (National Core Curriculum for ECE 2016), the emphasis on children's individual needs has guided the ECE pedagogy for a long time. However, according to the teachers of this study, societal investments in ECE do not support the implementation of this ideal. Although the teacher-child ratios were clearly the smallest in Finland compared to the other two societies (see Hujala, Vlasov & Szecsi 2017), the deliberation of the matter was most evident amongst the Finnish respondents, both within the teachers and the directors. It seems that the increased focus on children's individuality seems to be causing tension in the field, while the essence of Finnish ECE has traditionally emphasised group pedagogy and community (Koivula & Eerola-Pennanen 2017; Eerola-Pennanen 2013). The resources invested in ECE were perceived to be inadequate and prevented teachers from working according to their idealised pedagogy, and reaching the pedagogical goals set in the binding National Core Curriculum for ECE (2016), such as focusing on children's individual needs. It seems that the strong public deliberation focusing on oversized groups and large ratios – to which the respondents were referring to as well – is overruling many other significant areas of ECE.

Battling with regulative pressure
One of the key findings of this study highlighted the significant increase in external regulation affecting ECE. In all of the studied societies the goals to increase the quality of ECE services can be perceived to have changed since the early 1990s. However, to guarantee quality ECE services, more focus should place on the education of the workforce as well as in the policies guiding the practises – instead of control-based regulation.

The finding regarding the regulative pressure was the most apparent in the US context, where the market-driven ECE system and the lack of systematic (federal) policies have increased a demand for other types of regulation systems to both control and maintain the level of quality and safety of the services. Regulation of ECE services is essential if there are no unified policy requirements for the education of the ECE workforce or the implemented pedagogical goals in order to maintain and monitor the quality of the services. However, this type of regulation system may cause unexpected effects, as argued by Penn (2011b, 99): *'In the private market regulation is supposed to be a guarantee of quality, but it can have the very reverse effect: it sets a lowest common denominator below which standards must not fall. The regulatory framework is intended to prevent bad practice and then becomes the mark of 'quality'.'*

As described in chapter 3, the public sector has been traditionally strong in both Russia and Finland, and ECE is heavily guided by national policies, norms and legislation. However, the pressure to increase private services has increased, especially in Finland, where the share of privately organised ECE is increasing (Alasuutari & Ruutiainen 2018; National Institute for Health and Welfare 2017; FINEEC 2017). The tightening competition of public funding and budgeting has forced municipalities to create alternative solutions to meet their legislative demands to offer child care services for the families. New possibilities for private providers have been opened up by expanding the selection of government subsidies for families to use private services (ibid.). As the examples from the US context suggest, there is a danger that the increase in private services will result in an increase of external regulation in order to monitor the quality of the services. This might lead to a situation where regulations and quality assessments form tools of external control, as noted by Paananen, Kumpulainen and Lipponen (2015).

It is unlikely that the political climate of ECE in either Finland or Russia will allow the market provision or privatisation of ECE services to surpass the public sphere (see also Alasuutari & Ruutiainen 2018). Similar results were found in the study by Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit and Szebehely (2012), who demonstrated that marketisation of ECE in Sweden, Australia and England (or specifically child care, in their study) was path-dependent, and the mechanisms of the marketisation logic were seen to be heavily influenced by the local histories and practices. However, this dissertation suggests that the varying scenarios related to external regulation and monitoring quality need to be addressed with care while the ECE systems seems to be developing in new and rather unpredictable directions.

The changing roles of parents: From object-clients to the democratic citizens -clients

One of the objectives of this dissertation dealt with the changes in the roles of parents in relation to ECE. The findings indicated great changes in the roles of the parents as clients or customers of institutional ECE, which was found to challenge the field in all of the studied societies. The results suggest a significant increase in what was called 'the customer orientation of the parents.' Perceiving parents as customers of ECE services is not traditional to the field of ECE, yet, based on the results of this study, it is now something that needs to be acknowledged and exposed to critical evaluation. Viewing parents as customers or even consumers of ECE instead of more traditional clients[5] positions them differently than before. The issue needs to be addressed, for example, in the Finnish context, where – as mentioned earlier – the private ECE sector has been rapidly growing, and the roles and responsibilities of different actors have to be reconfigured.

Based on the results, it is necessary to re-evaluate and analyse the different roles parents are given in ECE. Niiranen (2002) has studied the position and role of clients in the context of adult welfare and has identified three overlapping roles of clients: the *object-client*, the *consumer-client* and the *democratic citizen -client*. This rather simplistic breakdown of different roles provides an interesting platform from which to analyse the changed role of parents in ECE.

In each of the society contexts, parents have been traditionally positioned as what Niiranen (2002) describes as *object-clients*. In the USA and Finland, the historical roots of ECE are in the child welfare tradition (Kinos & Palonen 2012; Scarr 1998; Välimäki 1998), which defined institutional ECE as a social service targeted to socio-economically less fortunate or culturally diverse families to support their children's development. This traditional view tended to position parents as object-clients in relation to the institutional ECE, where power-relations between the professionals and the parents often worked from the top down (Alasuutari 2006). Similarly, in the Russian context, the results of the study confirmed the parents' subordinate role in institutional ECE, dating back to the Soviet times (Taratukhina et al. 2006). In the historical frame of each society, parents were expected to commit to the ECE goals defined solely by the professionals. This kind of positioning led to a situation, where parents were merely as objects in their child's upbringing process in institutional ECE, rather than active actors and partners. Although the understanding of parents'

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[5] The words 'client' and 'customer' have semantic differences, as the *Oxford Online Dictionary* suggests. While clients often refer to those who use professional services from a service provider, customers are the ones who buy goods or services from a shop or business.

active roles has since changed, the historical roots still seem to shadow the present practises.

As reflected in the results, parents' increased awareness of ECE and their growing expectations have changed their positioning from merely being the object-clients of ECE into being customers or even consumers of the services. In the US context, the customer orientation was connected to the market-driven ECE system and the more general societal ideal of individual freedom to choose services to meet the family needs, such as child care (see also Penn 2011). The features related to the consumer-client include such elements as customer satisfaction and the quality of the services (Niiranen 2002; Nummela 2011).

However, as both Niiranen (2002) and Penn (2011a) point out, consumerism includes a notion of one's ability to make such individual choices: to choose the adequate services or evaluate the quality of them. In order to make valid decisions, customers – in this case, the parents – should have sufficient information about the quality of the ECE services they are about to choose and purchase. However, as other studies have demonstrated, in the market-driven ECE system in the US context, the choice is not completely 'free'. This is partly due to the high fees, which dictate the choices parents are actually able to make (Barnett 2010; Bennett 2011; Michel 2015; Penn 2011a). Additionally, parents have only partial – and mostly second-hand – knowledge of what is going on in the centres and with the early education and care of their children (Penn 2011a). Parents may be consumers who choose and buy services for their children, but they are not the ones experiencing it. Research suggests that the lack of sufficient info about ECE quality creates difficulties for parents in monitoring and evaluating quality (Cryer & Burchinal 1997; Cryer, Tietze & Wessels 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow 2009), yet parents are particularly concerned about the quality of the services, as shown in the US context and demonstrated, for example, in the report by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA 2010). That is why parents will focus more on evaluating issues more concrete or closes to them, such as the facilities, group sizes or other resources (Cryer & Burchinal 1997; Cryer et al. 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow 2009).

In light of the results, the parents whose behaviour was in line with that of consumer-clients were often viewed as 'difficult parents' whose individualistic demands were seen to conflict with the core ideas of ECE. However, this was more notable amongst the US and Russian directors than amongst their Finnish colleagues. It seemed that out of the three countries, Finland seemed to position

parents more often through the clientship role that Niiranen (2002) described as the *democratic citizen -client*.

The democratic citizen –client role emphasises the active role of the parents in relation with institutional ECE and its professionals. As explained earlier, the governance of institutional ECE in Finland has undergone significant legislative and curriculum reforms, and due to these reforms, the role of the parents is now defined differently than previously (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). Parents (and children) now have a legal right to take part in and influence the planning process of the local curricula, the implementation of the actual ECE practises, as well as regularly joining the evaluation of the ECE practices (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973; National Core Curriculum for ECE 2016). Whilst the reforms were still underway during the last data collection phase in 2014, the way parents and co-operation with them were constructed in the Finnish focus group discussions, was very different compared to how these issues were perceived among the US and Russian respondents. The long history of building educational partnerships in Finnish ECE, which go beyond parent involvement and co-operation (see e.g. Alasuutari 2010; Kekkonen 2012), was clearly seen in the Finnish results. However, the deliberation about parent-teacher co-operation seemed to be mainly ideological, and it differed from the directors' *descriptions* of the actual practices. It was clear that the agency of the parents was often understood as simply participating in events organised by the professionals. This finding aligns with a recent study conducted by Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja and Silvennoinen (2018), which showed that Finnish professionals agree on the importance of co-operation or parental involvement, however the attitudes were demonstrated to be quite superficial.

Perceiving parents as active, democratic citizens, aims at empowering them in their relationship with their child's ECE. Empowerment increases parents' feelings of engagement within the ECE service context, and thus enhances the possibilities for reciprocal partnership (Tauriainen 2000). However, increasing this kind of participation of parents requires trust as well as mutual and shared understanding of the goals of ECE, which, according to the results, requires a lot of work at this moment.

Additionally, positioning parents through the dimension of democratic citizens could help to increase 'activism in parents', i.e. better prepare parents for advocacy when, for example, fighting for the rights for their children in more difficult matters, such as special education (Sumsion & Goodfellow 2009). At the same time, sensitivity is needed to know how to equally hear the more marginalised parents and

not just the more powerful (often highly-educated middle-class) parents whose complaints or wishes might be taken into account more often (Van Laere, Van Houtte & Vandenbroeck 2018). Parents have different capacities to take on the different roles of clientship. Not all parents are in a position to adopt the active and democratic customer role, or they do not even want it; some are merely satisfied with the role of object-clients. Yet, as shown by Van Laere, Van Houtte and Vandenbroeck (2018), parents who may seem more passive might still be interested in co-operating and being involved with their child's early education. Whilst there will always exist information asymmetry between professionals and parents, empowering all parents should be widely considered as the goal of the educational co-operation process. *'Rather than claiming an equal partnership, schools may wish to encompass a continuous search for creating moments of reciprocal dialogue within unequal relationships.'* (ibid., 197).

Reconfiguring parent-teacher co-operation

One of the objectives of the dissertation focused on the parent-teacher co-operation, how it had changed within the studied societies, and what are the future challenges to consider. As the results of this study demonstrated, there was certainly variation both within and between societies in how co-operation was implemented and how much power parents were granted in their relationship with ECE and its professionals. Therefore, it becomes very significant whether parents are viewed as clients, consumers or as reciprocal partners in the child's education process. Educational organisations should formulate a clear policy vision for how the parents will be better integrated to the ECE services (Oostdam & Hooge 2013; Van Laere, Van Houtte & Vandenbroeck 2018).

Considering the changes in all of the studied societies, the goals set for co-operation in ECE may not necessarily be suitable in the future. For example, the new perception of parents' active agency in Finnish ECE (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973) adds pressure on actors and policy makers in different levels to explicitly define what is meant by the parents' participation and their active agency in ECE practice. There is a need to increase knowledge amongst the professionals how to better integrate parents in the pedagogical processes of the centres, and yet – at the same time – inform them how to be strong in their professionalism (see also Venninen & Purola 2013).

In addition, there is a need to enhance understanding of the roles through which parents enter ECE and, more specifically, how *parents* understand or value co-operation (Van Laere, Van Houtte & Vandenbroeck 2018; Ward 2018). As the

findings implied, parent-teacher co-operation was often understood merely as involving or engaging parents with ECE. This resulted in criticism amongst the directors, whilst many parents were seen to be too busy or reluctant to participate. This dissertation thus agrees with Venninen and Purola (2013), for it is essential that multiple forms of co-operation are formed, and possibilities for parents to engage and influence the programs are offered in various ways. Instead of patronizing or blaming parents, there is a need to enhance the understanding of how the changes in the societies have eventually affected parenthood and the roles of parents in ECE.

In line with the study by Oostdam and Hooge (2013), the discussions of the US directors revealed that apart from the children, parents were the most important group that the centres needed to communicate with. Especially in the US context, where parents mainly choose ECE services from the private market, the directors emphasised the increased needs for customer relationship management. With this in mind, more focus should be placed on the new understandings of leadership, which focus on customer relationships along with the pedagogical leadership tasks. Although parents have always had hopes and wishes for ECE based on their children's needs, it seems that the way professionals are expected to encounter these requests has changed. This is especially true in the private centres, where the role of the parent as a paying client may be different. Parents do not expect perfection, but they are interested in how their hopes and wishes are heard and taken into account and how the problems are encountered and solved (Abraham 2010). For many parents, ECE is most likely their children's first educational experience, and thus the demands for improvement will be constantly present.

Future development goals for ECE

The notion of the increased customer orientation of parents predicts that if the public system remains stagnant, the private market may be in a better position to answer to the individual needs and growing demands of the parents. Instead of creating a debate regarding whether services are best provided publicly or privately, this dissertation suggests a need to increase understanding of the mechanisms, which either guide or force parents to choose services. An increasing range of different kinds of ECE services challenges the field to make its operations more transparent. However, the freedom to choose amongst the various ECE programs involves an enormous responsibility, both for the parents and for the societies in general. In the Finnish system, ECE service counselling could be a solution as the municipalities have the responsibility of organising ECE services; however, in the US context, this is not possible due to the privately organised system.

Additionally, the increasing privatisation of ECE services along with the commodification of early education increases the push towards monitoring or evaluating the quality of these services. As shown in the results of this study, excessive criteria-based quality control seemed to restrict the pedagogical autonomy of the teachers, and it prevented them from using creative teaching methods. This was particularly true for the US context, where the scarce ECE system and absence of federal ECE policies created a need to increase regulation. However, by investing (the USA) or maintaining (Russia and Finland) the staff qualification requirements, investing in pedagogical teacher training and emphasising a reflective working approach may reduce the need for such excessive external regulation. Therefore, to better respond to the future needs of ECE, we need to focus on teacher preparation and professional development programs. Additionally, there is a need to further define and develop the goals for parent-teacher co-operation to meet the needs of not only children and their families, but the practices as well.

6.2   Methodological discussion of the REA

This chapter discusses the use and perceived advantages of the REA method, which was applied in the dissertation during the second and third sub-studies. The argument presented in this dissertation is that the complexity of the societies and their cultural and historical diversities should not be simply compressed into measured items for comparison derived from universal communalities without examining how the complex issues are reflected at the local level.

Based on the meta-analysis of the focus group discussion data, the proposed REA method was found to be successful in its attempt to enhance the cultural validation of the study and to bring out the local emic voice. A quantitative survey instrument was used to serve as an etic entry to examine changes in the local contexts of institutional ECE in the USA, Russia and Finland, thus giving a voice to the professionals as cultural informants rather than solely using statistical analysis of the quality assessments.

The method was found to be efficient in generating causal connections between quality items and revealing particularities from specific contexts that could be easily overlooked by the researcher. The REA method, being participative in nature, allowed the voices of the locals – in this case, the ECE directors – to contribute to the knowledge production process by elaborating new ideas and critically discussing the quantitative material and supplementing it with lively examples from everyday

life. The quantitative data served as a projective cue for the participants, regarding which they revealed something deeper about how they made sense of their local ECE systems and their surrounding society – and in this case, how they interpreted the changes within their ECE culture (see also Tobin 1999).

During the data analysis, this information was used as the basis for the emic-etic dialogue where this tacit, meta-level emic knowledge was enhanced by the etic interpretation of the researcher (see sub-studies II and III). The discussions led to a much deeper data analysis than could have been achieved by simply using statistical analysis. As noted by Fenech (2011), the majority of quality evaluation studies conducted in the field of ECE derive from the positivist paradigm and rely heavily to the researcher's etic knowledge. This study has the potential to supplement this etic knowledge by bringing out the emic voice of the professionals and their experiences from the field. Similarly, this method could serve to give a voice to children and their families and to enable researchers to value the perspectives of those who are rarely heard in quality evaluation studies.

Instead of conducting straightforward comparisons between three different societal contexts with no clear consensus on organizing ECE services, the study juxtaposed the cases to highlight the unique features of each context. Having three such different cases under investigation did pose a clear risk of 'the Goldilocks effect', as Tobin (1999, 129) refers to it: one is good, one is bad, and the one in the middle is just right. This problem was addressed by the use of the REA approach. By treating each case individually and avoiding making etic comparisons in a manner that valued one over the other, the goldilocks effect was sought to overcome. The discussion revealed the differences in the societal contexts of how the participants entered into the dialogue with each other, to what extent they agreed and what kind of topics they engaged with.

