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A matter of universalism? Rationalities of access in Finnish early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

Universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) has become a policy goal in many countries. In comparing and categorising national ECEC systems, Finnish ECEC has been presented as an example of a universal system. However, as municipalities are responsible for the provision of ECEC services in Finland, it is important to examine how access to ECEC is locally rationalised: how universal is Finnish ECEC after all? Drawing on discursive institutionalism, we analysed what kinds of rationalities administrators of local ECEC services constructed in terms of access to ECEC concerning four-year-old children, and what kind of possible preconditions were constructed in these rationalities. As a result, we found three different but intertwined rationalities of access to ECEC: equality of access for all children, a real need for ECEC, and the parents' choice. The parents' position in the labour market, the level of concern for the child or family, and the parents' decision emerged as constructed preconditions for access. Our examination illustrates the importance of examining local-level policy discourses in order to understand the historical and social constructions of access to ECEC.

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Introduction

Increasing access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) has become a topic of global and national interest, and it is on the agenda of policymakers and international organisations, such as the European Union (EU), the organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank (Mahon 2016). It has been pointed out in earlier research that attending high-quality ECEC is beneficial for cognitive development, and thus it has positive outcomes in the future educational attainments of children (Cornelissen et al., 2018; Krieg et al., 2015; Melhuish et al., 2015). There has been a shift in political discourse from the provision of childcare services for parents to early childhood education and care (ECEC), which now has the wider societal task of fighting social exclusion and ensuring children's readiness for school (Urban, 2015). The widespread discourse acknowledges ECEC as an investment with high returns for both individuals and society (Heckman, 2011; Macewan, 2015).

In order to realise the benefits of ECEC, governments and international organisations have been looking for tools to increase attendance at ECEC services. In 2009, the member states of the EU agreed on the goal of a 95% enrolment rate in ECEC among four-year-old children by 2020. The goal was attained already in 2017 (Eurydice, 2019). In OECD countries, the average ECEC enrolment rate of 3–5-year-old children rose from 76% to 87% between 2005 and 2017 (OECD, 2019). However, children from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds

are less likely to access ECEC (Petitclerc et al., 2017; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014), even though attendance is considered especially beneficial for children whose socioeconomic background is lower than average (Campbell et al., 2018; Havnes & Mogstad, 2015; Schoeber & Spiess, 2013).

It has been suggested in earlier studies that public investments in 'universal' ECEC programmes would help to make ECEC services more accessible and produce more societal benefits compared to targeted ECEC programmes (Barnett, 2010; Campbell et al., 2018). Generally, universalism refers to the idea that all citizens have the right or entitlement to receive certain social benefits, regardless of their wealth or abilities (Esping-Andersen, 1999). However, universal ECEC can refer to a variety of policy implementations, such as the legal entitlement to an ECEC place, provision of free-of-charge service for a varying number of hours per week, and it can be allocated to apply only to a certain age group of children (Alasuutari et al., 2020). Even though several studies emphasise the significance of high-quality provision (Havnes & Mogstad, 2015; Sibley et al., 2015; Van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018), rationalisations of the universal access policy agenda have also been problematised. For example, it has been argued that the rationalisations are mostly focused on the goals of economic productivity and the idea of parental choice rather than the equity of access for all children (e.g., Molla & Nolan, 2019).

As a ‘Scandinavian welfare state’ (see e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1999; Sipilä, 1997), Finland is often presented as an example of a universal ECEC system that provides all children with an opportunity to access high quality ECEC (e.g., Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Silva et al., 2018). Indeed, children in Finland have a subjective entitlement to an ECEC place, and the service fees are regulated by the state (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care, 1503/2016) and heavily subsidised by the government. However, despite investments in ECEC, Finland differs from the other Nordic countries in having significantly lower enrolment rates in institutional ECEC. Almost all 3–5-year-old children in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are enrolled in ECEC, while the enrolment rate in Finland is 79%, which is also below the OECD average (OECD, 2019). There is also regional variation in the enrolment rates of 1–6-year-old children in Finland: some municipalities have an almost 20% lower enrolment rate compared to others (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2019).

Earlier studies underline the significant role of policy measures in increasing the use of ECEC services (Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). However, children from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES) are less likely to attend ECEC than children from higher SES families, and this is the case also in countries with a ‘universal’ early childhood education policy (Petitclerc et al., 2017; Schoeber & Spiess, 2013). In attaining equality of access to ECEC, Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014) point out that it is important to pay attention to local policies, such as whether the provision matches the needs and values of the families, and whether there are barriers or practices that might exclude children from accessing the services. It is not just the location of the ECEC place, but also the grounds on which the places are allocated that affects the availability of options for families (Vandenbroeck et al., 2008).

