

Inspiration from abroad

Pre-primary school education in Finland – How it works from start to professional

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Early childhood education and care in Finland has changed over the past few years, and has been receiving more political attention in Finnish government programs. We can have only seven children with one adult and a two-year pre-primary education trial, and we have a deficiency of educated teachers. In Finland, pre-primary school teachers are educated at university. Studies last three years and focus on pedagogy. At some universities, the master of education degree can be studied immediately after the bachelor's degree.

In Finland, you can be a pre-primary school teacher if you have studied at university. Most of the teachers have studied early childhood education, but classroom teachers can teach in pre-primary school too. In this section, I talk about the University of Oulu and studies from 2015 to 2018 because it is common to me. Students can study courses in open university at many universities in Finland before they have applied. You can apply the credits from the courses to studies. This might help you to graduate faster. In early childhood education, intermediate studies is a major subject which includes, for example, children's rights and basics of child welfare, pedagogical applications and analysis, multiculturalism in early childhood education and collaboration in early childhood education. Minor studies includes, for example, handicrafts, pre-primary education and transition to school, practical training in primary education, pedagogy of children under three, and children's development and learning process. Those studies include professional studies in early childhood education and pre-primary education. They also include practice in those three years of the bachelor's degree in ECEC centers, pre-primary education and in the first class in primary school, for instance. Total credits for a bachelor's degree are 180, of which 60 are pedagogical studies (University Of Oulu, 2015). This provides a good professional knowledge, considering that some students may not have earlier experience from ECEC centers. After studies, you are qualified to work as an early childhood teacher and as a teacher in pre-primary education.

The website of the University of Oulu (n.d.) indicates that through the studies, you will develop into an expert who knows how to work ethically and in cooperation with children and their guardians, and form other cooperative connections. Those are daily things in my work. I meet guardians, and in Finland we also have a special needs teacher who helps if some children have special needs or if we have concerns in the group. A teacher of early childhood education is responsible for planning, documenting, and evaluating the pedagogical activities of a group of children together with others. At my workplace, for example, we have planning hours outside of the group: two hours in the ECEC center and three hours at home. This varies for each ECEC center. Planning increases the pedagogical effect on the children. I plan how and what we do in ECEC, and I write an info letter to guardians every week about what we did with the children and what we will do next week. This way the guardians can prepare, and it is also for documenting our activities.

I currently work at the ECEC center in Oulu, and I have also worked at many other ECEC centers in Finland. There have been different groups of children. At most of my workplaces there have been three adults and about twenty children in one group. The groups can also be formed according to age, need for support and sibling relationships, for instance. Groups are formed considering pedagogy, provisions on staffing and maximum group sizes (EDUFI, n.d.-a).

We have a national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (EDUFI, n.d.-a), for pre-primary (EDUFI, n.d.-c), and for a two-year pre-primary trial (EDUFI, n.d.-b). Those are issued by the

Finnish National Agency for Education, which is guided by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care; pre-primary is guided by the Basic Education Act. The national core curriculum for ECEC outlines children's right to early childhood education and the amount of early childhood education. ECEC is part of the Finnish education system and is an important stage in the journey of a child's growth and learning. Guardians have the primary task of raising a child. ECEC complements and supports the task of raising children. We have three levels of plans in Finland. These are the basis for the national plan, municipal plan, and child's personal plan (EDUFI, [n.d.-a](#)). Activities I plan for children are based on national and municipal core curriculum for two-year pre-primary. Along with the guardian and child, I make a personal curriculum for every child in my group in the autumn semester, and we complete it in the spring semester. I discuss the child's ambitions with the guardian; the child can give their own opinion as well. It is important to see the child as an individual.

The ECEC will build holistic growth, learning and development for the children involved in it. It is based on the regulations of the children's growth environment and the operating environment of early childhood education. The national core curriculum for pre-primary education was prepared in cooperation with professionals, utilizing the results of the latest research and development work (EDUFI, [n.d.-c](#)). In the next chapter, I discuss one of the latest trials in Finland.