Applying the method in development work
One of the key findings is the potential use of the REA method in any nationally or locally conducted quality evaluation study. Instead of seeking generalizable explanations across societies based on the quantitative quality evaluation data, the aim was to emphasise the individuality of the cases, the local and situated knowledge and the intersubjective views of the participants. Discussing the results of the assessments as a professional group helped the participants to recede from their own personal work and review their ECE reality holistically. The intensive discussions generated amongst the participants over the quantitative stimulus materials led to an idea of how reflective methods such as REA could be utilised in quality evaluation

and educational development processes. The participants remarked that this method could help them to raise awareness of how quality evaluations in general could be better reflected on through the collective discussions of the staff. By discussing the assessments, the participants were trying to form a more profound and conscious understanding of why the parents evaluated the practices as they did. This discussion eventually led to reflection on their own practices and how the practices had changed – or should change – over the course of time. Because the method served as a mirror for self-reflection, its use could be expanded to development work at the local level in addition to cross-cultural research designs. After all, reflection is important for both individual and organisational learning.

This dissertation therefore suggests that the proposed REA method may assist professionals in identifying the aspects that need to be further developed relating to policies and practices within their closest context. Furthermore, the method allows professionals to become aware of the strengths of their practices, which may then be utilised to improve the processes. Instead of emphasising the evaluative assessments on a scale of 'good-better-best', it enabled the participants to question and reflect on the prevalent practices, discuss the values they are based on and ground the development work on them. Focusing on the strengths of the processes – rather than weaknesses – changes the focus of the assessments from auditing and external evaluation to the practitioners' self-reflective approach to work, and this could lead to more effective development work. This type of reflective and in-depth learning requires theoretical and practical understanding, which the directors clearly had.

6.3   The ethical discussion and the limitations of the study

In this chapter both the ethics and the limitations of the study are discussed and evaluated. By discussing the ethical, theoretical and methodological decisions made during the course of the research project, the aim is to enhance the credibility of the study, to define how the experienced challenges were unravelled and discover why certain decisions were made during the process (see also Clarkeburn & Mustajoki 2007). The principles of research integrity are aimed to assure the ethical sustainability of the study, in order to validate the research to meet with the standards set for scientific research (RCR guidelines 2013). Therefore, the research ethics needed to be constantly observed and reviewed during the long project. For the most part, the ethical discussion is related to the cross-cultural nature of the study and the

theoretical and methodological engagements, which are important to acknowledge when conducting a cross-cultural study.

The research project followed the ethical standards of the University of Tampere as well as the 'Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences and proposals for ethical review' (2009) outlined by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. More specifically, the ethical principles of EECERA (2015) codes intended for researchers working specifically in the early childhood field were applied during the course of the project.

In order to be validated and permitted to conduct international research, the ethics of the study were assessed and officially proofed by the University of Tampere and Tampere Area Ethical Review Board. This was done in December 2010, whilst in the beginning of 1990s this kind of procedure was not required. The proof provided by the board was considered equivalent to the ethical requirements in the USA, where any research that involves human beings as subjects must be ethically approved by a registered Institutional Review Board (IRB). Additionally, the IRB review was not required in the 1990s.

In Finland, research permissions were applied and received from the municipalities, in which the data was collected. In the Russian context, the permission to conduct the research was granted by each participating ECE centre, and by the institute, which coordinated the last data collection in 2014.

All of the guidelines above insist that, first and foremost, the principles of respect towards participants and research voluntariness are carefully considered during the planning and implementation of the data collection. In addition, the principles emphasise the privacy of the participants and the importance of confidentiality and protection of the data. The rights of the participants aim to ensure the anonymity of the research subjects in every stage of the study.

The ethical procedures during each data collection phase were the same with regard to the voluntary nature of the study. The anonymity of the participants was assured by notifying them that no personal information would be documented at any point of the study. During the first and second phases of the study, the teaching staff in each participating centre was trained and instructed to deliver the printed questionnaires for the parents of their child groups. The data from the questionnaires was coded and no personal information was saved. Each child was given a participant number, which was used to match the parents' and teachers' survey responses. During the third data collection phase in 2014, the information letter delivered to the participants consisted of the contact details of the researcher for possible questions after the group discussion. At the beginning of each discussion,

oral instructions, guidelines and topics of discussion were shared with the participants. Additionally, participants in each focus group session were informed that each opinion and topic raised was of value, with no right or wrong answers.

While this study focused on the professional point of view, it is understood that the deliberation of the perceived changes would have been different if the participants of the focus group discussions were parents or even children. In addition, the perceptions of changes would have been differently constructed if the respondents were to represent different goals or roles of ECE, such as the political decision makers. Additionally, this dissertation lacks a thorough analysis of the ECE policy documents from the respective societies. There are several reasons for this: the researcher's inadequate language skills in Russian, the scarce ECE system in the US context making it nearly impossible to detect national- or state-level policies, and finally the insufficient time resources. However, this may be considered one of the goals for future research.

The unique research design, which included three countries and three different ECE systems, combined with the exceptionally long research period, was found to be challenging at times; however, it may also be considered a strength of the dissertation. Over the twenty-year research period, both knowledge about ECE and the research traditions had evolved, which again called to develop the methodology. Additionally, some of the questions in the survey instrument that were relevant at the beginning of the 1990s seemed old-fashioned and irrelevant to the respondents in 2014.

Amongst the biggest ethical challenges in this study were language equivalency and the use of concepts in the survey instrument in three different languages. Conducting cross-cultural research in three different languages requires careful planning and assessment before, during and after the research process. Problems related to language and conceptions used include ethical issues, which need to be acknowledged and solved by the researcher with theoretical, methodological and practical decisions. Some of the survey items had different meanings in different societal contexts. The research material was translated from Finnish into English and Russian, and the Russian materials were double-checked by two separate interpreters. Despite the careful preparations, when analysing the data, a language error was found in the materials, as were minor inconsistencies in concept equivalence. For example, the survey question related to the amount of space for children to play was troubling. In Russia, this question was understood to refer specifically to the outdoor playgrounds.

In order to overcome the obstacles related to language, it was important to construct the study design to carefully consider this fact. The use of focus group discussions as a data collection method and determining the role of the facilitator enabled the data acquisition in all three countries similarly and on as equal terms as possible despite the language barriers. The role as the facilitator was to open the discussion by welcoming the participants, explaining the details of the stimulus material, assuring the ethical issues related to anonymity and explicitly articulating that the facilitator would not take part in the discussion at any point. With the help of the interpreter, it was possible to carry out the discussions in the Russian context the way they had been executed in the two other countries. This was seen to increase the reliability of the study.

However, the applied REA method during sub-studies II and III seemed to provide a solution to overcome these issues related to language and concept equivalence. The reflective focus group discussions allowed the respondents to consider the terms used, what was actually asked and how the parents might have understood the questions. It was noted that in their discussions, the participants reflected on the concepts and linked them to their emic understanding. Sometimes the questions that seemed less relevant to today's ECE provoked discussions that were more intensive. In this way, the reflective discussions mediated the problems related to both language and concepts used.

In addition, when participants reflected on the stimulus materials during the third data collection phase, it was noticed that one of the figures (see Appendix 3, figure 6) appeared to be too difficult to understand, which then hindered the participants' discussion. The figure had a different logic and layout than the others, and it was rather difficult for the participants to grasp its main point during the discussions. For the possible use of this method in the future, it is therefore suggested to keep the stimulus materials and the guiding questions consistent, clear, simple and open to allow a smooth flow of discussion.

The research process must take into account the multicultural backgrounds of the participants, where one's own view of reality is constrained and shaped by one's own experiences and specific circumstances that evolve over time. This was in line with the EECERA ethical codes (2015, 2), which outline researcher's responsibility to *'ensure all the research participants are seen as subjects developing in the context of their families and communities, which are culturally situated as part of wider societies.'* To acknowledge this, the theoretical underpinnings related to cross-cultural research were discussed in chapter 1, section 1.3 in the theoretical framework of the emic-etic approach. In sum, it can be concluded that the cultural emic knowledge of the informants of the

study and the outsider etic perceptions of the researchers formed a multidimensional picture of the studied phenomena Therefore, it can be seen that the study relied on both parties, the researcher and the informants, to supplement the process of forming new knowledge.

6.4 The implications of the study and suggestion for future studies

Instead of using only the statistical rationale of changes in parents' quality evaluations and applying etic interpretation of what was assumed to have happened during the course of time within these societal ECE systems, the aim of this dissertation was to search for a deeper understanding by asking the 'cultural informants', who have lived and experienced the changes more closely. Therefore, the argument presented in this dissertation was that the complexity of the societies and their cultural and historical diversities should not be simply compressed into measured items for comparison derived from universal communalities without examining how the complex issues are reflected at the local level. The study did not seek to deny the importance of cross-culturally or quantitatively obtained research data; instead, applying a culturally sensitive research approach – such as the proposed REA method – was found helpful in understanding the interaction between the local and the global.

Due to recent legislation reform in the Finnish context, local authorities organising ECE, including both municipal and private providers, must carry on self-evaluations on a regular basis as well as take part in the external evaluations. Evaluation processes are steered, but not controlled, from the national level by a government agency, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). Local providers have the autonomy to decide how to implement the self-evaluation processes. However, they must make sure that all the stakeholders (i.e., local authorities, ECE professionals, parents as well as children) have adequate information about the implementation of the services and their quality. The REA method could be used in such enhancement-led evaluation processes, which aim to develop the practices. Similarly to the realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley 2004), instead of solely *collecting* evaluation data, the REA method focuses on the *production* of the data with the aim of enhancing understanding of the hidden mechanisms causing change (see more of realist evaluation by Pawson & Tilley 2004).

Additionally, reflective emic analysis could therefore be used to increase the democratic and dialogic knowledge production, not only amongst professionals but also as a means to involve parents or even children in the ECE evaluation processes. The research informants of this dissertation were the ECE leaders, whereas the voices of the parents – and more significantly, the children – were missed. Thus, while studying changes in ECE, the opinions of those who are most involved with the practices should be taken into account in future inquiries.

The field of ECE is a complex entity, and its links to the surrounding society create a web of systems wherein everything affects everyone. By reviewing, evaluating and reflecting on the past and the changes that have taken place, we may better predict the future, not just in the context of one society but also internationally. It is therefore necessary to anticipate the future and clarify the needs that ECE aims to meet. Creating a clear vision of the direction in which ECE should be developed also requires more research of the past.

Challenging the current development of both research and global policies, Urban (2012) calls for a more democratic turn in answering the questions of how, with whom and for what purpose we conduct research. He argues that ECE research (specifically in the European context, but also globally) tends to focus on research conducted in two categories – either large-scale international research, often focusing on comparisons, or locally conducted (often qualitative) studies. This dissertation suggests that instead of dichotomising these two opposite approaches, we should see them as complementing each other.

More 'emic' research is needed to identify how cross-culturally and 'etically' conducted studies are domesticated at the local level and how the results interact with local conditions and, thus, local policies. In general terms, the educational ideals or best practices cannot be transferred from one context to another, but the comparisons of different sociocultural contexts could be used in reflecting and assessing one's own system.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix 1 – Discussion topics of the focus group sessions in 2014

The following topics guided the focus group session:

Quality of ECE

1. How do you assess the changes that have taken place within the last two decades considering the quality of ECE according to parents in your society context? (Figure 1)

2. What are your interpretations about what has possibly affected the changes in the assessments?

3. How do the results reflect the overall quality of early childhood education in your society context? (Figure 2)

Home – school co-operation

4. How would you describe the home – school co-operation and the changes with it in your society context? (Figures 3–6)

5. What has possibly affected the changes in your opinion?

6. What are your interpretations why the congruence in the views of parents and teachers concerning ECE practice, co-operation and children's satisfaction has decreased/increased, although the congruence concerning their views of the child has decreased/increased? (Figure 6)

How to interpret the figures

The first part of this focus group discussion deals with parents' quality assessments and how these assessments have changed within two decades. The quality instrument used in the study follows the quality evaluation model of ECE (Hujala et al. 1999), where ECE quality was examined through four subscales: Structural, intermediate, process, and effect factor. Each subscale consisted of several items. In the research questionnaires parents were asked how satisfied they were with the child care

activities and child care centre characteristics. Parents scored items on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating inadequate quality and 5 indicating high quality.

The change in the parents' quality assessments is presented in the figure 1. The bars below the zero-line indicate dissatisfaction with the assessed items. Figure 2 represents parents' satisfaction with child care in 1991 and 2011 on a scale from 1 to 5.

The second part of the discussion concentrates on co-operation between parents and teachers. The issues discussed are: how satisfied parents and teachers are with the co-operation, how the views have changed between the years 1991–2011, and how congruent the views of the parents and teachers are about children, their upbringing, co-operation, and child's satisfaction with child care. Figures 3–5 represent co-operation and figure 6 the congruence in the views of parents and teachers.

Appendix 2 – Stimuli material (Changes in ECE quality)

Figure 1. The change in parents' quality assessments between 1991–2011

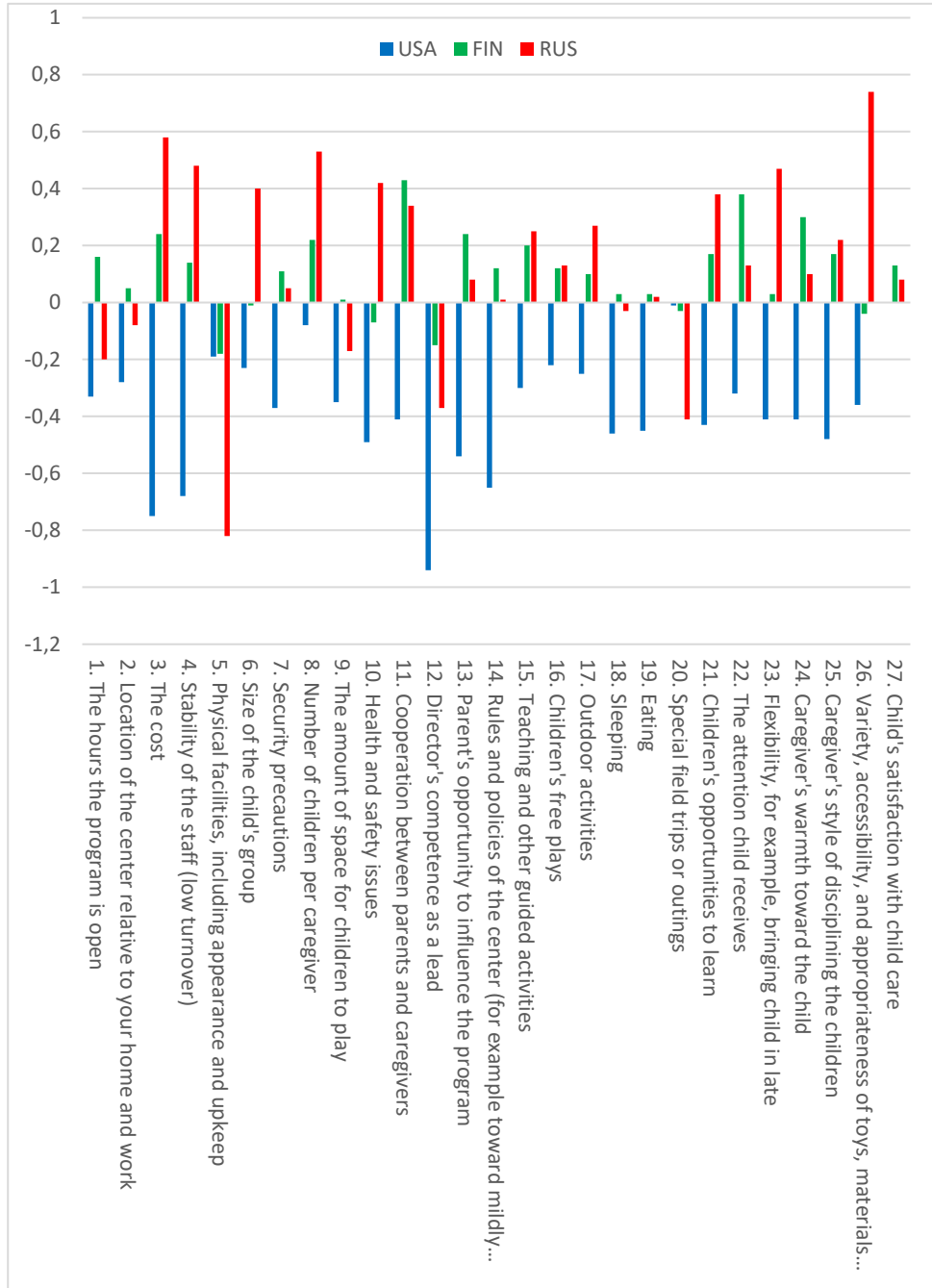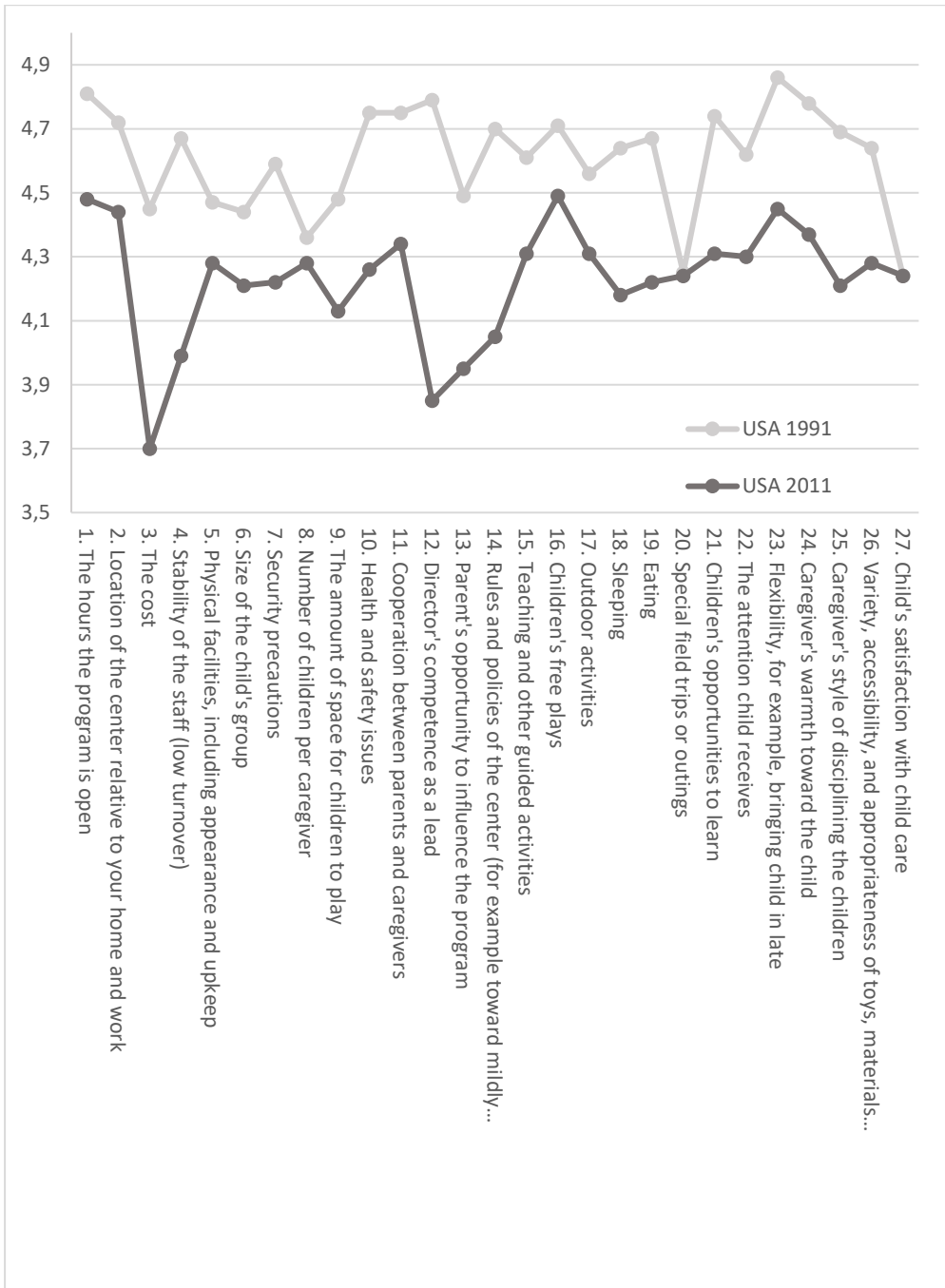Figure 2. Parents' satisfaction with child care in 1991 and 2011 (an example from the US context)