In the Nordic countries, municipalities have significant autonomy in deciding how public services are organised locally (Kröger, 2011). Even though there is research on the rationalisations of national ECEC policies (Lundkvist et al., 2017; Molla & Nolan, 2019; Paananen et al., 2015; Penn, 2011), less is known about how ideas of access in ECEC are rationalised at the local level. Nevertheless, local policies can play a significant role in the everyday lives and childcare decisions of families (Paananen, Kuukka et al., 2019).

In this article, we examine the rationalities and possible preconditions of access to ECEC using data from interviews with administrators of local ECEC

services in Finland. Our approach draws on the ideas of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008). Discursive institutionalism (DI) understands institutions as constructs of culture and society: simultaneously as given and constraining structures, as well as enabling constructions of meaning (Schmidt, 2010, p. 4). Thus, DI rejects the idea of institutions as external structures as their own entities, ‘mindlessly’ fulfilling their predesigned purposes (see Alasuutari, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This means that political institutions are what March and Olsen (1984, p. 739) call ‘more than simple mirrors of social forces’. Instead, institutions should be treated as political actors that act on the basis of collective interests or intentions with a variety of coherence (March & Olsen, 1984). Instead of explaining institutional change as a result of exogenous shocks, discursive institutionalism treats actors in the institutions as agents who use historically and socially constructed meaning context to maintain but also to challenge and change the institution with their discursive abilities. Thus, this brings the deliberative nature of discourse to the focus. (Schmidt, 2008, 2010)

However, this does not mean that institutions are reduced to mere negotiations of individual actors (see Schmidt, 2012). In order the change to be possible, it needs to ‘make sense’ in the specific ideational setting. That is, the discourse needs to be patterned in a way which follows a certain ‘logic of communication’ that is grounded in socially and historically justified and legitimated rules and ideas. (Schmidt, 2008.) Thus, by focusing on unravelling agents’ logic of communication, we believe we can challenge the idea of universal access as a uniform, pre-defined product.

Finland as the context of this study

In this chapter, to give contextual information for our study, we describe the Finnish ECEC institution as we understand it based on the approach described above. Leaning on Schmidt (2008, 2012), we maintain that ECEC institutions are not detached from societal conditions and discourses of their time. Universalism of ECEC in Finland has its foundations in the ‘Nordic welfare state’ in the 1960s and 1970s (Karila, 2012; Kildal & Kunhle, 2005). According to Mahon et al. (2012), universal ECEC policy in the Nordic countries was based on the premises of gender equality and the central role of the public sector in financing services through taxation. From a legislative perspective, this meant answering the demand for high quality, publicly subsidised childcare in order to support women’s participation in the labour market (Karila, 2012). In Finland, the Act on Children’s Day Care was established in 1973, which obligated municipalities to provide children’s day

care services to all who needed them (Kröger, 2011). The principle of universalism strengthened in the 1990s, when children received a subjective entitlement to a day care place (Sipilä, 1997). Entitlement to free-of-charge pre-primary education at the age of six, preceding the year of compulsory education was established in 2000 (Government proposal 91/1999). From 2015, attendance of pre-primary education has been mandatory (Basic Education Act 628/1998). In addition, from 2018, it has been possible for the municipalities to apply for a government grant to organise free-of-charge part-time ECEC for five-year-old children as part of the Finnish government's pilot programme.

Despite the legislative development in Finland, the discourses of publicly subsidised childcare have been diverse. Demands for nationally allocated children's home care subsidies became to public debate in the 1970s, when the establishment of the Act on Children's Day Care was on the political agenda. The provision of cash-for-care allowances for children's home care was rationalised as increasing parents' freedom to choose the form of childcare between day care services and home care according to the individual needs of the family (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009.) Since 1985, parents of children under three years of age have been entitled to receive a state-funded home care allowance if they decide to take care of their child at home and the child is not enrolled in publicly subsidised ECEC services. In 1987, the entitlement to an additional allowance expanded to concern also the home care of siblings below school age until the youngest child in the family turns three (*Amendment to the Act on Home Care Allowance* (1112/1987)). It is fairly common to utilise the home care allowance for the siblings as well: in 2018, 23% of the children whose home care was subsidized with the home care allowance were over three years old (Kela, 2019). In addition, municipalities can also support the home care of children with additional supplements paid on top of the state-provided home care allowance. Utilising municipally provided supplements often includes certain conditions, for example, requiring that also the older siblings in the family below school age are taken cared for at home (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2018).