A two-year pre-primary education trial

Children have been selected for the test group for a two-year pre-primary education trial. Children were selected for this trial because the living area or ECEC center is organizing the trial. The two-year pre-primary education trial launched in Finland in August 2021. Altogether approximately 10,000 five-year-olds are participating in the trial. Half of them started in August 2021 and the other half will start in August 2022 (Ministry of Education and Culture, [2021](#)). I started with five-year-olds in August 2021. There are also three- and four-year-old children in the group, and they have their own ECEC teacher and one ECEC nanny. We are with a smaller group part of the day and with the whole group the rest of the time. I am with my five-year-olds and others are together. It helps my work when I have a small group because I have more time to focus on them. Often the core of the work is realized in the encounter with children and the warm context, where the educator learns to understand the child better, and mutual trust is felt to be strengthened (Martikainen & Oikarinen, [2021](#)). Then they can learn play skills from each other. We also play with six-year-old pre-primary children. We walk and play together in the forest, go skiing and play outside because of COVID-19. According to Kuutti, Kahila and Sajaniemi ([2021](#)), research and pedagogy was a challenge during COVID-19 time in spring 2020. It was important for the staff at ECEC centers to cooperate to fulfill pedagogy.

The purpose of the trial is to make education more equitable by encouraging more children to participate in pre-primary education as part of early childhood education and care. The trial will develop the quality and effectiveness of pre-primary education from different angles, examine the continuity of early childhood education and care, pre-primary education and initial teaching, examine what choices for services guardians have, and collect information on what effects two-year pre-primary education has on children's abilities to develop and learn, and on their social skills and development of healthy self-esteem (Ministry of Education and Culture, [2021](#)). In a two-year pre-primary trial, children can be invited even if they have some special need, disability or cultural difference. This is called inclusion (EDUFI, [n.d.-b](#)).

The children who are chosen for the trial group are obliged to attend the two-year pre-primary education program. This means that the child's guardians must make sure that their child participates either in pre-primary education organized at a two-year trial site or in other activities that achieve the objectives set for two-year pre-primary education. Such other activities include attending other early childhood education and care activities, club activities or child home care. The pre-primary education program is free of charge (Ministry of Education and Culture, [2021](#)). Pre-primary education takes four hours a day. In my group of five-year-olds, we have about one hour teaching lessons. At the teaching lessons we make crafts, do math, and discuss emotions, for instance. At other times children play, we

go out and rest. Even though we have quite a few hours per day of actual teaching, we still have the whole day for teaching and pedagogy. We play and discuss things with the children, and also help them to learn life skills. Early childhood pedagogy takes the child and the comprehensiveness of education, instead of learning, into consideration. It is perhaps the most defining factor inherent in early childhood education pedagogy (Mertala, 2020).

The trial uses a pilot curriculum. The two-year pre-primary education program follows a new pilot curriculum. Children in pre-primary education become familiar with things that they express an interest in, by playing and exploring and in other ways that are suitable for little children. Every child is given space to learn at their own pace. Two years offers the children and pre-primary education staff plenty of time to get to know one another, work together and focus on things for which the children show a genuine interest. Lämsä (2021) adduce an example where there is a circle of pedagogy in early childhood education. In the circle are four things. The first is a whole day of pedagogy, the second is doing it in small groups, the third is pedagogy rota planning, and the fourth is using a learning environment (Lämsä, 2021). In addition to diverse activities, the pre-primary education program offers rest periods, tasty food and care for the children. The two-year pre-primary education program strengthens the children's ability to work together and learn, and builds a solid foundation for moving to year one of primary school in due course. Support for growth and learning during the two-year pre-primary education trial provides robust support for children's growth and learning. Children participating in the trial have the right to receive support for their development, learning and wellbeing. Thanks to the trial, support for growth and learning under the Basic Education Act (three-step support) and student support under the Student Welfare Act will apply to five-year-olds as well. The support measures are planned in collaboration with guardians (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

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Reeta Mäki-Pollari was born in the Alavus countryside in the middle of Finland. She studied at the University of Oulu and graduated with a master of education and has worked in ECEC centers and acquired experience from teaching children. She got her ECEC teacher professional qualification and also wanted to get to know the education and leading theory from a master's degree. This will help her to get more working opportunities to become the leader of ECEC, for instance. She is studying flexible mathematics for children. She is also interested in union experience and has been involved in the student union at the university. She is now selected in the trade union (Early Childhood Education Teacher's Union of Finland) council.