Appendix 3 – Stimuli material (Changes in co-operation)

Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6. Co-operation between parents and teachers and the congruence of their views in the US context 1991 and 2011. (an example from the US context[6])

The Figures 3 and 4 describe how satisfied parents and teachers were with child care co-operation and how satisfied children were with child care. The figure 5 describes parents' satisfaction with their opportunities to influence the program, the flexibility and the rules and policies of the program.
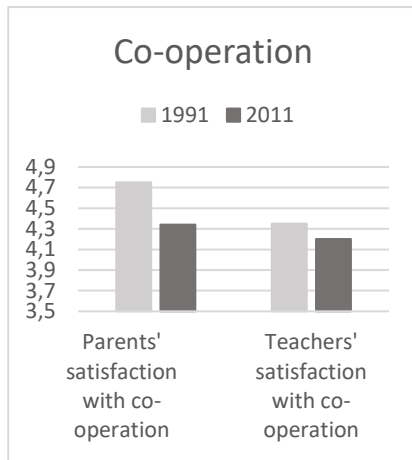
Figure 3

Figure 4
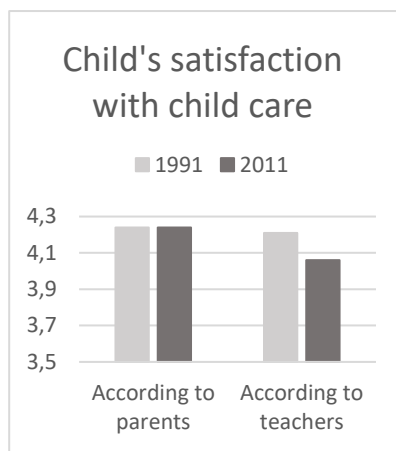
Figure 5

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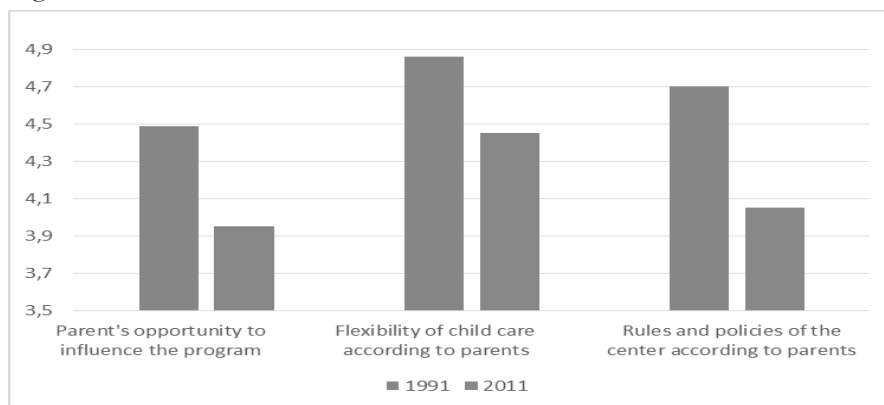
[6] In the original focus group materials the figures were presented in color. In the figure 5 the left hand column is year 1991 and the right hand column is year 2011.

One of the hypotheses of the study is that the more congruent the views of the parents and the teachers are, the more it increases child's wellbeing in child care. The figure 6 below describes the uniformity of the views of parents and teachers on a scale of 0 to 4, where 0 indicates full disagreement in the views and 4 full agreement. The figure does not indicate whether parents and teachers are satisfied with the asked questions. (an example from the US context)

Figure 6

USA
The congruence of the views of parents and teachers
Means (0 = Full disagreement in views, 4 = Full agreement in views)
■ 1991 (n = 76-87)
■ 2011 (n = 95)
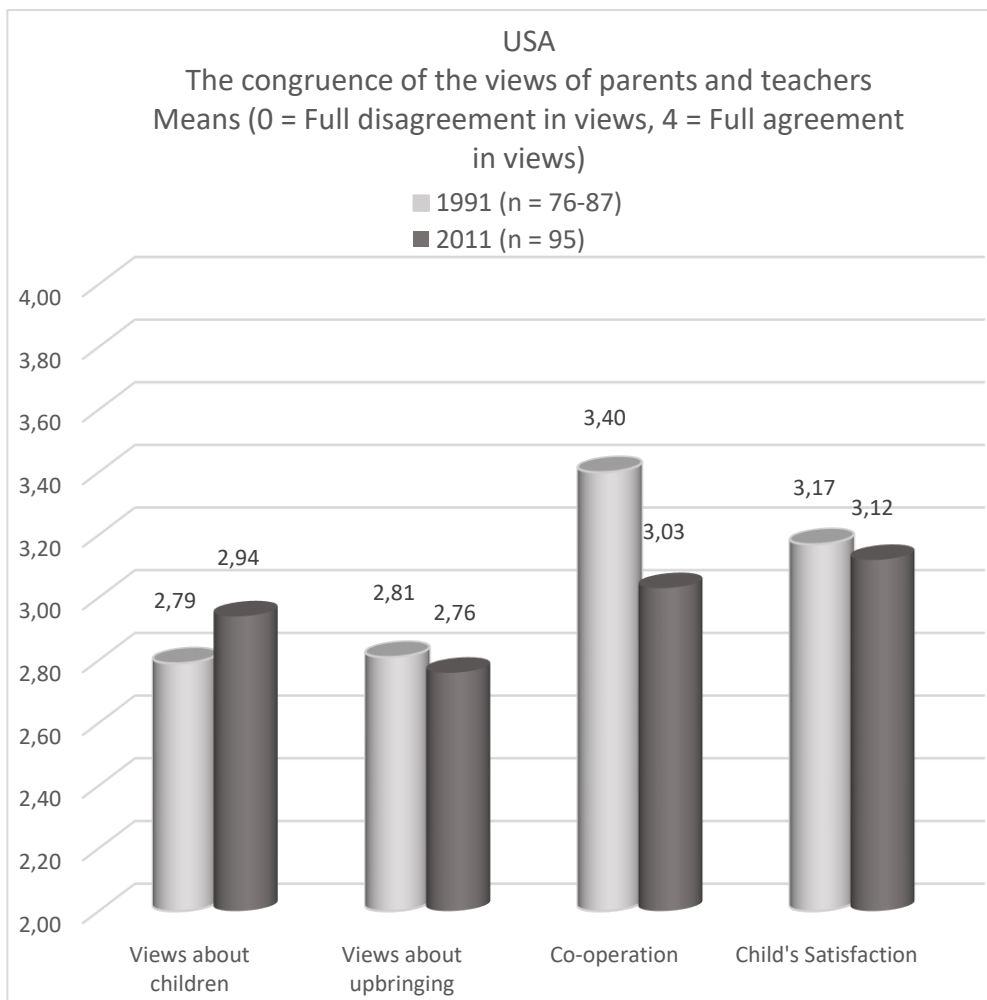
ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Longitudinal Study of Changes in Teachers' Views of Early Childhood Education in the USA, Russia, and Finland

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ABSTRACT: This investigation examines changes in teachers' views of the needs of children in early childhood education (ECE) context in the USA, Russia, and Finland over the past two decades. In addition, it focuses on the teachers' views about their role in the process of child-rearing within formal ECE institutions. Moreover, the primary purpose of documenting teachers' views on children's needs, professional work, and centre-based child care, between these societal contexts from 1991 and 2011, is to better understand points of comparative change. The data was collected from child care centre teachers by applying the qualitative method of focus group discussions. The results suggest great changes both on the micro and macro levels of ECE in the contexts of investigation. Although the results suggest that individual encounters with children are idealized in each society, the economics and values beyond the child care setting define the limits of resources available to implement their pedagogical aspirations.

Keywords: child care context, cross cultural study, change, society, case study

Introduction

Societal complexities, including cultural norm pressures, and other functional expectations, are affecting the early childhood education (ECE) sector, and consequently the professionals involved in it (Rury, 2016). International focus on ECE has increased since the 1990s, beginning with global actions, such as the 1990 World Declaration on

Education for All and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Mahon, 2010). As societies evolve, the evolution challenges ECE teachers – and the teachers' professional work – to react to these changes.

This international comparative investigation aims to understand changes in teachers' views of the needs of children in three ECE contexts within the United States of America (USA), Russia, and Finland over the past two decades. In addition, it examines professionalism, focusing on teachers' views about their role in the process of child-rearing within formal ECE institutions. Instead of straightforward comparisons within one country of investigation, the diverse national orientations of the selected societies provide interesting and contrasting contexts for conducting cross-cultural research due to the differences in their national orientations to family-child care dynamics. For instance, in Russia, society has traditionally had a strong ideological power over families (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina et al., 2006), whereas in the USA, families have power over child care choices if they can afford them (Barnett, 2010; Bennett, 2011; Scarr, 1998). In Finland, according to the legislation, child care services must be arranged by the municipalities according to the needs of the children and the families (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973; Revised in 2015).

The nature of the study should be understood as multiple case studies, and therefore the results cannot be overgeneralized to cover the entire socio-cultural context of each country under investigation. In order to improve clarity when reporting the results, the respondents are referred to as "American", "Finnish", or "Russian" depending on the obtained sample. National generalizations are impossible to achieve and undesirable (i.e. create stereotypes). Instead, this study aims to yield information on how the ideological and political issues of societies compare and contrast to the teachers' own views regarding children, upbringing, and child care.

Theoretical Framework of the Investigation

Early childhood education has its roots in the cultural values of each society, and the implementation of early child care programmes are seen to reflect these values (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Rosenthal, 2003). Despite the well-accepted philosophy, from a psychological perspective, that children are perceived rather consistently from one culture to another, different societies conceptualize the culture of childhood in a variety of ways (Tudge, 2008). The structures of a society, its boundaries and its policies, regulate the reality of childhood in private and public institutions, such as within families and in child care centres. The regulation of childhood also involves the regulation of the teachers' professional work, and both are defined as being culture-specific (Peterson, Veisson, Hujala, Sandberg & Johansson, 2014). Cross-cultural

research questions the self-evident nature of culturally bounded ECE practices. It may, metaphorically speaking, hold up a mirror to one's own educational system and its everyday practices.

In early education, the foundation for understanding children's behaviour is the awareness of contextual growth (Hujala, 1996) and the understanding that every child is an integral part of their social environment. The concepts of the child and child-rearing practices are included in formal ECE, moreover, maintaining a continuous impact on teachers' professional work within the field.

The theoretical approach of this study has its foundations in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, which offers a contextually defined structure for approaching early childhood education (Hujala, 1996; 2013). It gives insight into the understanding that child care provisions, including its pedagogical models and the growth environment, reflect the society in which it is situated and functions within. Triandis (1994) emphasized that educational processes cannot be viewed separately from the societal context: in order to understand the phenomenon as a whole, societal and cultural influences need to be considered as well.

Child Care Systems in the USA, Russia, and Finland

Children's growth and development, and the impact of interventions affecting them, have been studied extensively by researchers in the United States (e.g. Bennett, 2011; Barnett, 2010; Burger, 2010; Halfon, Russ, Oberklaid, Bertrand & Eisenstadt, 2009; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). However, systematically organized child care is underdeveloped at best (e.g. the supermajority of teachers lack pedagogical training), and its availability and quality varies extensively. Furthermore, educational services are often designed and supported on the regional or private level for children under school age. ECE programmes for young children receive limited funding from the federal level, and affordability for parents can be an issue (Barnett, 2010; Bennett, 2011). Although anticipated in the early 1990s (Kagan & Rivers, 1991), a comprehensive national early childhood infrastructure has yet to emerge (Wortham, 2006). While a variety of programs exist on the market, limited options create high demand and prices, and fragmented ECE systems often create programme choice inequality, i.e. there is a large variation in the type of quality early childhood education that families may pursue (Barnett, 2010).

Russian early childhood education has a strong tradition and status in its society (Rubtsov & Yudina, 2010), and childhood is highly valued (UNESCO, 2010; Graves & Gargiulo, 1994). The function of ECE in Russia is dual: it serves the labour market by

enabling mothers to work, but the early educational and developmental aspects are emphasized as well (Taratukhina et al., 2006). The universal early childhood education system is coordinated and financed on the national governmental level; however, the quality of services varies regionally (UNESCO, 2010).

In Finland, child care services are integrated and universal systems, and designed to offer both early education and care. The governance of ECE services is centralized on the state level; the system is strongly subsidized and it is equitably available to all families. Finnish ECE policy, including the child-adult ratios as well as staff qualifications, is established in detailed legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). Despite the highly integrated service model and pedagogically educated workforce, there is no systematic quality management on the national level, and this causes variation in ECE quality (Hujala, Fonsén & Elo, 2012).

Research questions

The purpose of the study was to examine and follow how teachers' views of the needs of children in ECE have changed in the USA, Russia, and Finland between 1991 and 2011. In addition, it focuses on the teachers' views about their role in the process of child rearing within formal ECE institutions. The current study is part of a larger research project, "Education in a Changing Society" (Huttunen, 1992).

With three different cultural and societal contexts in mind, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How have teachers' views on children's needs changed in the USA, Russia, and Finland over the last two decades?

2. How has teachers' professional work in supporting children's well-being changed over the past two decades in the studied societies?

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data was obtained from child care centre teachers using focus group discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The aim of the focus group method was to generate knowledge among the informants of ECE in their society. The teachers, including all educators (n=2–3) of the same group, were invited to discuss together and formulate their joint answers to the questions asked. The questions under discussion

concerned children's needs, the well-being and position of children in society, the importance of early education, and the role of the teachers' professional work in ECE.

The data consists of samples collected in two different phases: the first round was in 1991 and the second in 2011. In the USA, due to the fragmented ECE system, the study was conducted in two cities in two different North-Eastern states: Virginia and New York. The Russian sample was collected from a city situated northeast from the Moscow metropolitan area, and the Finnish sample was collected from a city located in the eastern part of Finland. All of the research cities are relatively small, urban, university cities.