It has been argued that Finland's relatively low enrolment rates in ECEC indicate the will of the parents, since parents have the freedom to choose between home care and institutional ECEC services (see Duvander & Ellingsæter, 2016; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). On the other hand, home care has been constructed as being in the best interests of the child, and institutional care is seen as a secondary option for those families who do not have the opportunity to stay at home (Jallinoja, 2006; Paananen, Alasuutari et al., 2019). Nevertheless, mothers with

a low level of education and an unstable position in the labour market were more likely to take care of their children at home with the home care allowance longer when compared to employed, highly educated mothers (Närvi, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, municipalities are responsible for organising ECEC services in Finland. In addition, municipalities also have significant autonomy in the provision of ECEC services (*Constitution of Finland* (731/1999); *Local Government Act* (410/2015)). Thus, there is variation in how the services are locally organised. Children have a subjective entitlement to a publicly provided ECEC place either in a day care centre or in family day care. Municipal day care centres are the most common form of ECEC service in Finland. In 2019, 71% of children attending ECEC were enrolled in municipal day care centres (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2019). In addition, private ECEC provision is publicly subsidised, since parents can claim a private day care allowance to or voucher to subsidise the expenses of market-based day care (see Ruutiainen et al., 2020). The popularity of the vouchers has grown significantly in recent years, but there is considerable regional variation in deployment (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2019). In addition to the statutory ECEC services, municipalities can also organise open early childhood education, which mainly consists of children's clubs and playgroup activities (*Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* 540/2018). In 2019, 39% of Finnish municipalities offered open ECEC services (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2019).

Earlier research shows that the rationalisations of ECEC provision in Finland are not uniform either. Indeed, local policy debates on childcare seem to have their own logic in comparison to debates on the national level. For example, whereas gender equality was present in the discussions over childcare policy in the Finnish Parliament, it was almost absent in the local policy debates. (Autto, 2016.) In addition, a study of local policy discourses in Finland suggests that the ways in which the organisation of ECEC services has been rationalised varies locally. In urban municipalities the focus was on discourses of investment and lifelong learning, and in rural areas the provision of ECEC was justified mostly based on the economy and the needs of the labour market. (see Karila et al., 2017.)

In this article, our focus is on the rationalities and preconditions for access to ECEC among four-year-old children. On the one hand, in the Finnish system, four-year-old children belong to an age group whose parents are not entitled to receive the home care allowance for their home care without an under three-year-old sibling in the family, nor are the children yet entitled to free-of-charge pre-primary

education. On the other hand, the Finnish home care allowance system enables parents to receive an additional home care allowance also for the home care of the siblings in the family below school age. Since receiving the children's home care allowance and utilisation of an ECEC place are mutually exclusive, the policy creates a possible barrier to ECEC access also for four-year-olds. In addition, there might also be discursively constructed barriers of access to ECEC as we do not know how four-year-olds' access to ECEC is rationalised in local ECEC institution with differentiated ECEC and childcare policies.

The inquiry

The aim of this study is to unravel the communicative logic of access to ECEC in ECEC institution. To achieve our aim, we analyse what kind of rationalities administrators of local ECEC services construct for access to ECEC concerning four-year-old children in Finland. In addition, we investigate what kind of possible preconditions for access are constructed in these rationalities. We use rationality as an analytical concept to grasp the communicative logic of how access to ECEC is discursively constructed. We understand rationalities as socially and culturally constructed and shared logic of reasoning that legitimate institutional action (Townley, 2008). Rationalities are constructed within discourses, which we understand as ideas or wider worldviews conveyed in social interaction (Schmidt, 2008). In other words, rationalities are embedded in the ways in which institutional action can be justified in societally acceptable and contextually comprehensible manner (Johnson, 2000; see also Schmidt, 2008). Therefore, rationalities should not be considered just from an instrumental point of view, as calculated and 'best' means to accomplish something (see Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). We believe that by examining the rationalities of access to local ECEC services, we can unpack the communicative logic of how access to ECEC is constructed. This will direct us to discuss the fact that access to ECEC is not only about the question of affordability, availability in terms of location and sufficient supply of good quality services that serve the needs of the families, but barriers of access might also be constructed discursively in local contexts. We believe that this notion has a potential to contribute to the discussion of universal access to ECEC.

This study involves ten Finnish municipalities. The municipalities were invited to participate in the research project based on differences in their demographics, geographical location, and local ECEC and childcare policy and provision. The aim was to have a selection of municipalities that would represent the variety of local ECEC and childcare policies within the Finnish ECEC system.

At the time the interviews took place, the Finnish government had implemented a policy that gave municipalities the option to restrict ECEC entitlement to 20 hours per week.¹ Seven of the municipalities participating in this study had implemented the restriction. Local ECEC services are mainly publicly provided. Regarding to the private provision, the municipalities can choose between a voucher system and a local private day care allowance (PDAMS) or use both. Seven of the municipalities offered a voucher for ECEC, and six municipalities used the local private day care allowances. There were also differences in the policies concerning the home care of children: four of the municipalities offered an additional supplement together with the home care allowance, and three of those municipalities required the home care of older siblings as well as a precondition for the supplement. In addition, three of the municipalities were participants in the Finnish government's pilot programme involving the provision of free-of-charge part-time ECEC for five-year-old children.

The data of this study consist of ten qualitative interviews with administrators of ECEC services in the ten municipalities in Finland. In addition, data concerning the local childcare policy contexts of each of the selected municipalities were gathered as the background material for the interview design. The data gathering began with an examination of the municipalities' public website pages for ECEC services and public statistical data from Finnish national databases (Statistics Finland and Sotkanet²). Data were gathered about available ECEC services in the municipality, the demographic and geographical characteristics of the municipality, the local policy regarding the municipal supplement of childcare allowances, and enrolment rates to ECEC. The idea was to gain an understanding of the local variation of ECEC provision and childcare policy of the given municipalities.

The interviews were carried out by phone during the spring of 2019. The administrators of local ECEC services were invited to participate in this study based on their professional expertise and managerial position in the field of ECEC services in their municipality. The administrators interviewed in this study work in collaboration with the local policymakers, other local administrators and ECEC professionals, as well as the parents. From their institutional position, they participate in negotiating, advising, and justifying the local policies in the field of ECEC in the municipality (see Schmidt, 2008).

The general focus of the interviews was to discuss the provision and use of ECEC services in the specific municipality from the perspective of the ECEC access of children aged approximately four years. The topics included for example, the local development of the

provision of ECEC services, rationales of the distribution of different kinds of ECEC services in the municipality, as well as the ideas concerning international goals of higher enrolment rates in ECEC. The background data were used to guide the discussion to concern topics familiar to the municipalities (see Pfadenhauer, 2009). Thus, the aim of the interviews was not to collect 'factual' data on the local ECEC and childcare policies in the given municipalities, but rather to discuss the ideas and justifications upon which certain decisions were based on (see Wood & Kroger, 2000).

The interview participation was voluntary and was based on the written informed consent of the interviewees. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The duration of the interviews varied from 51 to 74 minutes, and the mean duration was 60 minutes. The interviews were carried out in Finnish. The excerpts used in this article were translated into English by the authors.

The analysis was carried out with discourse analysis. The data were treated as intertextual – an understanding of texts, written or spoken, being constructions of other, historically produced texts (Fairclough, 1992). The focus of the analysis was to trace those texts entangled in the data. The analytical interest was therefore not in the administrators' individual perspectives or the local decisions concerning ECEC provision itself, but instead in the variety of talk about how the local decisions were rationalised within the context of the universal ECEC system.

The first analytical reading of the interview transcription focused on coding the parts of the interviews that involved discussion about the access to and use of ECEC services. The coded texts were selected for further analysis. Next, we looked for variabilities and consistencies in what was being discussed in the selected data. We asked analytical questions of the data, such as whose perspective was present in the discussions of access to ECEC, to whom ECEC services were addressed, and what kind of positions were constructed for the actors involved. Since rationalities construct different subject positions and agency for the actors (see Townley, 2008), examining the variation of the constructed positions enabled us to notice the differences in the logic of how the access of four-year-old children to ECEC is rationalised in the data.

Rationalities of access to ECEC

As a result of our analysis, we found three different rationalities of access to early childhood education and care services. We named them 1) equality of access for all children, 2) a real need for ECEC, and 3) the parents' choice. These rationalities varied based on the positions and agency constructed to the actors. In general, the interviewees positioned

themselves as one of the actors in the local ECEC institution. However, there were differences in how the ECEC actors were positioned in relation to parents or actors in other institutions. In addition, constructions of the targets of ECEC varied between the rationalities. Despite the differences, the rationalities were intertwined, and therefore they should be treated as an illustration of the complexity of the discourses concerning universal access to ECEC. Next, we will present the three rationalities of access found in the data. Then, in the following subsection, we will conclude our findings by presenting how the preconditions for access constructed align with the rationalities. We will further discuss the relations between the rationalities and wider socio-political discourses of ECEC in the discussion.