The participating child care centres were required to meet the criteria of providing an all-day programme for groups of 3–5-year-olds. Due to the differences in the ECE systems within the societies, the amount of centres participating in the study varied. Altogether 17 different child care centres participated in 1991, while 11 centres participated in 2011. The total number of focus groups increased from 39 discussions during the first phase to 43 in the second phase. In the USA the amount of focus groups discussions decreased from 14 (1991) to 8 (2011) due to difficulties in recruiting participating centres during the second phase. In Russia, we organised 11 (1991) and 14 (2011) discussions. In Finland, research activity increased from 14 (1991) discussions to 21 (2011). In order to be validated and permitted to conduct international research, the ethics of the study were assessed and officially approved by the University of Tampere and Tampere Area Ethical Review Board. The informants were assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Conducting international research is a methodological challenge for researchers, who need to be aware of the ethical problems inherent in cross-cultural research. Triandis (1994) argues that in order to reduce ethnocentrism, it is important to analyse each culture in its own terms. In this paper, the theoretical underpinnings derive from the emic-etic approach (Pike 1967; Harris 1976; Berry 1989). Emics, i.e. the insider views on the studied phenomenon, represent the ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culturally specific. Etics, or the perspectives of the outsiders, on the other hand, discuss the same components on a universal level (i.e. considering generalizations in each culture). In this study, the interpretation of the preliminary results is done in cooperation with native researchers in order to overcome cultural barriers and enhance the emic-understanding of the results.

The epistemological orientation of the data analysis was inductive, and followed the objective hermeneutical method adjusted for educational research by Siljander and

Karjalainen (1991). The method of objective hermeneutics guided the analysis process in order to allow a deep interpretation of the data. The analysis process started by a holistic interpretation of the transcriptions, where the aim was to detect themes related to the research questions. The first phase of the analysis was carried out country by country, and by separately analysing the data from the two time cohorts. During the second phase of the analysis, the changes in the themes between the time cohorts were explored, and preliminary results were constructed. In the third phase of the analysis, native researchers were engaged in the process as experts of the ECE culture and research in their society. The purpose was to validate the findings by revealing the latent meanings and social constructions through an interpretation and cultural meta-analysis of the results (Siljander & Karjalainen, 1991). The results should be viewed as a dialogue of the etic (i.e. focus group data) and the local emic (i.e. interpretations of the native researchers) (see, e.g. Pike, 1967).

Results

Changes in teachers' views on the needs of children in the USA, Russia, and Finland

In the focus group discussions, the teachers were asked to describe children's needs, and the things they would change in their society to meet these needs, i.e. in order to promote the children's general well-being and quality of life. The reporting of the results is done country by country. Findings are provided in a descriptive manner to make the contextual changes within the studied societies visible.

Consistent emphasis on the emotional well-being of children in the USA

For two decades, according to the American teachers, the most important need of children was considered to be emotional well-being. In 1991, teachers requested improvements in children's education and care both on the micro and macro level. On the macro level, they wanted a broader emotional change in the social prestige of childhood, and called for more time, love, and care for children, instead of material wealth. Teachers suggested that children need acceptance and a sense of self-worth. In consideration of each child's own family being at the core of fulfilling these emotional needs, comments were made emphasising this, such as *"love and affection from parents or guardians. A strong relationship with family members. To be able to understand and to care."* (American teachers, 1991)

On the macro level, teachers expressed a need for investment in the early education system in order to ensure quality education programmes for children. Society must *"value education more, so that more federal money is put towards quality day care."* (American teachers, 1991) In addition to formal ECE services, teachers requested support for parenthood. Teachers defined the children's fundamental need as that of *"being loved and feeling that they are important as individuals. They need to feel safe and secure."* (American teachers, 1991). The teachers suggested that in a loving and safe atmosphere, guided by adults who are attentive, children had an opportunity to grow up well-balanced with strong self-esteem. Social relations in general as well as a balanced growth environment and learning atmosphere were considered important in promoting the development of children.

Twenty years later, the views of the American teachers considering the basic needs of children have expanded from a focus predominately on family to a focus on professional child care as well. While two decades earlier, parents were considered to have the main responsibility for the child's emotional well-being, in 2011 the influence on the child's well-being was perceived to be equally shared by the home and child care. Adult activity was considered to have a great impact on the child's psychological development, which can be stimulated by secure boundaries and consistent child-rearing: *"Children are most influenced by the people that teach and raise them – parents and teachers. Parents and teachers spend the most amount of time with the child. Our beliefs and opinions easily rub off and influence children."* (American teachers, 2011).

Along with the emotional and psychological needs, teachers in 2011 emphasized the importance of meeting children's physical needs, such as proper nutrition, adequate housing, and appropriate health care. In addition, the child's right to a quality early education was emphasized. Teachers proposed that when the basic needs and the basic care of the child were fulfilled at home, the child care setting could provide opportunities for the child's comprehensive growth and development in a stimulating learning environment. *"While at school",* the teachers clarified *"we provide children with nutritious and healthy food, a warm safe environment, and quality education"* (American teachers, 2011).

Societal change towards family-centeredness in Russia

For the last two decades in the focus group discussions, Russian teachers agreed unanimously that emotional needs are children's most salient basic needs. In the discussions in 1991, the teachers raised children's need for loving, caring, and individual attention from the adults around them as a key issue. The teachers stated that *"children lack care and love. Parents should spend time with their kids as much as possible."*

(Russian teachers, 1991). The teachers emphasized the significance of the home atmosphere, parents setting an example to their children, and the importance of authoritative behaviour towards children. The teachers also expressed a concern that parents did not spend enough time with their children, and they were concerned that children's emotional needs, as well as warm interaction with their parents, were neglected.

In the discussions, Russian teachers agreed that after the economic and political reforms in 1991, general societal change was needed in order to improve the well-being of citizens. A strong belief in the state's role in ensuring the well-being of children was clearly seen in the teachers' responses. According to the teachers, a substantial restructuring of administration was needed, and demands for allocating resources and support to the families and the ECE system were emphasized. These changes were seen as essential when trying to improve early childhood education, as "*the structure of the whole society must be changed in such a way that there would be better material well-being for people and good conditions for family life. In time, people's attitudes towards each other will change.*" (Russian teachers, 1991).

In the former Soviet Union, families were subordinate to the state and official child care, but today the situation appears to be the reverse. State-centeredness diminished in the early 1990s, and the focus of policy discussion was gradually transferred to the family. A new law stipulated that parents were the primary care-givers (Federal Law On Education, 2012). Consistent with this shift in the state's focus, teachers emphasized the mother's role as the primary care-giver in ensuring the upbringing and well-being of the child. Teachers were unanimous that the main thing children needed was *"attention, affection, and care from the parents*" (Russian teachers, 2011). As in 1991, teachers in 2011 were still concerned about the parents' lack of time and attention towards their children, since many of the children spent long hours in child care. Teachers suggested that *"in order to fulfil children's needs to be loved by their parents, it is necessary to shorten mothers' working hours and increase the leisure time of parents"* (Russian teachers, 2011). The teachers' concern was understandable in the light of the study by Alieva, Stasjuk, Fadeeva, Aslanova, and Uvarova (2011), which documents that both parents had long working hours until late in the evening. They suggested the need for a new kind of labour force policy so that parents of young children could work shorter hours, and focus more on family life. The political and societal shift has made it necessary to reconsider the responsibilities of the state and the individual.

In 2011, teachers also demanded more societal prestige for work in ECE. They asked for more financial resources from the state in order to strengthen the material basis of the child care centres and to enable the creation of a versatile learning environment for

children. In addition, the participants postulated that the deteriorated status of ECE should be restored to its prior level. This was in line with the OECD policy review of Russia, which confirms that the status of ECE had decreased (OECD, 1998, 55–57). In 2011, teachers felt that elevating the status of ECE professionals was crucial. In the former Soviet Union, salary differences between professions were insignificant; raising the salaries of the child care staff was seen by the participants as modern, concrete evidence of the appreciation of educational work.

From care routines to emphasizing children's emotional well-being in Finland

In the majority of the discussions in 1991, Finnish teachers listed physical needs and basic care as the major needs of children. Teachers listed *"food, rest, physical activities, outdoor play, and safety"* as children's most crucial needs in support of their well-being, and assessed that *"these can be met relatively well in child care"* (Finnish teachers, 1991). Children's physical needs were seen as the basis for their balanced and holistic development. Twenty years on, educational aspects are now more emphasized in child care, but the traditional daily schedule of the child care centres remains constructed according to basic care situations (e.g. allowing enough time for rest and providing an adequate lunch). Basic care that focuses on children's physical needs has been perceived to be fundamental in Finnish early education (Niikko, 2008) and therefore the predictable daily schedule and adult-oriented didactics were considered as key elements in professionalism in the latter part of the last century (Huttunen, 1989).

The second most emphasized element discussed by the teachers in 1991 was connected to the children's sense of psychological security, which was seen to be depend on having consistent relationships and an encouraging and accepting atmosphere, both at home and in child care. The basic needs of children, according to teachers, were connected to the children's *"sense of security, warm relationships, adult responsibility for the children and justified tasks, proper basic and health care, a stable emotional life, and warm and genuine human relationships"* (Finnish teachers, 1991). It was considered an adult responsibility to make an effort to form a tender, psychologically secure, and nurturing environment for children. The psychological sense of security in Finnish child care is perceived to be realized in basic care situations, since a positive and attentive approach during these situations enhances the children's sense of security (Niikko, 2008; Tiusanen, 2008).

In Finnish discussions, teachers' expectations of support from society were divided in 1991. On the other hand, the teachers suggested that parents should be offered the opportunity to choose the child care service that suited them best. The government was seen as responsible for supporting families both financially and on the labour

force-policy level to ensure that parents would have the chance to take care of their children at home if they so wished. Teachers argued that *"families should have the opportunity to choose the child care solution that best serves their needs: home, child care programme, or something else"* (Finnish teachers, 1991). In turn, every child's subjective right to formal ECE was proposed and the government was required to offer programme access to every child. In addition, teachers called for the societal appreciation of ECE. Investing in children was to be seen as an investment for the future.

Twenty years later, in 2011, the views of the Finnish teachers had changed: basic care was no longer listed as the most significant developmental need. Instead, children's emotional needs, such as their need to feel accepted and loved, were strongly emphasized. The role of the safe home environment was now seen to be most crucial for the well-being of children, and the teachers' role was *"to support parents in their parenting, and to offer each child developmentally appropriate early education"* in child care (Finnish teachers, 2011). On the other hand, teachers expressed a view that financial troubles or mental health problems in the parents' relationships could increase the risk of children being in an unsafe atmosphere during upbringing.

In the discussions in 2011, teachers hoped for changes in general societal attitudes in the direction of non-materialistic values. Society was seen to emphasize the importance of paid work and teachers therefore proposed flexible working hours for parents, more family time, and *"less stress and extra-activities. Better economical choices for parents to take care of their child at home. A need to shorten children's days at child care,"* and *"enough staff"* in child care (Finnish teachers, 2011).

While twenty years ago, the subjective right to ECE was called for, in 2011 Finnish respondents expressed a desire to restrict it. Even though the Act on Children's Day Care (1973) defines it otherwise, the constant tension in public discussions remains between care and education. The main emphasis of this discussion regards whether the child care system in Finland should be seen as a child's right to early education or as a labour force policy solution for parents (Repo & Kröger, 2009). There seems to be an increasingly prevalent conception that a child should not be taken to child care if one of the parents stays at home (Kinos & Palonen, 2012). This may reflect the critical discussion that child care is not considered an optimal environment for a child to be raised in in the light of attachment theory, because it might endanger the secure mother-child relationship (Rusanen, 2011). In addition, the quality of child care has been criticized for not being satisfactory from the youngest children's point of view, since the activities are typically adult-centred instead of child-centred (Kalliala, 2012). Broadly considered, though, Finnish ECE is mainly of high quality (Hujala, Fonsén & Elo, 2012; Roos, 2015; Heikka, Fonsén, Elo & Leinonen, 2014).

Changes in the teachers' professional work

With the second research question, we investigated teachers' perceptions of professional work in supporting children's well-being. In addition, we focused on how these perceptions have changed. The topic of the group discussions followed these questions: What would you see as an ideal upbringing and how could you execute it in practice? What things do you feel are important in the caregiver's work that would satisfy the needs of the children?

From emotional support to professional ECE in the USA

When asking about teachers' conceptions of an ideal early childhood education in 1991, American teachers highlighted the importance of emotional education. A loving and respectful relationship with the child, as well as the teacher's emotional commitment to children, was seen to be meaningful and significant. Attention to individual needs and the teacher's sensitivity in defining the developmental stages of children rose to the heart of the debate. The focus of professional ECE was on the aspects of care in which the teacher's own sensitive personality was emphasized. According to the respondents, children should *"be provided with a safe, secure, loving environment in which they can grow and learn at their own pace"* (American teachers, 1991).

In the discussions in 2011, although emotional care was still a concern, the spotlight had shifted. The professional emphasis was now more focused on educational aspects rather than care. The teachers' opinions seemed to reflect the discussion targeted on curricular professionalism (Wortham, 2002). In this general discussion, which began in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the choice was between a developmental, constructivist approach to curriculum development and an emphasis on learning math and literacy content-area knowledge that would lead to success on standardized achievement tests in elementary school. In 2011, teachers also called for professional support and strong leadership. Teachers in the US-discussions still stressed their belief in child-centred pedagogy and the individual needs of children as they did in 1991. However, in 2011, they were more aware of their professional teachership in demanding *"proper training and enough staff to be able to meet children's needs efficiently"* (American teachers, 2011). In addition, the respondents focused on their needs outside of teaching hours, e.g. in-service training and more time for pedagogical planning. Other studies suggest that the development of child care programmes added the need for quality evaluation in early childhood education, leadership, and staff training, and thus for teacher education in general (Barnett, 2011; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009).

From teacher-centeredness to parent-teacher partnerships in Russia

In the Russian discussions in 1991, the importance of taking children's individuality into account in care and education was seen as a major focal point of teachers' professional work, as was the teachers' competence in observing child's developmental needs and responding to them. Teachers emphasized early education that promotes the development of the child's abilities in a diverse way: *"harmoniously taking child's needs into account. Bringing up a child by taking his/her individuality into account."* (Russian teachers, 1991). The cornerstones of professional work were seen as the teachers' warm attitude towards children, their fair and caring role, and their ability to listen to children.

The findings suggest that Russian teachers' professional opinions have remained rather stable over the last two decades. As discussed in 2011, early education was seen as a process based on the child's needs. This situated the teachers' role as that of an enabler who may enhance the individual development of a child. Teachers were expected to *"take each child's mental abilities and individualism into account and guide the child in the right direction while acknowledging his/her interests and abilities."* (Russian teachers, 2011). Changes in the teachers' thinking in this study can be understood in light of Ispa's (2002) investigation, which examines the changes in the goals of Russian early childhood education from the perestroika era to the beginning of the 2000s. Russia opened up to the West during perestroika, and Western education and care had a strong influence on Russian education; a consciousness of child-centred pedagogy and individuality reached the teachers. The independent individualism of the child was now approved of and encouraged, contrary to Soviet-era ideas, where collectivist values were stressed. However, the daily practices in child care centres could not change as quickly as the new philosophical ideals were adopted. Zagvozdkin (2013) has shown that almost half of the centres still use only slightly updated programmes that were originally developed in Soviet times. Such programmes provide very little room for independent individualism.

In the discussions in 2011, the focus of Russian ECE had broadened to the parent–teacher partnership. Previously, the parents' involvement in ECE had been slight. Nowadays, parent-teacher partnerships are stressed and encouraged by teachers, and *"comprehensive upbringing of individuals and individual upbringing jointly with parents"* (Russian teachers, 2011) is called for. Russian parents were seen to be more self-confident today than they were during the Soviet era. They want to be active partners in their child's child care and are not afraid to ask and question childcare practices. Nonetheless, Elo (2012) found that although parent-teacher partnerships are now the focus in Russian early childhood education, parents still generally believe their potential to affect the child care practices is limited.

It can be seen that a significant change in perceptions of child care and upbringing took place during perestroika. In the Soviet Union, there was a rhetoric of children being highly valued as future citizens (Graves & Gargiulo, 1994). In practice, however, children's voices were rarely heard because adults knew what was best for them and activities were planned and carried out by adults (Gradskova, 2010). According to the teachers in 2011, it was now important to *"see the individual in the child and to take child's opinions, needs, and abilities into account"* (Russian teachers, 2011).

Emphasising child-centred professionalism in Finland

In the discussions in 1991, Finnish teachers' emphasized child-centeredness and children's individualism as an ideal upbringing. Teachers stressed that *"practice should be based on interaction between children and adults. It should also be enabling and take the child's ideas, wishes, and individualism into account."* (Finnish teachers, 1991) In addition to these ideals, safe and open communication and interaction between the teacher and children was a major focus. Trained teachers and adequate resources were seen as prerequisites for high-quality child care practices.

Finnish teachers' views on professional ECE have remained rather similar over the past two decades. In 2011, teachers still emphasized that each child's individualism and active agency should be taken into account in education and care. Teachers stressed the need to offer children choice and a creative learning atmosphere in child care. Education and care took place in interaction. In addition, structural features, such as adequate staff and material resources, smaller group sizes, and appropriate facilities were strongly regarded as a prerequisite for high-quality education. Teachers suggest that ECE should be *"child-centred and goal-oriented, based on individual needs. When working in a group, children learn to listen to each other and respect others. Children should be offered possibilities to work in small groups, allowing the child the possibilities to do things he/she wants without disturbance."* (Finnish teachers, 2011)

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate changes in teachers' views considering children's needs and teachers' professional work in ECE in the USA, Russia, and Finland during the past two decades. Theoretical underpinnings of the study derived from the contextual paradigm (Hujala 1996) with an aim to understand the studied phenomena in the interconnected environments and in interaction with the surrounding socio-cultural context.

In analysing teachers' pedagogical thinking in this study, the individual needs of children were strongly emphasized. Children's individual encounters were idealized in each society, but the respective economy defined the resources available to implement them. The investment of societies in early childhood education and care seem to be minor compared to the goals demanded of ECE by society, which suggests a low valuation of the field (Strategy 2020; 2013; Abankina, 2011). Teachers wished to work according to their educational ideologies, however, results suggest that inadequate resources prevented them from achieving their most desired goals. According to the teachers in Finland, the basic physical needs of the majority of children could be met in child care. However, the lack of resources to meet individual needs was seen as problematic. It was suggested that a reduction of group sizes was needed in order to put more effort into emotional education and individuality. On the contrary, the current government has made decisions to increase the adult-child ratios, which will inevitably lead to enlargement of the group sizes.

In each studied societal context, teachers expressed a need for more government support to develop the ECE system and guarantee quality child care. American teachers' demands for the development of child care programmes are, in part,   due to the reality that federal government-supported preschool education (e.g. Head Start), for children from low-income families, has been developed more efficiently than other typical alternative private all-day programmes. Also, half-day programmes have traditionally been developed to offer activities for children cared for by their stay-at-home mothers. Now, as women enter the work force more than ever, there is a need to develop an efficient, universal, early childhood education system. In addition, the increase in the number of single mothers has added pressure to the need for all-day care, because most single parents work full-time (Halfon et al., 2009; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007; Scarr, 1998). According to Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel (2007), there are even strong socio-cultural "myths" to motherhood: poor single mothers are expected to work outside the home even when they have infants. On the other hand, middle-class mothers should remain at home.

According to Katz (2010, p. 52), *"Welfare is the most despised institution in America and public education is the most iconic."* There appears to be a dichotomy in ECE in the USA (Morrissey & Warner, 2007). Education is perceived to be the cornerstone of democracy, and therefore citizens are entitled to public education from the ages of five or six until high school graduation, while care for very young children has been considered the responsibility of individual families. The funding of governmental ECE programmes is not considered a priority on the government level. Indeed, the funding is often deficient and marginal, and it is operated through the local, state, and national funding streams (Halfon et al., 2009). Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel (2007) argue that government

involvement in the upbringing of young children is still viewed by some as trespassing into the private lives of families.

When investigating the changes in Russian teachers' responses, it is apparent that a significant change in Soviet thinking had already taken place in the late 1980s during the perestroika era, when "Soviet pedagogy" ended. The Russian teachers' opinions from 1991 suggest that the Russian government defined the goals of ECE and the guidelines of the implementation of child care. This may have contributed to the definition of the parents' subordinate role. In 2011, however, the focus in the responses shifted from seeing the state as superior to the family, but the parents' subordinate role has nonetheless remained. During the Soviet era, early childhood education was seen as part of the governmental apparatus; ECE was pursued to raise proper Soviet citizens (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina et al., 2006). Moreover, during perestroika, the changes in the societal position of parents and the economic circumstances of the families evoked concerns for the well-being of children.

Even though the role of the mother was traditionally strong in the Soviet Union and she has been seen as the primary care-giver in the family (Gradskova, 2010), motherhood was not emphasized in the Soviet Union. The aims of society were collective: mothers had a responsibility to work outside the home, and children were to be brought up in public preschools. The state had a strong role as the primary practitioner in the upbringing of children. Preschools and nurseries, which were meant for the children of working mothers' and for poor families, were considered welfare institutions, and one of their missions was to educate parents in child-rearing (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina, et al., 2006).

In Finland, ECE has developed extensively over the past twenty years. Every child has been granted the statutory right to child care programmes. In addition, national goals have emphasized that the quality of child care should not be compromised. For example, the child-adult ratio, which is one the lowest in the world, had not been questioned by policy-makers until recently. On the contrary, the respondents raised critiques towards the universal right of children to ECE, as they were concerned about the parents' position in their children's lives. The decline in the Finnish economy has now led to the government decision to limit the subjective right to ECE.

Since the 1990s, the volume of ECE services in Finland has grown remarkably (Strandell, 2011). In 1990, the role of child care was perceived to support parents in their task of bringing up the child. Twenty years later, however, the Finnish ECE paradigm has shifted from day care to early education to meet the developmental and educational needs of children (Kangas, 2016; Roos, 2015; Hujala, Valpas, Roos & Elo, 2016). In 2000,

the quality of ECE became an integral part of public discourse (Alila, 2013), and enhancing quality practices and emphasizing the importance of ECE pedagogy were seen as fundamental leadership tasks in the development of early childhood education. These themes have since become the foci of recent research (Hujala, 2013; Fonsén, 2014; Heikka, 2014).

In conclusion, our findings suggest that in all of the societal contexts in this study frame, the professional work of teachers and the manner in which teachers view children's needs have changed greatly. The status of ECE professional work has remained low compared to the expressed value of children in the three societies. In addition, participants throughout the investigation suggested that the professional status, such as the level of the salaries, is still low in ECE. When childhood development is not understood and/or appreciated on the macro level of society, investments in ECE will struggle to meet the required levels to fulfil the goals set for ECE by professionals.

Conducting cross-cultural research with an international authorship presented many challenging, yet fruitful outcomes. Complications occur because there are a variety of different research cultures between us co-authors. For example, choosing clear conceptions puzzled us from time to time, but the process exposed us to the emic-reality of our informants – instead of finding one truth, we found many. Moreover, this article aimed to bring out the multilayered voice of the informants, previous investigations, and the interpretations of us researchers. In today's world, international research may help us overcome cross-cultural barriers and enhance our understanding of different levels of society as well as academia.

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CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHANGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE USA, RUSSIA, AND FINLAND

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine changes that have taken place in centre-based early childhood education in the USA, Russia, and Finland between 1991 and 2014. The cross-culturally conducted study aimed to identify and contrast socio-cultural differences and similarities of the perceived changes in the context of the studied societies. The country-wise qualitative data was acquired using focus group discussions targeted at childcare centre directors. The directors interpreted the quantitative results of quality assessments collected as part of the larger research project from each context under review. This process was called the 'Reflective Emic Analysis', with an aim to enhance the cultural aspects of the data. The results suggest that the field of early childhood education has faced significant changes in each society. Country-specific sub-categories from each discussion were merged and four main themes common to all countries were formulated: (1) the changed role of parents as customers, (2) the change in external factors and regulations affecting the services, (3) the change in the pedagogic orientation, and (4) the changed role of the director.

Keywords: early childhood education; change; socio-cultural context; cross-cultural research; focus group

Introduction

There is a growing need for professional early childhood education (ECE) services worldwide, but the types of governance structures strongly influence the coverage and quality of those services within countries (Bennett 2011). According to a study by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA 2010), parents are particularly concerned about the quality of the available childcare arrangements. Furthermore, quality is not only a concern of parents, but also of other stakeholders involved, such as the ECE professionals, government officials, and policy-makers in designing and providing early educational services (Ho, Campbell-Barr & Leeson 2010). Therefore, it is not insignificant where, how, and what kind of ECE services parents are able to claim for their children. More research is needed to clarify what constitutes international ECE quality, and to determine the interdependency between different quality dimensions, such as the society, the users of the services, and the cultural context (Ho, Campbell-Barr & Leeson 2010).

Societies are continually evolving and the cultural and societal changes affect the development of the ECE services. Increased knowledge will help direct new policy recommendations, good practice suggestions, and research perspectives. The changes are not separate from the culture, but in every society, new ideas will be adapted within the existing cultural scripts. On the other hand, the existing cultural scripts are transformed and changed by the influence of policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers (Rosenthal 2003; Tudge 2008).

There is a lack of research available of how the global and local change has affected the ECE context in various societies. Social change since the 1990s has been accelerating in nature due to substantial changes in world politics (i.e. Perestroika in former Soviet Union) and in the information technology (development of World Wide Web). Societies have become more complex, which has caused more pressure and expectations towards education and towards the stakeholders involved in it (Rury 2016). The international focus on ECE has been rapid since the 1990s, beginning with the World Declaration on Education for All, involving major global actors such as UNICEF, the World Bank, United Nations Development Project, and UNESCO (Mahon 2010). In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 has added to the global discourse on child's best interest.

This article examines how ECE has evolved in the past two decades in the USA, Russia, and Finland. More specifically, the study aims to describe changes within the ECE field interpreted by childcare centre directors, and how these changes have

affected their work. The interpretations are constructed based on the obtained parental assessments. The study is part of a larger cross-cultural and multi-method research project called 'Education in a Changing Society' (Huttunen 1992). This article aims to address the growing interest towards comparative international ECE research tradition, with a special focus on society-related change over time, which has rarely been studied.

ECE in the context of the USA, Russia, and Finland

The cross-sectional data was collected from three significantly different contexts and therefore it is necessary to justify the selection of them. In all of the studied countries, ECE systems are different, as can be seen in the current system and also historically. These societies provide interesting and contrasting contexts to examine and define how ECE services have been constructed over the past two decades. By being remarkably different, the contrasts in the results revealed clear similarities and differences.

In the USA, ECE services are implemented and organised at the state level and there is significant variation in the state policies regulating the quality of ECE services (Barnett 2010; Bennett 2011; Connors & Morris 2015). The fragmented ECE system creates inequality for families and what services are available to them. Russian ECE services have a strong tradition and status in society (Graves and Gargiulo 1994). The function of ECE in Russia is dual: it serves the labour market by enabling mothers to work, and the early educational aspects are emphasised as well (Taratukhina et al. 2006). The ECE system is coordinated and financed at the government level, although the variance in quality services seems to be high and vary regionally (UNESCO 2010). In Finnish ECE, childcare services are integrated to offer both education and care, and they are heavily subsidised and equally available to all families. The model is called 'EDUCARE'. The governance of ECE services is centralised at the state level, and they are well established in legislation. The ratios and staff qualifications per child are defined in the acts that steer ECE services. (Hujala, Fonsén & Elo 2011; Karila 2012.)

While the presumption is that the three studied countries organise their ECE services in line with the societal and cultural norms and expectations, hence the differences, the aim of the study is not to prove the inferiority of cultural differences or superiority of the systems. In order to understand the ECE systems in different countries, one should be aware of those cultural, historical, and social influences that have contributed to shaping the system (Triandis 1994; Tudge 2008). The study does

not claim to represent the overall population of ECE services in the three societies, but to emphasise the contextual nature of the study. When reporting the results, the contexts of each society are referred to as 'American, Finnish, and Russian' to improve clarity. Yet, it is necessary to bear in mind that the results cannot be overgeneralised to cover the entire socio-cultural context of each country, but rather to be understood as multiple case studies. Although generalisations are both impossible to achieve and undesirable, the study will yield new and important information about some of the society-related changes while contrasting the results from the three different socio-cultural contexts within this study frame.

The theoretical foundations for this study lean on the contextualist ontology (Hujala 1996; Tudge 2008) and the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). Deriving from the theory of Bronfenbrenner, this study focuses on the integration (meso system) of the home and childcare centre (micro system), and how this interplay is influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural context (macro system). The macro-level impacts are examined within the notion of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006), and how the gradually evolving practices, rules, and activities, as well as values and beliefs of the society (Tudge 2008), affect the interaction within microsystems.

One of the greatest challenges and ethical standpoints of the study was how to respect the cultural aspects of the knowledge construction. The theoretical emic–etic approach (Berry 1989; Harris 1976; Pike 1967) offered a multifaceted tool to explore ECE systems in three different contexts that would otherwise remain difficult to compare reliably. Drawing from Pike (1990), the emic perspective brings out how we perceive our own culture, and the etic is how the outsiders view it. Etics are the universal aspects that can be compared across all cultures; whereas emic is culture-specific. For Pike, the etic data is merely the starting point for the analysis, and it provides 'access to the system' under investigation.

Research task

The general aim of the present study was to examine the changes that have taken place in childcare centre-based ECE in the USA, Russia, and Finland over two decades. In addition, the study aimed to identify what societal and cultural differences and similarities define ECE in the studied societies. An additional purpose was to overcome the challenges of cross-cultural research by using the *Reflective Emic Analysis* (Vlasov forthcoming) approach, where native experts from each society interpreted the cross-cultural quantitative data. The qualitatively

obtained data derived from the socio-cultural realities of the participants, and formed the emic understanding of the studied phenomenon. With the Reflective Emic Analysis -process, researchers aimed to gain deeper and more culturally sensitive understanding of the studied phenomenon.

The study was carried out using focus group discussions with childcare centre directors to interpret the quantitative results of the ECE quality assessments collected as part of the larger research project. The quantitatively obtained data was acquired from each context under review during the years 1991–2011, and it can be seen to form a foundation to this study. The principal research question guided the study: What were the perceptions of childcare centre directors regarding the changes that have taken place in parents' quality assessments for the past 20 years in the USA, Russia, and Finland?

Data collection

The quantitative data that served as the etic starting point for this study was collected country wise by questionnaires from parents of 3- to 5-year-old children from 17 ECE centre programmes in 1991 and from 11 centres again in 2011. Each childcare centre was required to offer an all-day programme. The research cities represented average urban cities in their societies.

The focus group discussion method was selected due to its synergetic nature in interpreting the quantitative data. Wibeck et al. (2007) suggest that focus groups enable the topic to be studied and understood from the perspective of the informants. This was in line with the philosophical underpinnings and the epistemological premises of the study as the interest was in how the results are reflected from the participants' cultural perspective, i.e. the emic perspective. The fact that the researchers are members of one of the studied socio-cultural contexts was acknowledged and taken into account during the course of the research process. A pilot focus group discussion was organised in Finland to test the suitability of the method, and the rich discussions encouraged the use of the focus groups as a 'Reflective Emic Analysis' method.

Four to five focus group discussions were organised in each studied society. Discussions were implemented in different cities from where the quantitative data was collected, in order for the participants to recede from the data and reflect on the results more objectively in their society context. Childcare centre directors in each country were invited to discussions according to their willingness to participate. Extensive experience in the field was preferred, but not mandatory.

Focus group discussions were organised in each country, one at a time, by the first author. In Russia, an interpreter joined the data collection process with the researcher. In the USA, childcare centre directors or head teachers (n=18) from the state of New York participated in the study. Due to the fragmented ECE system in the USA, a decision was made to organise four focus groups as part of a state wide network for ECE professionals. Finnish discussions were held in a southern urban city with local childcare centre directors or those in a similar position (n=15) in five different sessions. In Russia, the data was collected from an urban city in Siberia, where five focus group discussions were organised for local childcare centre directors (n=14).

The aim of the focus group method was to generate knowledge among the directors of the general changes in the field of ECE. Based on the parental ECE quality assessments, statistical results were used as data for further interpretations of the changes in ECE. The questions asked to guide the discussions were as follows: (1) How do you assess the changes that have taken place within the last two decades considering the quality of ECE according to parents? (2) What are your interpretations about what has possibly affected the changes in the assessments?

A facilitator guided the discussion without disturbing the flow, though she made sure that the discussion was on track, as well as ensuring the equal rotation of participation among the individuals. At the start of the discussion, instructions, guidelines, and the topics to be covered were shared with the participants. The anonymity of the participants was assured and the group was informed that each opinion and topic raised was of value with no right or wrong answers. The discussion sessions ranged in duration from 45 minutes to nearly two hours.

Reflective emic analysis

The US data was transcribed and analysed in English and the Finnish data in Finnish. The Russian data was translated, transcribed, and analysed in Finnish. The Russian translations were tested and validated by back translation conducted by two separate translators.

The obtained data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009) in which the analysis is based on the interpretation and reasoning of the data, and where the process proceeds from empirical material towards forming a conceptual view of the phenomenon. Data analysis was inductive and used a three-phase, progressive process. The first and second phase of the

analysis was carried out country wise, and in the third phase, the cross-cultural comparisons were conducted. Transcriptions were read intensively, and the data was condensed by revealing thematic categories that described the changes in ECE defined by the participants in their collective discussions. The analysis process began by separately analysing each focus group discussion in order to identify initial categories showing the major changes in ECE based on the parental assessments. When proceeding to the second phase of the analysis process, the initial categories from each discussion were merged together country wise in order to form themes describing the changes in studied countries at the societal level. After identifying these themes in each studied country, the cross-cultural analysis was conducted. The third phase of the data analysis aimed to reveal cultural similarities and differences of how ECE has changed from the point of view of the users and management of services, pedagogy, and society.

Key findings

Country-specific sub-categories from each discussion were merged and four main themes common to all countries were formulated: (1) the changed role of parents as customers (users of services), (2) the change in external factors and regulations affecting the services (society factors), (3) the change in the pedagogic orientation, and (4) the changed role of the director (management of services).