Equality of access for all children

In the interviews, one way to rationalise children's access to ECEC was based on the idea that such access is equally important for all children. The interviewees described access to ECEC as 'an opportunity for the child in all circumstances', and 'equal opportunities for children to receive high quality ECEC regardless of the family background'. In this rationality, a distinction was drawn between access to ECEC and the work-oriented societal function of ECEC services. Typically, the interviewees emphasised the learning-based orientation of ECEC in relation to the fact that access to ECEC services also enables the parents' access to the labour market. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Overall, our main emphasis is that early childhood education also has an impact on the child's learning and those sorts of things. So, it is not just a so-called day care place that is needed when going to work.

In the excerpt above, the interviewee states that ECEC is not just a day care place that is needed when parents are going to work. Thus, the importance of access was constructed on the idea that early childhood education is something more than a childcare service for the parents. According to this rationality, ECEC is a service for the child, as is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Access to early childhood education is important, particularly because it is in the best interests of the child. It is not important just because it enables the parents' participation in the labour market; it is also [important] for those [children] whose parent is at home.

In the excerpt, the interviewee states that all children should have access to ECEC because it is in the best interests of the child. Therefore, access to ECEC should not be dependent on the parent's participation in the labour market. However, the excerpt also

illustrates the cultural presumptions on the use of ECEC services. Here, the parents' work was constructed as a premise for the child's access to ECEC, and it is the access of children with a parent at home that needed justification. Interestingly, the interviewees do not refer here to the child's legal right to ECEC in Finland. Instead, the importance of access to ECEC was justified based on the research-based evidence on the benefits of ECEC. The interviewees position themselves as 'advocates', who actively spread knowledge about the importance of access to ECEC for all children:

As the administrator responsible for the [ECEC] services, I have strongly brought to the debate how important it is for children, children in general, to attend early childhood education. Research evidence shows that the earlier [the child attends] the better are the results, learning results among others. And all in all, attending early childhood education is meaningful for the child.

In the excerpt above, the interviewee emphasises the importance of ECEC enrolment for children in general. Access to ECEC is constructed as meaningful from the perspective of the children. Furthermore, providing early access for all children is constructed as a rational and purposeful thing to do: the earlier children have access to ECEC, the greater are the benefits.

A real need for ECEC

In the data, access to ECEC was also rationalised based on a 'real need' for ECEC services. This rationality emerged as a variation in the constructed strength of actions in providing access to ECEC for specific categories of children. For example, instead of discussing children's access to ECEC in general, it was implied that some children are not in a real need of ECEC services. There were also differences in whose needs were said being addressed: the needs of the parents, the needs of an individual child or family, or the needs of society.

A real need as a need for a day care place

Rationalities based on the needs of the parents' work focused on the need to provide a day care place for children. When referring to this, the interviewees talked about 'the real need' or those who apply for an ECEC place 'for real' in comparison to those families where the parents were not participating in the labour force. The rationality of the 'real need' for ECEC was often linked to talk about the resources of ECEC. The interviewees discussed the 'realities' that limit actions in ECEC services. However, children's access to ECEC was rationalised based on the need for the services, instead of a lack of resources. This is illustrated in the following excerpt, where the

interviewee discusses the allocation of ECEC places in the municipality when there is shortage of ECEC staff:

It often becomes problematic if we do not have employees. Then we carefully consider what kind of options are available. Because it must be ensured that when families go to work, their children have a place to spend eight to ten hours.

In this excerpt, the interviewee states that it must be ensured that when the parents go to work, the children have a place to be during that time. Providing day care places for the children of working parents was constructed as the primary responsibility of the municipality. Thus, the rationality for access to ECEC was to enable the parents' access to the labour market. The ECEC institution was constructed as the place where children go when their parents go to work. This also illustrates the function that is constructed for the ECEC institution. In Finland, the proportion of children in informal, non-parental care is very low in comparison to most OECD countries (OECD, 2016). Thus, in the Finnish context, when parents are at work, it is considered usual for children to be in institutional care (see Korsvold, 2012).

At the time the interviews took place, the policy that enabled the municipalities to restrict the entitlement to ECEC to 20 hours per week instead of full-time service was being implemented in Finland. However, full-time ECEC had to be provided for children whose parents were working or studying full-time. When access to ECEC was rationalised as the need of the parents to get a full-time day care place for their children in order to access the labour market, a distinction was constructed between having an entitlement to a place in ECEC and the 'real' need to access the services. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

At the moment we have certain premises reserved [for expanding the service] as September comes and the need for day care increases. And with the need for day care I mean that they really, the parents are really working. So it is not just a so-called ECEC place.

In this excerpt, the interviewee discusses the provision of ECEC places in the municipality in the situation when the subjective entitlement to ECEC is restricted to 20 hours per week. The need for day care for the children of working parents was constructed as the need for the provision 'for real', in comparison with 'just' a place in ECEC. Thus, this rationality is justified by different constructions of the concepts of 'day care' and 'early childhood education and care'. In contrast to the rationality focusing on the importance of access for all children, the main emphasis here is on enabling access to *day care*.