After systematic and rigorous coding, it was noted that the most frequently discussed sub-themes were the same in all of the three studied countries, but the contents of the themes varied. The variations could be explained by the societal and cultural differences, and what the institutional status and history of the ECE system is. When analysing the data more deeply, it was noted that the contents of the themes represented the emic knowledge of each cultural context. The study can be perceived as a dialogue between insiders' emic views and the etic interpretations and comparisons of the researcher.

The changed role of parents as customers

In each of the studied cultural contexts, the changed role of the parents as customers was noted, and this was a frequently discussed topic in nearly every focus group. In the USA, parents' dissatisfaction with the cost had increased since the 1990s. Directors linked the high fees of the ECE services with dissatisfaction among the parents and at the same time as a factor promoting parents' customer orientation in ECE:

> …we're looking at the cost, the cost of your childcare is very expensive but, it's like we were talking about the other day. The priorities of parents, our society is no longer based on need. It's based on want. What I want. (USA-FG1, R1)

Parents are now expecting a more individualised, instant, and responsive service for their money, which according to directors has changed in the last two decades. According to US directors, ECE is seen as a market-driven business that is affected by the society's labour force policy. More centres have been opened in response to the different needs of the parents, and directors were seen as 'business managers' for these services:

> And really when you add up your childcare costs it's as much as a mortgage. It's what you pay, every month to live in your house. It's horrendous but, at the same time, it costs a lot to do everything we need to do, even though our salaries aren't the greatest. And when you're looking to hire somebody, you can't just hire someone who's good with children. They have to be good with parents. (USA-FG4, R2)

In Finland, the notion of parents as customers has also strengthened according to the respondents, but for different reasons than in the USA. Twenty years ago, it was still uncertain whether families qualified for the place in public child care. The provision of childcare was considered a social welfare benefit for low-income families and families with better income did not qualify for public care. When the act on subjective right for childcare was passed in 1996, every child was to be given access to childcare regardless of the socio-economic status of the family. According to the respondents, the parents in 1991 were more satisfied with receiving a place in childcare, whereas today childcare is considered somewhat self-evident. The respondents felt that this has partly promoted the customer orientation, and increased the demands and expectations of the parents as paying clients. According to the respondents, this was also reflected in parents' decreased satisfaction with the special field trips and outings, as well as the variety, accessibility, and appropriateness of toys, materials, and other equipment. The respondents pondered whether the decrease in parents' satisfaction with field trips was due to the increased expectations of visiting special entertainment centres, and traditional forest outings were not considered as field trips but rather everyday activities. The participants believed that the improved socio-economic status of the families and society in general had caused this:

> … before, something smaller was enough, children were happy with things on a smaller scale. Now there should be much more, something bigger and more spectacular. (Fin-FG2, R1)

With the increase in public discourse about ECE, parents were perceived as being more conscious of what constitutes good ECE today than they were in the 1990s. Finnish respondents suggested that today, due to increased knowledge, cooperating with parents has reduced the amount of direct advice and instructions, and this has further led to more sensitive encounters with the families:

> In general in the society, the fact that people want to affect and be in charge of their own matters has changed, and people don't settle with just what is offered. (Fin-FG2, R2)

In the Russian context, the dramatic societal and ideological changes have moulded the role of the parents in ECE. After perestroika, in 1991, Russia opened up to the West and people became aware of Western ideologies concerning both material and pedagogic issues. It was suggested that the increased use of the internet has added to the awareness of parents regarding choices for ECE services. Before, childcare centres were institutes owned and run by the state, and their services were not questioned. Today, according to the Russian respondents, the focus has shifted towards the quality of these services. Whereas the Soviet generation did not demand services, the directors had noticed that the parents today are consumers who know what can be expected and demanded:

> The social situation has changed, life has become more stable, and people do not just think about surviving day by day. (Rus-FG5, R1)

During the Soviet days, the rhythm of life was the same for everyone, and everyone worked to the same schedule. Today, the working hours have changed and this leads to pressure on childcare centres to offer a more individualised service and to allow parents to drop off and pick up their children more freely.

The change in external regulations affecting the services
The safety of children was raised as a concern in all of the studied societies. In discussions in the USA, this was reflected through the increase of regulations affecting the services. The increase in external regulations at both the federal and the state level affecting ECE was strongly emphasised in every discussion. According to directors, this was expressed, for example, in parents' growing dissatisfaction with the rules and policies of the centre:

> …we know full well that we've got more regulations. More restrictions. So there are things where we used to have more flexibility with parents. Whereas now, I don't know how many times a day I say to the parent 'but this is a regulation'. (USA-FG3, R1)

As per the US respondents, the increase in regulations has also affected the work of directors and teachers. To be able to compete with the markets and be labelled as qualified service providers, the centres are forced to apply for accreditation, for example from the national non-profit organisation, The National Association for the Education of Young Children, which has set professional standards for ECE since 1985 (naeyc.org). While the accreditation systems will maintain equitable quality care, they increase the workload of the directors and mean more regulations affecting the policies and even the implemented pedagogy of the centres.

Along with the accreditation system, the US directors were also concerned with the fragmented and inadequate funding system in the field. Funding has traditionally been seen as a problematic issue. Lack of funding affects everything, and this can be seen in parents' dissatisfaction with the selection and suitability of materials, the security issues, and the stability of the staff. According to directors, funding and regulations dictate what can and cannot be done in ECE. Educated staff means more costs to the centres and this causes inequity among different centres. Staff turnover was also seen as a severe problem. The expectations towards quality early education are high, yet recruiting and retaining properly educated staff was seen as difficult.

The safety of the children was also discussed in the Russian context. According to the respondents:

> Security of the children is the most important thing in the Russian society today. (Rus-FG5, R1)

And, it is the biggest concern for parents, mostly due to the increased public discussion about security issues. Directors in most of the groups also speculated about the radical role of the media in spreading sensational news about childcare and creating negative images of ECE that affect the minds of the parents. Although parents in 2011 were more satisfied with the ratios in childcare than 20 years ago, the assessments showed that parents are still less satisfied with the amount of teachers in child groups. Parents may see this as a safety issue as well.

In Finland, one of the major external factors affecting ECE was connected to the safety of children from the health perspective. Parents' assessments of the physical facilities had decreased within the last two decades. The respondents saw a

connection with the media and the growing attention towards indoor air problems and outdated facilities. The facilities built 40 years ago are in need of repair, but the shortage of resources was seen to prevent or delay the renovations. The facilities were not seen to be equivalent and adequate for today's pedagogic needs. ECE has evolved, but the facilities were not perceived to meet the changing needs. The directors were surprised that parents were quite happy with the facilities, since some of the facilities are outdated or actually not suitable for children due to the indoor air quality. Some centres have since moved to temporary facilities that are not purpose-built for childcare use.

According to some of the Finnish respondents, the growing attention towards health and safety issues in the childcare centres explained above are partly due to the strategic planning in the field of ECE, such as the safety and security plans that became mandatory for the childcare centres a few years ago. Similar to Russia, the role of the media in guiding the discourses on safety and security in ECE was seen to have affected the parents' assessments. Oversized child groups and ratios were part of the general discourses among both clients and ECE professionals. The Finnish respondents suggested that parents' increased satisfaction about staff turnover and using supply staff were issues, which have been acknowledged in ECE, and therefore parents no longer consider the staff changes to be problematic.

The change in the pedagogic orientation

In the USA, parents' satisfaction with the process factors of ECE, such as children's opportunities to learn and teaching and other guided activities, has decreased in the past two decades. Directors suggested that at the societal level in the USA, the emphasis is now focused on learning outcomes. It seems like the push for academic expectations is coming from the society level, in an attempt to increase the international competitiveness of the country. Directors expressed concerns that these expectations are affecting ECE as well. Many parents feel pressured to educate their young children, and they put the pressure on ECE by demanding academics:

> Because they [children] need to be assessed, are they ready… do they know their ABCs, can they write their names, because that's in the assessment to get to kindergarten. And the parents have that pressure of saying kindergarten readiness. (USA-FG3, R5)

A discrepancy was seen here, as the teachers as professionals of ECE believe in developmentally appropriate practices over straightforward teaching. The field of

ECE is more concerned with the process, while the surrounding society focuses on outcomes.

The social status of ECE has changed in the Russian society, and as a result, the pedagogic thinking has evolved. The changes in ECE are driven at the society level in general, and they are also written in the new standard, i.e. in the national ECE curriculum. Parents' increased satisfaction with children's possibilities to learn new things and take part in guided activities enhanced the discussion about the parents' expectations for academic learning in ECE. The pedagogic thinking of ECE professionals has evolved:

> …from subject–object thinking towards subject–subject thinking, which means that both the children and their parents are now subjects in the upbringing process. (Rus-FG2, R2)

In early education, it was now seen as important to understand children, to learn about their interests, and to apply teaching through play. According to the directors, pressure for academics and school readiness is emphasised through the media, and that:

> Parents don't appreciate playing, which is actually a very topical and important issue and probably the most basic concept. They [parents] still appreciate teaching much more. (Rus-FG5, R1)

Parents' increased satisfaction with the discipline style of the teachers provoked discussion of the shift away from traditional authoritarian education that was related to Soviet society in general:

> If the interest of a child is maintained successfully, there is no need for discipline. The interest works itself. … The discipline does not mean that a child needs to sit still, but that she is doing something meaningful' (Rus-FG1, R3)

The constructivist approach to ECE pedagogy is grounded in the national curriculum, but the directors felt that it is not so easy for the older generation of professionals to change their understanding of educational philosophies as it is for the younger generation – including teachers and parents. The same kind of thinking was emphasised in Finnish focus groups as well.

In Finland, according to the respondents in every focus group discussion, the launching of the National Curriculum Guidelines (2005) has led to changes in the Finnish ECE field and its pedagogy the most. The respondents saw the connection with the implementation of the Guidelines and the parents' assessments to be aligned

with the core objectives of the Curriculum Guidelines, namely focusing on the educational partnership with parents; emphasising child's individuality and drawing up individual ECE plans; a nurtured child; and the sensitivity of the caretakers. These objectives were highlighted as being addressed in the pedagogic processes when implementing the Guidelines. Professionalism and the pedagogic awareness of the staff were seen as strengthened in these areas through education as well as in-service training. The respondents were happy to acknowledge that the intentional implementation of the core objectives was reflected in the parents' assessments as increased ECE quality.

Finnish respondents felt that families are now addressed more individually than in 1990. This was seen as partly due to the emphasis on children's individuality in the National Curriculum Guidelines (2005). According to the respondents, the individual ECE plans drawn for every child have given parents a feeling that their child is personally acknowledged. Parents believed that attention to an individual child was better in 2011 than 20 years ago, which was noted by the respondents to be a consequence of the implementation of the Guidelines. This was also perceived to be expressed in parents' increased satisfaction with the educational processes in childcare, such as guided activities and children's opportunities to learn. The emphasis on individualism was seen to have increased in the society as a whole. The view of the upbringing and the view of the child were perceived to have undergone changes, in part because of the increased knowledge and research on ECE:

> ... You can really see that in Finnish early childhood education a huge change has happened … When you look at those [assessments], when you think that I graduated in the 70s. So, I've had to kind of learn my profession again. So, the attitude towards children and this profession and the working methods have changed, and the emphasis, back then managing the group was emphasised, it was the number one thing. And, when you started an activity [with children], were the children in their places and did you have the glues and everything. All in all there's a pretty huge change in there. (Fin-FG5, R1)

According to the directors, a trend of emphasising individual needs in ECE can be clearly seen in the Russian context as well. The society has changed and so have the parents of the younger generation, which causes pressure for ECE to undergo severe changes to meet the individual needs of the families. The growing choice in various educational materials and extra activities in general, as well as the increased availability of information through the internet, has opened up the eyes of parents. Directors struggle to remove the enrolment queues to childcare centres, as more and

more children are being added to the centres. This puts pressure on teachers to give individual attention to children. The respondents connected the ability to answer to the individual needs to the personality of the teachers, and the pressure for strong professionalism is added due to the increasing size of the child groups. The effects of growing individual needs were also discussed within the remit of increased availability of special education. According to the respondents, inclusion in ECE has expanded. Childcare centres are now offering part-time groups for children who cannot attend all-day groups due to health issues.

The changed role of the director

In all of the studied societies, parents' satisfaction with the directors' competence had decreased since the 1990s and it was a topic that was discussed in every focus group. Interestingly, the reasons behind the dissatisfaction were not confronted explicitly in every Russian discussion, unlike in the USA and Finland. In every country it was noted that the changed tasks of directors have affected their daily work, but the directors' training versus the demands of the field were perceived to be imbalanced.

In the US context, because of the amount of regulations, parents are unhappy with the director's competence, since most of the on-site regulations are seen to be set by the director. Directors speculated that the dissatisfaction with the rules and policies could also be explained by the fact that Americans have traditionally not liked the idea of government or any external power controlling their private life. The directors required management skills along with the subject knowledge in order to keep the business going:

> When I took over, the position I'm in, there was turnover, and we're still dealing with that. Trying to find the right fit, trying to find the best person to be in that position. Some of that is on us, me as a director to make sure that we're hiring right, we have the right people, coming in and… creating an atmosphere that is going to be something that the parents enjoy and the parents can feel safe when they're dropping their children off. (USA-FG3, R3)

Twenty years ago in Russia, the subject expertise was emphasised when recruiting directors, but today the duties of the directors require more professional management. Parents come to the director with their questions more today than 20 years ago:

> … Parents' expectations towards directors' duties have increased… They have started to evaluate the director of the institute in a different way. (Rus-FG2, R2)

The increased criticism towards directors' duties calls for strong leadership, which then calls for more training to meet with the parents' grown expectations.

In Finland, the decrease in parents' satisfaction with directors' competence drew the attention of the respondents. In their opinion, the work of the director has changed significantly in the past two decades. There has been a shift from directors working partly as teachers in the child group and partly doing their managerial tasks, towards the position of administrative directors leading more than one site. The demands and expectations for the directors' work have grown as well. In addition, the scope of the directors' work has expanded and the responsibilities have been shared. The tasks of the directors are now focused more on administration, and the directors are not in personal contact with the parents as they were 20 years ago. The notion of distributed leadership has strengthened the employees' professionalism and there is no need for the director to interfere with the families anymore. According to the respondents, the director has not got less capable but their role and everyday tasks have changed:

> The qualification regulations have sort of changed a lot. That is so that you can keep up with everything… (Fin-FG1, R3)

Discussion

This article contributes to research on international ECE and how it has evolved in the USA, Russia, and Finland during the past two decades. The cross-culturally conducted study aimed to identify and contrast socio-cultural differences and similarities of the perceived changes in the context of the studied societies. Based on the findings, it can be seen that changes in the field of ECE were similar in each studied context, but the changes must be connected to their larger socio-cultural contexts at a given time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006; Tudge 2008). Broadly considered, the changes seem to reflect the current neoliberalist discourses and the increased demands towards quality services for the early years and subsequently high returns in human capital. As expected, the call for commodification of ECE, competition and individual choice were the most prevalent in the US context due to the system that is mainly depending on the private markets. (Moss 2014.) At the same time, the global trends towards competitiveness and individualism (Elliot 2009) were evident in the Finnish and Russian contexts as well. One example is the individual early education plan in Finland that has been considered to confirm the notion of individualisation (Karila 2012; Strandell 2011). Although the respondents

perceived the implementation of the plans to be with good intentions, it has been criticised due to its standardising and normalising nature (Alasuutari & Karila 2010).

In all of the studied society contexts, the role of the parents as customers was perceived to have changed significantly in the past two decades. In the USA, the respondents linked the strong customer orientation to high fees, whereas in Russia the general societal change seemed to have increased so that parents today have more possibilities to influence and express their hopes and wishes. Twenty years ago in Finland, childcare was not considered self-evident, yet today ECE is perceived as a necessity that is equally available for all. Today, parents are not only satisfied with ECE, but they also demand more individualised services. In all of the studied countries, the respondents described childcare centres as becoming 'supermarkets of choice, where parents go to choose services that suit them best'. It seems that with the availability of information in the internet, and the easy access to this information have increased parents' awareness of ECE in general. However, research has shown that there is variance in parent knowledge of ECE according to their educational background as noted by Howe, Jacobs, Vukelich and Recchia. (2013).

Parents' changed role as customers calls for strong professionalism within both the teachers and the leaders. In order to face the multiple needs of families in a pedagogically appropriate way, where professional knowledge of child development and pedagogic choices meet the demands of the parents, professional proficiency needs to be developed. This is in line with the findings by Happo, Määttä and Uusiautti (2012) who suggest that teachers' professional growth towards ECE expertise requires educational development, such as in-service training, and personal proficiency, for instance taking a reflective working approach. Sharing pedagogic leadership responsibilities and increasing the culture of teacher leadership within the teachers who work with families on a daily basis should also be required (Fonsén 2014; Heikka 2014). Strengthening teachers' professional identity and viewing ECE as a joint project for ECE staff and parents should be a focus. As suggested by Howe et al. (2013), more frequent and informative communication between professionals and parents is needed in order to increase parent knowledge, particularly of early educational and developmental aspects.

In addition, the pedagogic orientation of ECE practices and principles have evolved in all countries over the past two decades, but there seems to be tension between two orientations, those of academic and developmental. Russell (2011) suggests that there has been an increasing shift in public discourse and media attention towards academic pressure over developmental education in the US

kindergarten context, and a neoliberal reform towards teacher accountability falls on the ECE sector as well (Brown, Lan & Jeong 2015). The discussion about academics seemed to have affected parental expectations towards academics and preparing children for school. This was more notable in the US context, but the Russian and Finnish respondents made remarks on the topic as well. There is a danger that the trend of neoliberal understanding of governance is guiding ECE in a direction far from the values embedded in the developmentally appropriate early learning process stated in the EC curricula (Brown, Lan & Jeong 2015). Yet, academic skills are not emphasised as educational values in the Finnish curricula as a study by Einarsdottir et al. (2014) noted. In Russia, ECE has traditionally been based on teacher-led pedagogy, but a more child-centred approach is now entering the field along with the ECE curriculum reform (Rubtsov & Yudina 2010). By contrast, in the USA, the principles of teachers have long been derived from the individual needs of children as well as pedagogics, emphasising the importance of child-centredness, sensitive interactions, and play (e.g. Cryer 1999).

In all of the studied societies, the increased regulations and factors affecting the safety of the children were seen as challenges, even to the extent that they were considered to affect the implementation of ECE pedagogy. Examples of this were control and bureaucracy in Russia or the safety measures outlined in the centres' safety plans in Finland. In the USA, the fragmented system increased the need to meet quality ratings and criteria in order to be validated as an official, state-approved childcare centre. When ECE is steered by multiple regulations and criteria to enhance quality services, they actually narrow the pedagogic practices and restrict teachers from working according to their ideology, and structures suddenly become restrictions (see also Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow 2008). According to Sabol and Pianta (2015), the policies aimed at bettering the quality of ECE might be with good intentions, but were shown to have modest relation to positive long term outcomes. The discourse on outcomes, again, could lead to the futuristic expectations and governance of ECE as Moss (2014) has critised.

These findings add to the growing need to invest in ECE leadership capacity, in order to prepare the directors to face the complexity of the different tasks in working with families, professionals, and community policies (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012). In the US context, director profession was perceived to have changed towards being a manager. Unlike in Russia and Finland, where the finance of the ECE sector is based on public funding, the mainly privatised ECE system in the USA (Mitchell 2000; NACCRRA 2010) demands that the directors run

centres in a different manner, namely more as a business. Yet, the directors in Finland and Russia indicated similar trends within their own systems. The work of the director has expanded from subject orientation towards management tasks in all of the studied society contexts. The results indicate a strong need for ECE leadership to meet the needs of increased consumer orientation that creates pressure on directors who have to balance the demands of parents, and at the same time maintain and develop quality services.

This study indicates that the changes considering centre-based ECE services can be traced back to the ideals of neoliberalism in all of the studied society contexts, but apparently in different levels based on their socio-cultural histories. On the other hand, the results tell about early childhood education, which status has raised in all of the societies. Childhood and ECE are considered important, and there is an increasing amount of research available of 'what's best for the children'. Yet, parents feel pressured to educate their young children in order to meet the growing expectations of the surrounding society, and politicians are urged to develop and maintain quality ECE services for the same purposes. This may lead to a situation, where ECE is seen only as an apparatus that facilitates better outcomes not only for the children, but for the entire society with its demands for returns in the means of human capital. The results add to the critical discussion of jeopardising the essence of the childhood as a valuable stage in human life (Brown, Lan & Jeong 2015; Moss 2014; Karila 2012). The challenges and expectations that the field now encounters need to be globally acknowledged, and new ways of confronting them needs to be developed. Global decisions cannot be translated into local actions as such. Instead, more cross-cultural research is needed in defining in which direction contextually-bound ECE should be guided and by whom.

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PARENT-TEACHER COOPERATION
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
–DIRECTORS' VIEWS TO CHANGES
IN THE USA, RUSSIA, AND FINLAND

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Abstract
This article aims to show how parent-teacher cooperation has evolved over the past two decades from the perspectives of child care centre directors in the USA, Russia, and Finland. When analysing the phenomenon of educational cooperation in the studied contexts, it can be noted that significant societal changes have affected parenting and early childhood education as an institution, and consequently the educational cooperation between parents and teachers. Today, parents have more information about early childhood education and its importance to child development. The value of childhood was seen to have grown in each national context. The changes in educational cooperation were closely tied to the political, societal, and cultural changes in each national context.

Keywords: educational cooperation, change, cross-cultural research, focus group, case study

Introduction

Maintaining quality early childhood education (ECE) services for young children and performing positive educational cooperation with the children's families has been a field of great interest for many years. The importance of establishing and maintaining a mutual understanding between a child's two most important micro environments has been widely acknowledged and is considered one of the key elements in ECE quality research (Fan & Chen 2001; Hujala et al. 1999). Engaging parents in educational cooperation has been shown to have positive effects on the learning and development of children and in preventing social problems (e.g. Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein & Lloyd 2013; Goff, Evangelou & Sylva 2012). Furthermore, the fundamental right of parents and guardians of young children to engage in their child's education process has been increasingly emphasized in international documents guiding ECE. Whereas in the first 'Starting Strong' document (OECD 2001), the significance of parent-teacher cooperation was not stressed, in the document from 2012 (OECD 2012), cooperation is perceived to be one of the most pivotal chapters.

Cross-nationally conducted research (Hujala et al. 2009) confirms that national legislation, administrative structures, the guidelines that define leadership, and professionalism determine the role of the parents – and consequently the norms and forms of cooperation – in ECE settings. A study conducted by Cottle and Alexander (2014) in the UK confirms that in addition to the dominant policy discourses, the professional and personal histories of ECE practitioners have an influence on how parent-teacher cooperation is understood and enacted. As the education system reflects the wider society, the educational goals and objectives, policies, and organization of the system are always responsive to social demands and challenges within societies (Ryzhova 2012).

Despite the international emphasis placed on educational cooperation, there is relatively little comparative evidence on how cooperation between the home and institutional ECE services is perceived and constructed in different societal contexts. Ever-increasing global and local change has added to the complexity of societies, and this has again caused pressure and placed expectations on education and the stakeholders involved in it (Rury 2016). It is known that education is a driver of social change, but at the same time, it has been forced to change itself. There is an inevitable need to increase understanding of how globally significant social change has affected the field of ECE and parenting, and consequently the interplay of the private and the institutional via educational cooperation.

This article aims to address the gap in research on how global politics concerning educational cooperation has been locally enacted and developed over the past two decades in cross-cultural settings. Three different national contexts were selected as case studies: the USA, Russia, and Finland. These societies provide especially interesting contexts to examine and define the local constructions and developments of educational cooperation. The comparison of significantly different societal contexts has proved to be successful in comparative education research (Piattoeva 2010; Rutanen, de Souza Amorim, Colus and Piattoeva 2013). While the different contexts serve to reflect one another, they also allow the peculiarities to stand out and complement each other. This study is not designed to spotlight the inferiority or superiority of the different systems in these countries, but rather to come to a deeper understanding through comparisons (Triandis 1994). It is important to acknowledge that the results of this study cannot be overgeneralized to cover the entire socio-cultural context of each selected country; rather, the studied contexts should be understood as being multiple case studies. Although generalizations are both impossible (and undesirable) to achieve, the study will yield new and important information about some of the society-related changes within the study frame.

The key interest of this study is directed to the perspectives of the local actors, and their interpretations of how educational cooperation is constructed within their ECE contexts. The theoretical frame for the comparative methods applied in the study is based on the emic and etic approach (Pike 1967; Harris 1976; Berry 1989). The emic perspective aims to point out how the socio-cultural features of the studied phenomenon are viewed from the inside of the ECE system in each national context. The etic perspective pursues an examination of those universal aspects and global ideals of educational cooperation that can be compared across all cultures. The design of the study derives from these theoretical presumptions, and it is constructed to bring out the emic perspectives of the professionals from each societal context and the etic interpretations of the researchers. With this approach, the aim is to improve the reliability of the study on both the methodological and knowledge construction level by carefully considering the cultural specificities within the respective societal contexts.

Educational cooperation in the changing contexts of the USA, Finland, and Russia

According to the definition by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2012) educational cooperation in formal institutions refers to those formal or informal relations or encounters parents have with various ECE

services. The use of terms in defining educational cooperation in the research literature varies in different cultures, and the commonly used parallel terminology includes 'parent-teacher partnership', 'parent engagement', and 'parent involvement'. In addition, the strategies of both involving and positioning parents in the early education process vary.

In the US context, the professional discourse of the importance of parent cooperation has long traditions (Powell & Diamond 1995). During the recent decades, the deliberation has increased with an emphasis on forming reciprocal partnerships with families instead of traditional view on parental involvement (Miller, Lines, Sullivan & Hermanutz 2013; NAYEC 2009). Although partnering with families is considered to be important widely in the USA, the reasons behind it seem to vary. Whereas the ideals of developmentally appropriate practice promote the provisions of partnership with families mainly to benefit the balanced wellbeing and development of the child, the increasing demands for better learning outcomes and achievement define parent-teacher cooperation from a different angle (NAYEC 2009). Federal educational mandates such as the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001 aimed to strengthen parents' role in the education process in assisting and enhancing their child's learning (Miller, Lines, Sullivan and Hermanutz 2013).

Similarly, in the Finnish ECE context, the early educational policy discourse dealing with parent teacher partnership over cooperation has increased since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Kekkonen 2012). According to Karila and Alasuutari (2012), the major push to increase parental engagement in Finnish ECE was due to the OECD country report (2000). Although legislation guiding Finnish ECE had highlighted the parents' role in child care, it was the launching of the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2005) that explicitly emphasized the importance of the parent-teacher partnership in a way that went further than cooperation. Educational cooperation was now seen as the conscious commitment of parents and teachers to join in the children's early education process, where the knowledge of parents and the expertise of the early educators are combined to enhance the child's well-being and balanced development.

Additionally, the positioning of parents in relation to professionals in Russian ECE has changed significantly from the parents' subordinate role to a more co-operative stance (Gradskova 2010; Taratukhina, Polyakova, Berezina, Notkina, Sheraizina and Borovkov 2006; Vlasov, Hujala, Essary & Lenskaya 2016) or even towards partnering (Ryzhova 2012) during the past two decades. The New Federal Standards (2012 in Savinskaya 2015) emphasize the role of early educators in aiming

to form and maintain constructive relationships with parents and to find mutual understandings concerning the early education and development process of the child. Parents should receive appropriate information on their children's achievements, and they should be offered opportunities to approach staff to discuss any concerns they may have (UNESCO 2011).

Method

Research task

The purpose of this cross-cultural study was to examine changes in educational cooperation in institutional ECE services, specifically in all day child care in the national contexts of the USA, Russia, and Finland. In addition, the purpose was to overcome the challenges of cross-cultural research by using the 'Reflective Emic Analysis' (Vlasov forthcoming) approach, where ECE professionals as native experts from each society interpret the cross-cultural quantitative data. The principal research question this study addresses is: From the perspective of child care centre directors, how has educational parent-teacher cooperation changed over the last two decades in the early childhood education contexts of the USA, Russia, and Finland?

Data collection and reflective emic analysis process

The study utilizes multi methodological data collected as part of a larger research project 'Education in a Changing Society' (Huttunen 1992) with three different time cohorts between the years 1991 and 2014. Quantitatively obtained data was acquired from each country using questionnaires addressed to parents of 3- to 5-year-old children from 17 ECE centre programmes in 1991 and from 11 centres in 2011. Each child care centre was required to offer an all-day programme. The research cities were relatively small, urban, university cities. The quantitative data forms the foundation and research frame for this study, and the results are not presented and discussed in this article as such. Instead, this data served as the etic starting point for the study, and formed the basis for the qualitative data collection. Descriptively presented results were interpreted by ECE professionals from each societal context, and this methodological procedure formed the 'Reflective Emic Analysis' method used to emphasize the emic-perspective within the study and examine how educational cooperation is domesticated and enacted in local settings.

The qualitative data was collected from each country in 2014 using focus group discussions. Child care centre directors were invited to participate in the discussions, as it was believed that they hold a holistic view of the ECE field in their societal context. Therefore, extensive management work experience in the field was

preferred, but not mandatory. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to allow participants to share their knowledge and understanding of the changes in educational cooperation by interpreting the results of the quantitative data. Stimulation material for the discussions consisted of the statistical results of the quantitative data in graph form. The general questions guiding the discussions were as follows: How would you describe the changes in home school cooperation in the ECE of your country? What has possibly affected the changes in your opinion? Based on a successful pilot focus group discussion organized in Finland, the decision was made to proceed with this method.

Discussions were implemented in cities other than where the quantitative data was collected in order for the participants to recede from the data and reflect on the results more objectively. In the USA, child care centre directors or head teachers (N=18) from the state of New York participated in the study. Due to the fragmented ECE system in the USA, a decision was made to organize four focus groups utilizing a state-wide ECE network. Three of the discussions were held during a conference for ECE professionals and one was held outside the conference. In Finland, five focus group discussions were held in a southern urban city with local child care centre directors or those in a similar position (N=15). In Russia, the data was collected in five discussions for child care centre directors from an urban city in Siberia (N=14), and an interpreter joined the data collection process with the researcher.

The ethical requirements of the research were carefully considered at every stage of the project. During the discussions, the role of the facilitator was to ensure the topicality of the discussions as well as the equal rotation of participation among the individuals, but not to guide the discussion. Participation in the study was voluntary and the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the findings were guaranteed. Before proceeding with the discussions, instructions, guidelines, and the topics to be covered were shared with the participants, and their oral consent was obtained. The discussion sessions ranged in duration from 45 minutes to nearly two hours. The US data was transcribed and analysed in English and the Finnish data was similarly transcribed and analysed in Finnish. The Russian data was translated, transcribed, and analysed in Finnish. The Russian translations were tested and validated by back translation, which was conducted by two separate translators. It is important to acknowledge that by deriving the epistemological assumptions of contextual approach, this study does not claim to represent the overall state of ECE services in the three societies. Rather, when reporting the results, the contexts of each society are referred to as 'American', 'Finnish', or 'Russian' to ensure clarity.

Thematic data analysis

The qualitative data analysis was executed by applying a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) in identifying and analysing latent patterns that describe educational cooperation. In order to maintain objectivity towards the knowledge provided by the participants, and to ensure justice and equity for the data collected from the other two contexts, it was necessary for the researchers to maintain a distance so that the analytical process was not interfered with or dominated by the researcher's own existing contextual knowledge of Finnish ECE.

Data analysis was inductive and used a three-phase recursive process. Deriving from a contextualist paradigm, it is important to acknowledge that when studying human beings – the meaning makers of their own realities – the researcher will always have an influence that cannot be considered separate from the research process (Tudge 2008). Instead, the knowledge gained in the analytical process of this study should be considered as a co-construction of the informants and the researchers, and there is a need to accept this as an essential part of the selected qualitative approach.

The first phase of the analysis included intensive reading of the data and generating initial codes from each discussion, one at a time. The analytical focus was directed at detecting codes that describe educational cooperation on the latent level. The second phase of the analysis was carried out country by country, and the codes were now sorted into broader potential themes. When proceeding to the third phase of the thematic analysis, the themes from each societal context were first analysed and reported separately, and then followed with a comparative discussion.

Results

When analysing the phenomenon of educational cooperation in the studied societal contexts, it can be noted that significant societal changes have affected parenting and early childhood education as an institution, and consequently educational cooperation between parents and teachers over the past two decades. Next, we present the results, country by country, in order to highlight the context specific changes.

Changed roles of professionals over parents in the US context

Educational cooperation was unanimously agreed to be an indicator of quality among the US respondents. It was stated that increasing parent involvement in the centre based programmes is a fundamental issue in the criteria for gaining

accreditation. Although the importance of cooperation was emphasized, there appeared to be great challenges in its implementation.

According to the US respondents, parents' knowledge of ECE has increased due to societal pressure on academic achievement and kindergarten readiness in the ECE field. Despite the parents' increased attention and expectations towards ECE services, their knowledge of child development was considered to be limited, and the early educational goals of the programme were seen to differ from those of the parents. Directors unanimously declared that parenting styles have changed in a direction that means the parents' upbringing strategies were not meeting the objectives of child care. This seemed to cause friction between the home and professionals, and weaken the basis for cooperation:

> The more knowledge parents acquire … the smattering of knowledge … it creates more of a tension … Between what teachers are saying and what parents are saying. Because parents think they know. And teachers are not willing to back down because they understand child development and they know what's best for the child. So you have more tension. I think that exists between teachers and parents. (USA-FG1, R3)

Educating parents and teaching them how to work with their child was one of the elements that was a frequently discussed topic in the US context. The approach of educating parents dates back already to the beginning of twentieth century, and it has been historically emphasized in cooperation discourse (Powell and Diamond 1995). This tradition seems to have remained prevalent over the decades, and it was dominant among the professionals in the study:

> …we just have to educate them in all kinds of ways. That sometimes … we aren't transferring knowledge very well. And so I just think, it's up to us to do a lot more of that maybe, and … Their background is not in child development (like ours). (USA-FG4, R1&R2)

During the analysis, our attention was drawn to the paternalistic tone of the respondents as they discussed today's parents and parenting. This was rather explicit and consistent in every focus group. It seems that the respondents positioned themselves as professionals taking the role of expert over the parents. Despite the good intentions aimed at influencing the child's home upbringing, this may hinder the role of the parent as a partner in ECE, and lead to a cooperation that is not considered equal in terms of power.