Real need as a need for special support

Another kind of ‘real need’ constructed in the data was based on the needs of the individual child or family. According to this approach, it is important that the child has access to ECEC if he or she has developmental needs or if the access is needed for the welfare of the family. Thus, the rationality for access to ECEC was based on concern:

There are of course these particular children who are being guided to attend ECEC services by social workers or the child welfare clinic. We have wanted to make sure that they can attend and participate. We do not kind of have such groups of children whom we would be concerned about because they do not attend [ECEC].

In the excerpt above, an interviewee states that ‘they’ as ECEC officials have wanted to ‘secure and take care of’ those children who have been recommended to attend ECEC by social workers or the child welfare clinic. In this rationality, the child welfare clinic and social services were positioned as authoritative actors who can detect possible concerns in the child’s development and guide the families to ECEC services accordingly³ (see also Paananen, Alasuutari et al., 2019). Taking no action towards increasing enrolment was justified with not having ‘such groups of children’ whose absence from ECEC services would be particularly concerning.

When access to ECEC was rationalised as a real need for special support, the category of children ‘not of concern’ – those whose attendance at ECEC was not specifically necessary – was constructed as a consequence. According to this rationality, if there were no concerns about the home environment, access to ECEC was constructed as not necessary for the child:

[If the children live in] a certain area, with a proper outdoor environment and space to run around and play. And [they have] so-called ... smart parents who are interested in their children and their upbringing, who are active and interact with their children, and so on. Then it [not attending ECEC] is not such a big deal for that child. If the child already lives in this kind of environment.

In this excerpt, the interviewee constructs scenario of an environment where it is ‘not such a big deal’ if the child does not attend ECEC. Having ‘a proper outdoor environment and space to run around and play’ with active parents who interact with their children was constructed as an environment in which the child need not attend ECEC. Thus, when there were no assumed concerns about the family, home care was constructed as comparable to institutional ECEC.

In addition, the idea that accessing institutional ECEC is not that relevant for all children was justified with the possibility of access to other kinds of peer group activities before entering pre-primary

education. The following excerpt demonstrates the logic of justification:

We rarely have a child in pre-primary education who has not already been part of some kind of peer group, if not in our [municipal ECEC services] then in the services provided by the third sector. I would say that only few of those children who enter the pre-primary class have not participated at least in open ECEC. [...] So they have already been in some kind of peer group, and had the feeling of being a part of a group, and interaction and age-appropriate activities and such. [...] Probably, if we had noticed that we have a child in a pre-primary class whose skills are not on the level that they should be, we would have been more concerned. But we very rarely have these kinds of surprises.

In this excerpt, the interviewee states that they rarely have a child who has not been involved in ‘some kind of peer group’ before entering pre-primary education. Because in most cases children have had access to peer group activities and the skills of the children are adequate regardless of their attendance of institutional ECEC, there is no need for concern. Thus, peer group experience was constructed as more essential for the child than accessing institutional ECEC *per se*.

Real need as a need for social integration

In addition to developmental needs, another construction of the ‘real need’ for ECEC was the need for social integration. The Finnish National Agency for Education grants discretionary government transfers to municipalities to implement positive discrimination in ECEC in order to tackle possible inequalities. One of the focus areas of this policy is to help the social integration of immigrants. According to the rationality of the real need for social integration, it is especially important to provide access to ECEC for multicultural children who speak a foreign language as their home language. Having multicultural children attending ECEC was constructed as a social integration policy tool, as is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Another thing is probably the multiculturality. It is of course very good for social integration that these children have access to ECEC with the other children in their neighbourhood, and that they can learn the language. It is the best social integration policy. And that is why we need to attract those children [to ECEC] early on.

In this excerpt, the interviewee states that it is important to attract multicultural children to ECEC early on, so that they can learn the Finnish language. Thus, attending ECEC and learning Finnish were considered good forms of integration at the individual level, as well as ‘the best integration policy’ at the societal level. The rationality of access to ECEC was thus

instrumental: promoting multicultural children's access to ECEC helps to achieve the goals of social integration.

The parents' choice

The third rationality for children's access to ECEC was constructed as the parents' choice. This rationality differed from the others in the constructed positions between parents and the actors in ECEC. It was representative of this rationality that the interviewees first talked about promoting children's enrolment in ECEC, but then ended up emphasising that the parents are the ones who make the choice. This is illustrated in the following excerpt⁴:

We are trying to get everyone to attend [ECEC services] eventually, although the parents can at first (.) or the parents have the opportunity to choose whether they stay at home or not.