According to the respondents, parents' opportunities to influence the programme are limited due to heavy regulations.

> My licenser said 'make sure she understands as soon as that parent walks out the door that child is yours, and you go by regulation'. So, your licenser right there is saying, 'I don't care what that parent thinks or feels'. (USA-FG1, R2)

In addition to the state regulations, the programmes participating in the study were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYEC). Following the guidelines of NAYEC, the programmes were required to draw up a Parent Handbook, which consists of general information about the centre's policies, health care issues, daily routines, curriculum, and early learning process. Parents were required to read the handbook, and accept the care and learning conditions of the centre. It was repeatedly brought up by the respondents that the wishes and expectations of parents cannot be taken into account on the level that professionals would like to respond to them if these wishes and expectations contradict the regulations. Limited opportunities to influence the programme and educational processes may cause an actual decline or withdrawal of parental initiatives. This was perceived to have changed significantly over the decades:

> Our centre, we started as a parent co-op. And they [parents] were the ones making the rules and they were setting things up and, then it evolved and right now, as we were saying before, the more we say 'well, we'd love to do that but according to regulations, we can't'. (USA-FG3, R3)

Respondents also reflected on the difficulties of getting parents to participate and worries were expressed concerning the busy life of young families, and the demands and pressure parents were seen to face on a societal level:

> A lot of people advocate increased parent participation. To come more in line with each, to try to increase parent satisfaction. They feel like if they're more involved then they can be more satisfied with … with parent boards and things like that. We can't get them to participate. I can't get them to read a sign or a leaflet, much less, come down and make policy. On their day off, after hours. (USA-FG5, R1)

In the USA, educational cooperation was characterized mainly as the professionals getting parents involved in special events or learning tasks. The Parent handbook seemed to be the most emphasized tool in passing information on to parents, although directors were well aware that just signing that they had read the handbook did not mean that the parents understood or accepted the conditions for early learning. It seems that engaging parents in ECE was considered important, but educational cooperation was fairly one sided and focused mostly on the learning or developmental outcomes of the children, rather than taking into account the aspects of the child's different micro environments, such as the home environment as being

the most important. It was acknowledged that parents want the best for their children, but the view of the 'child's best interest' was perceived differently by the professionals.

Professionals inviting parents to participate in the Russian context
In the Russian context, the general opening up of institutional ECE and society in general was seen to have increased the active agency of parents in terms of their lives and their willingness to influence child care. The role of parents in ECE had changed: they were now invited to cooperate with the professionals more than before. Directors agreed that there is plenty of information available for parents, and their awareness of both the processes and goals of ECE have increased.

> Parents' pedagogical awareness has changed, increased to some extent. They are now more interested in the upbringing processes of the institution, and child care centres are not considered only as places where their children are fed and taken for walks; they are now viewed as the first places of learning. (Rus-FG5, R2)

However, there seemed to be little consensus among the respondents as to whether parents have been offered enough opportunities for cooperation. It was also noted that parents themselves are not always willing to participate, or they are too busy to engage with the institutions:

> Parents have now more opportunities to have an influence, but another thing is their desire to do so … It seems like we do not somehow hear them? And we feel that they do not hear us … Things must be discussed, and not to remain silent – right? (Rus-FG3, R2)

The respondents agreed that the individual needs and requests of families have increased, but they were not necessarily meeting the educational goals of ECE.

> [Cooperation] has changed in a very interesting way. Cooperation exists … and there is help available for parents. But the expectations of parents are different … Especially among the younger parents. (Rus-FG3, R3&R1)

This was seen to cause pressure on professionals. Additionally, there seemed to be a dichotomy between responding to the increased individual needs of the families and responding to the needs of the group. It was noted that the effects of the strong tradition of collective thinking – where individual needs should never be superior to the needs of the group – have remained.

In some of the discussions, directors raised topics concerning enhancing parent engagement, as this was now emphasized in the national standard. Despite the desire

to increase parental engagement, parents' actual opportunities to influence the activities or the policies of the centres were still seen to be limited. The discussions revealed that as ECE services are strongly steered by national standards, both ECE professionals and parents were seen to be subordinate to the standards set by the government authorities. The standards were seen to regulate educational cooperation and prevent parents' real opportunities to have an influence:

> Parents can influence some individual activities, but not the activities that are separately planned and organized … child care centres have to meet the expectations of the municipalities … Parents cannot influence the parts of the programme that are mandatory, because they exist and we must follow them … I am sure, though, that if this question is raised in ten years' time, the answer will be different… (Rus-FG5, R1&R2)

Directors pointed out that parents are now more interested and eager to express their demands and opinions to ECE professionals. Consequently, some of the directors seemed to be reluctant to give too much power to parents:

> Parents are satisfied with their opportunities to influence the child care programme. But we are defending very carefully the perception that the curriculum is drawn up by the centre, or possibly the municipality, and not by the parents. (Rus-FG4, R1)

Professionals may not be ready to give up their position as an authority, even though the current trend calls for a more cooperative stance.

Everyday encounters with parents were considered problematic because of staffing. There are mainly two teachers in a group, but they work in different shifts, i.e. one at a time. The directors felt there was not enough time for daily sharing with parents, or there were difficulties in circulating information between the teachers. According to Russian respondents, parents have offered resources and help to the centres, either in material form or for building and constructing the learning environment. Since there were always parents who were more active than others, few respondents expressed a need to search for new strategies to activate parents and increase their involvement:

> We cannot force the 'consumer' parents to engage with the activities. But we must organize things in a way that they are willing to participate … If we are able to do this, it will most certainly be an important change. (Rus-FG5, R2)

From cooperation towards partnership in the Finnish context

In every Finnish focus group, the importance of educational cooperation was consistently considered to form the basis for ECE. The drafting of the National

Curriculum Guidelines at the beginning of the twenty-first century was perceived to have set the grounds for today's educational cooperation. The role of the parent as the child's primary caretaker and expert holding the best knowledge of the child as part of the group was underlined repeatedly. Respondents agreed unanimously that educating professionals about the importance of partnerships has had a significant effect on ECE work:

> Educational partnership is one the issues that has been developed for years already, and is something we have also been trained for. This will most certainly begin to appear now as high-quality ECE, and as appreciating parents … Parents' voices are now better heard, and new opportunities [for parental engagement] have been created, which promises even more good in the future. (Fin-FG3, R2)

According to the directors, educational cooperation should be based on trust, a sense of equality, open communication, and a rapport in parent-teacher encounters. Through the conscious and targeted planning of information offered to parents, ECE professionals were perceived to have created an atmosphere in which the teacher was no longer the single authority. The respondents suggested that it was now essential to form professional relationships where the most important knowledge concerning the child's learning is formed collaboratively:

> The idea is that we complement each other. Professionals have a professional point of view, and they know all the developmental theories. Parents are parents, and there is no need for them to add theories to their home upbringing. (Fin-FG5, R3)

> It is actually wrong to say that we [parents and teachers] should have a shared vision of the child and what he/she is. Why couldn't there be a multi-perspective view? … After all, it is good that we both see the various aspects of a child, and then form shared educational goals together, which we can support and develop for the child. (Fin-FG5, R2)

It was seen as important to gain a mutual understanding of the developmental and learning goals for each child together with the parents, and it was equally important to do so from the parental perspective. The respondents stated it was significant for the parents and teachers to have a connection for communication, even if the perceptions of educational methods differed. A culture of open communication was seen to have enhanced the early recognition of problems affecting the well-being of children and raised discussion over difficult topics from teacher's side – but respectively from the parents' side, too. The implemented curriculum guidelines and the strong tradition of educational cooperation has led to the strengthening of ECE as a family friendly service. Professionals no longer wanted to withdraw from the

principles concerning educational cooperation; instead continued discussion was called for.

It was noted in some discussions that the true influence Finnish parents have on ECE is limited, and there were only certain aspects of ECE work where parents should and could have an influence. Instead, the respondents suggested that it was more important to understand the holistic nature of the child's development and the interdependency of the different micro environments. It was also acknowledged that parents and professionals should have different views on a child's development and upbringing, and instead of turning this into an issue of power, it is more important to understand the multi-perspective nature of the phenomenon:

> 'Hearing, respecting, trust, and dialogue … You have a feeling that you are heard, even though you can't have an influence on everything.' (Fin-FG1, R2)

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the changes in educational parent-teacher cooperation in ECE over the past two decades in three different societal contexts, namely the USA, Russia, and Finland. The countries under the investigation were selected due to their different orientations in organizing ECE services, as it was believed they would reveal contextual changes more efficiently, and help to understand the domestication of global ideals of educational cooperation. The study focused on the emic-aspect of the phenomenon to reveal how internationally emphasized ideologies of educational cooperation are interpreted and enacted by professionals in today's changing societies.

The standpoints for educational cooperation in ECE with public and private domains vary greatly in the studied society contexts due to their socio-cultural traditions and history. According to the domestication paradigm, the ideals and global policy models are never just adopted, but rather they are actualized in local practices, and therefore might differ from the originals (Alasuutari 2009; Alasuutari & Alasuutari 2012). Educational cooperation and attempts to engage parents with institutional ECE had increased in all of the studied societies since 1991. The ideals of educational cooperation are closely connected to the broader values of the societies, for example, in how parents are positioned and much power they are permitted concerning their child's early education process. These have shaped the enactment of cooperation as well as the expectations of professionals during the decades. Therefore, in order to understand changes in educational cooperation, there is a need to understand and acknowledge how the cultural, historical, and social influences have affected the grounds set for cooperation in each society.

Interaction between different generations challenging cooperation

In all of the studied society contexts, parents' awareness of institutional ECE was perceived to be greater than 20 years ago. Directors clearly pointed out that today's generation of parents live in a different society compared to the parents in the 1990s. Although this is obvious, the way the changes in parenting were confronted and understood by the professionals requires more attention. According to the respondents, parenting has changed, but there was a discrepancy in whether it has changed for the better. The parents' seemed to represent the younger generation, while the staff seemed to advocate for the older generation. Especially in the US context, the paternalist discourse among the respondents was consistent from one discussion to another, which challenges us to wonder whether institutional ECE has difficulties in following inevitable social change and modifying its methods to understand today's parents. This was the most explicit in the American responses, and it was also acknowledged among the Russian respondents, but was not so evident in the Finnish discussions. It appeared that the directors focused on the goals and ideals of the formal institutions, and these differed from those of the parents. In line with the study by Miller, Lines, Sullivan, and Hermanutz (2013), there is an inevitable need to prepare future teachers to face the challenges of changing parenting by developing collaboration skills that help them to form constructive partnerships with families.

Educational systems are conservative by nature, and the process of confronting changes in educational institutions is usually slow and halting by nature (Rury 2016; Ryzhova 2012). Teachers who have worked for years are experienced, but their personal values might differ from the ones she/he should disseminate, and this might prevent educational practices from developing (Ryzhova 2012). This was most evident in the Russian discussions, where new educational ideologies have been introduced to the system, but the old traditions and approaches that represent collectivism were seen as difficult to replace. During the Soviet times, the main principle of education along with all social institutions was unification (Ryzhova 2012), and the parent-teacher relationships were formal and unbalanced in power, yet considered important. The ageing of teaching staff and the lack of a real inflow of younger teachers has been considered problematic in the Russian ECE, and it may prevent the real development of the field despite the changes on the policy level as many of the early educators have received their training during the Soviet times (Ryzhova 2012; Taratukhina et al. 2006).

Positioning parents

The studied cases differ greatly in the means of how parents are positioned in relation to the ECE institutions. As research suggests, professional view tends to position parents either as deficient or active agents in the cooperation process, even though there is a danger of oversimplifying the complicated issue of these relationships (Cottle & Alexander 2014). In the US context, the professional status of teachers seemed to have risen over parents, and the communication strategies seemed to work from the top down. Although parents were now seen to be more aware of ECE, they were viewed as having little knowledge about child development, and thus the objectives set for child upbringing by parents and professionals were not meeting. This may be due to a tradition in which the approach towards parents views them as learners instead of decision-makers (Powell & Diamond 1995). Although the trend has changed (NAYEC 2009), the tension could still be sensed. Since parenting has undergone significant changes, new ways of meeting and engaging parents in cooperation need to be developed.

If the aims of educational cooperation focus mainly on supporting children's development and learning, educating parents, and improving the home environment to support these goals, there is a danger that may lead to a power imbalance and cause weakening in the parent-teacher connection (McGrath 2007). It can be seen that to some extent in all of the studied societies, the implicit goals for cooperation derive from the neoliberalist notion of viewing childhood as a social investment to the future. Despite the global ideals (OCED 2012), the implicit goals of educational cooperation seem to be shaped by the expectations of children becoming future citizens, and thus raising expectations towards parenting (Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, van der Mespel & de Branbandere 2009). Placing such expectations, implicit or explicit, on parents is not without effects to cooperation. Geinger, Vandenbroeck, and Roets (2014) suggest that professionals tend to view the insecurities or concerns of parents as something that need to be addressed by expert knowledge or from the perspective of an advisor. However, emphasizing professional knowledge may cause problems in the first place by raising expectations of parenting or positioning the parents as subordinate to expert knowledge (ibid.). This does not mean that professionalism should be diminished, since expertise in professional relationships may not always be divisive, and some parents actually look for professional opinions and answers from teachers (Lang, Tolbert, Schoppe Sullivan and Bonomi 2016; Geinger, Vandenbroeck and Roets 2014). Instead, this calls for great sensitivity among professionals.

Compared to the two other countries, Finnish parents were positioned more equally in relation to professionals, and the parental involvement strategies seemed to be developed further than in the other two national contexts. After the National Curriculum Guidelines for ECE (2005) were adapted, a variety of participatory approaches to engage parents had been constructed, such as drawing up individual early education plans for children in joint meetings. In these meetings, the teacher is not the only one giving the information; instead, the parents are involved in a dialogue. Noted by Karila and Alasuutari (2012), Finnish partnership practices need to be further developed as the use of individual education plans in Finland is not without its problems. The plans might have good intentions, but they have still shown to appear as tools of governance for professionals, and might place parents in a subordinate and asymmetrical position.

The desire of parents to influence ECE was regarded to have increased, but the actual opportunities for parents to affect the programmes were still considered to be limited. As noted in our previous study (Vlasov & Hujala 2016), a customer orientation among parents has increased over the past two decades. The changed role of parents as clients adds pressure to the cooperation, as parents are now more demanding and their expectations are higher. As anticipated, the opportunities and the will of parents to influence their child's programme seemed to have increased the most in the Russian context. This has been acknowledged on the government level, as the significance of educational cooperation has been written into the New Standards (Ryzhova 2012). In Soviet times, the impact of the parents' opinions and views was weak, and their position was subordinate to the strong state, whereas today parents are perceived to have more influence on decision making. Savinskaya (2015) suggests that today's parents perceive teachers as their consultative and supportive partners in the education process of their young children. Even though parents can only influence the processes to a certain extent, the key issue is the perception that they have the opportunity to do so if they wish, as is shown in the Finnish results.

Despite the work done, the need to increase the visibility of local ECE services, its ideology, and educational goals and practices is a remaining task as noted in all of the studied societal contexts. Sharing reciprocal information with parents and developing open communication strategies would increase the level of trust and even out the power balance between the public and private domains. Increasing parental involvement in ECE programmes through different types of participatory activities, such as family events, concerts, and interactive parent conferences were viewed as important in every national context, however, simply increasing and providing

parents with school-involvement activities is not enough, as has been confirmed by Powell, Son, File, and San Juan (2010).

Future challenges to battle

This article aimed to illustrate how educational cooperation has evolved in different societies, and how the national interpretations of global goals have been enacted in local practices. There is a need to acknowledge and understand what is influencing the work of professionals, and how their personal opinions have been shaped by the strong traditions that affect their pedagogical thinking. This will challenge both the leadership of ECE, but also current teacher training. Questions can be raised as to whether educational partnership in ECE has become somewhat self-evident. The biggest issues affecting the enactment of cooperation seem to derive from the socio-cultural traditions and history, the shared responsibilities between public and private domains (Genger et al 2014), and the way parents have been positioned in relation to the institutions and thus the professionals. Issues dealing with the cooperation have been the foci of the international research for decades, and cooperation is appreciated, required, and nurtured among the professionals. Parent-teacher cooperation can be perceived to form the basis for quality ECE, but as per the respondents, there are still a multitude of factors preventing it, such as a lack of time, power issues, and structural problems.

The results of this study suggest that the criteria for cooperation in the ECE context should be reconsidered and the goals and objectives re-evaluated. Future research should take into consideration the extent to which parents are willing to work in partnership with professionals, and take into account more explicitly the variation in the realities of parenthood and the parents' abilities and resources to engage with ECE. Instead of global ideals, the local contexts should be at the heart of this discussion. Ideals are always actualized by the actors on the local levels, and the global models cause pressure on professionals regardless of whether they have the opportunity to implement these models or not.

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