In the excerpt above, the administrator states that they are trying to have all children attending ECEC eventually. Then, she counters the argument by continuing that 'at first', the parents have an opportunity to choose. Thus, parents were positioned as agents who have the right to choose whether they enrol their child in ECEC or care for their child at home. This is further illustrated in the next excerpt:

[The municipality] has thought that early childhood education and care is the child's right, but on the other hand we respect families' choices if they want to stay at home with the children and choose, for example, the municipal supplement to the home care allowance. [...] So maybe it is the respect for the parents' choice that is the premise, and then we are trying other kinds of solutions to enable access to ECEC at least partly.

In this excerpt, the interviewee states that even though children have an entitlement to early childhood education and care, the actors in ECEC should respect the choice of the parents to care for their child at home. The decision over childcare was constructed as a private matter in which ECEC actors should not intervene. This was especially emphasised when the interviewees discussed the parents' right not to choose ECEC. Indeed, ECEC actors were positioned as defenders of families who want to choose home care for their children. The relationship between the ECEC institution and the family is illustrated in the following excerpt. In this municipality, municipal supplements were offered to the families on top of the national child home care allowance:

I do not believe that it [the EU policy goal of a 95 % enrolment rate in ECEC] is going to be attained just by attracting and listening to the families. Certain decisions concerning [monetary] family benefits would be needed, concerning for example, the

home care allowance. [...] But with our [local] policies, we also wanted to listen to the voice of the families.

In the excerpt above, the interviewee states that she does not believe that the European Union's goal of increasing enrolment in ECEC could be met simply by attracting and listening to the families. The local policies were legitimised as being the result of listening the voice of the families. According to this rationality, enhancing the enrolment in ECEC of children in home care was constructed as an inappropriate action for a public institution. Obliging parents to bring their child to ECEC was paralleled with compulsory attendance of comprehensive school, as shown in the following excerpt:

Compulsory education for three-year-olds has not been an achievable situation in this area. Instead, families should have the opportunity to decide for themselves and partly stay at home.

In the excerpt, the interviewee constructs an imaginary 'compulsory early childhood education of three-year-olds' as the opposite pole of the parents' freedom to choose. By using the concept of compulsory education (*oppivelvollisuus* in Finnish), she makes a juxtaposition between ECEC and school. Within this rationalisation, compulsory education is for everybody, while ECEC is a matter of a choice for the parents (see also Paananen, Repo et al., 2019).

Constructed preconditions for access

Above, we have illustrated the three rationalities for access to ECEC found in the data. These rationalities varied based on the positions constructed for the institutional actors, the parents, and the children, as well as on the constructions of to whom ECEC was addressed. In these rationalities, categories of children whose access to ECEC is not similarly relevant were constructed in the data. These categorisations emerged as preconditions for access to ECEC based on *the position of the parents in the labour market, the level of concern for the child or family, and the parents' decision*. Next, we will sum up our findings.

One of the constructed preconditions in the data was based on the categorisation of the parents as either 'working parents' or parents 'who are at home'. Even though this kind of categorisation was present overall in the data, it emerged as a precondition for access if access to ECEC was rationalised based on the need of parents to access the labour market. According to this rationality, even though all children have an entitlement to an ECEC place in Finland, it is reasonable that ECEC places are allocated based on an evaluation of need. Stay-at-home parents were constructed as being in a position where it was an appropriate action for

the parent not to demand an ECEC place based on subjective entitlement so that ‘the working parent’ could access the labour market. Thus, access to ECEC based on subjective entitlement was constructed as conditional to the ‘real’ need for the ECEC services based on the parents’ position in the labour market.

Another kind of precondition for access to ECEC was constructed based on the level of concern for the child or family. When access to ECEC was rationalised as a real need for special support, the categories ‘of concern’ and ‘not of concern’ were constructed as a consequence. The relevance of ECEC attendance was assessed in relation to the observations of the professionals in child welfare clinics and social services on the one hand, and in relation to the expectations of pre-primary education on the other hand. In this rationality, access to some kind of peer group activities and a ‘proper’ home environment were constructed as commensurate with access to institutional ECEC if the child or family had no special needs. Thus, it was constructed as appropriate that some children do not attend institutional ECEC if they are not ‘of concern’.

The third precondition for access found in the data was related to the rationality of access as the parents’ choice. In this rationality, parents were positioned as the ones who have the primary say, and the actors in ECEC cannot question them. By stating that the municipality respects the choice of the family, parents were positioned as having the authority and best expertise in terms of the needs of their child over the professionals in public institutions (see also Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). The choice is constructed as the parent’s choice between staying at home with the children or not, rather than choosing whether or not to enrol their child in ECEC. Thus, in this rationality, parental care is constructed as being parallel with institutional early childhood education and care. However, for example, socioeconomic distribution in the use of home care allowances (Närvi, 2014) was not brought into the discussion.

Discussion

In this article, we took a discursive approach to the policy of universal access to ECEC. We examined the rationalities and preconditions constructed for access to ECEC services in the context of the Finnish ECEC system, which is often described as universal. Our aim was to explore what kind of rationalities administrators of local ECEC services construct for access to ECEC, and we focused especially on children aged approximately four years. Furthermore, we analysed what kind of preconditions for access were constructed in these rationalities. As a result of our analysis, we were able to distinguish three overlapping and contrasting rationalities for access to ECEC:

equality of access for all children, a real need for access, and access as the parents’ choice. In these rationalities, the parents’ position in the labour market, level of concern for the child or family, and the decision of the parent emerged as the preconditions for the child’s access to ECEC.

In the rationalisations of children’s access to ECEC, the results show the distinctiveness of categorisation between children whose parents work and those whose parents are at home. Whereas access to ECEC based on the parents’ work was constructed as a self-evident premise for ECEC provision, the access of children with a parent at home was specifically justified. This was also the case when access to ECEC was constructed as equally important for all children.

Examination of rationalities of access to ECEC on a local level brings new perspectives to the wider socio-political discourses concerning universal access to ECEC. Earlier research has suggested that access to ECEC consists of affordability, availability, amenability and acceptability of ECEC services (see e.g., Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Acceptability of the services has been investigated from the point of view of parents (Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017; Vandenbroeck et al., 2008). Our findings suggest that even though ECEC policies at national level can be seen as universal supporting affordability, availability and amenability of the ECEC services, we need to pay attention to how local enactments of ECEC policies might construct barriers related to the acceptability of the use of services. In more specific, our approach in which we focused on how ECEC institution is discursively constructed (Schmidt, 2008, 2010) by local ECEC administrators helped us to identify potential risks to universal access to ECEC. The need to construct a justification for access to ECEC for children whose parents are not participating in the labour market implies the predominant discourse of ECEC as a service whose primary societal function is to enable parents’ access to work life. Thus, the results are in line with earlier studies pointing out the work-life oriented discourse of ECEC in Finland (e.g., Lundkvist et al., 2017; Paananen et al., 2015). However, this construction was also challenged, not by drawing on ideas of the universalism of the Finnish ECEC system, but by referring to the globally predominant discourse of the benefits of ECEC attendance.

The findings of this study also imply a discourse suggesting that access to ECEC is not necessary for every child at the age of four years. On the one hand, childcare decisions were constructed as a matter of the private life of the families and according to the notion that it is normal that some parents decide not to enrol their four-year-old child in ECEC. In line with the findings of Paananen, Repo et al. (2019), access to ECEC was constructed in terms of which services the parents want their child to attend. Constructing parental care of four-year-old children

with care allowances as commensurate with attendance at ECEC services can be interpreted as a sign of the institutionalisation of children's home care also in the four-year-old age group (see Mahon et al., 2012).

On the other hand, the constructed distinction found in this study between children and families 'of concern' and 'not of concern' implies a targeted rather than a universal approach in rationalising access to ECEC services. According to earlier research, parents' conceptions of the purpose of ECEC services and the target group for whom the services are intended matters in their decisions regarding childcare (Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017; Vandenbroeck et al., 2008). The fact that the use of ECEC services might be seen as culturally inappropriate or marking the family as being 'of concern' can create a barrier to parents positioned as being 'at home' to applying for an ECEC place for their child. Thus, explaining the parents' decision not to enrol their child in ECEC as a matter of individual choice neglects the cultural connotations of parenting and the 'proper' use of ECEC services.

We do not claim that our findings are generally applicable or a complete description of the rationalities and preconditions constructed for access to ECEC in Finland. Rather, the results reveal the complexities of the constructions in the Finnish ECEC system. Discursive institutionalism turned out to be useful in increasing understanding of the logic of local ECEC policies in terms of access to ECEC services. Alasutari et al. (2020) point out that in the comparison of national policies, it is important to ask what kind of service provision 'equal access' refers to. Based on the results of this study, we argue that it is an important question also at the local policy level.

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Notes

1. Full-time ECEC was available for those children whose parents were working or studying full-time. Extended hours in ECEC had to be organised if it was necessary for the child's development or well-being (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). The restriction was cancelled in 2019.
2. Database of the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare.
3. In Finland, municipalities are obligated to provide regular and free-of-charge health and development checks for all children below school age at child welfare clinics.

⁴ (.) symbols a brief pause in speech.

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