

The Development of Early Childhood Education as an Academic Discipline in Finland

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Abstract: Early Childhood Education (ECE) as an academic discipline has gained an academic legitimacy in Finland in 2005. In accordance with internationally established practice, Early Childhood Education as an academic field and a field of research has been set to cover the period from birth to eight years of age. The focus of ECE research is to analyse and define the development and upbringing of young children, including such themes as learning and teaching and the complex connection between child development to the growth environment. In recent years in Finland, the internal paradigmatic discussions within academic ECE have been both enlightened and critical. The emergence of an academic Early Childhood Education paradigm has been apparent in the discussions of early pedagogy, professional growth, leadership, management and quality and as a definer of pedagogy to support children's learning. The challenge of academic Early Childhood Education is to introduce into the discussion ontological and epistemological issues of early childhood and thereby activate teachers and other professional educators and parents to consider personal and professional conceptions of the child, of learning and of the role of adults in the upbringing of young children from birth to eight years of age.

LEGITIMATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

Early Childhood Education (ECE) as an academic discipline is the most recent newcomer to the family of education sciences in Finland. It has gained an academic legitimacy under the Universities Act and Decree (794/2004) in 2005. One of the most significant changes in the history of Early Childhood Education took place as early as in 1995, when the teaching of Early Childhood Education was transferred to the universities. The so-called "temporary training" of kindergarten teachers which had operated for 20 years in affiliation with the universities set the stage for transferring early education to the legitimate part of the university institution. This move led the way to academic Early Childhood Education and the establishment of ECE as a legitimate discipline in 2005.

Why were the traditional disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology insuffi-

cient or inadequate in legitimising the basis for contemplation, research and teaching of issues of childhood and early education? Firstly, there are major differences in kind between childhood and the early years compared to the other stages of human life. In this paper, 'early childhood' is defined as being the period from birth to eight years of age, when a child would be in the first years of formal school in Finland. During early childhood, development and growth are holistic and changes are easily observed. Accordingly, the study and examination of development and growth during early childhood cannot be broken down into different disciplines, but rather, they require an integrated framework that enables the contemplation of the child holistically.

Secondly, the challenges of education today are greater than before. One of the key challenges facing childhood educators is to be proactive in their education in a society that is defined by globalisation, cultural diversity, financial com-

petition, technological explosion and by changing working conditions that are all influencing peoples' lives, families and children. The ever-increasing distress of children proves that superficial knowledge is no longer enough; special pedagogical expertise is called for in order to respond to the needs of young children. Teachers and researchers require a more profound knowledge to respond to the challenges of the rapidly changing world, a knowledge and understanding of education that is appropriate and relevant to an increasingly multidimensional and international community as reflected in the European Union for instance. These complex growth environments and networks are also reflected in government policy that now appears to promote partnerships between parents and professionals. In Finland, it is easy to see that cooperation in child rearing has assumed centre-stage in early education policies and practices (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet 2005).

THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS A BASIS FOR TRAINING

Today in Finland, Early Childhood Education is an academic discipline, a field of teaching and pedagogy for young children. In keeping with internationally established practice, Early Childhood Education as a field of science and object of research has been set to cover the period from birth to eight years. Definitions of educational systems and practice are always contextualised according to each society's socio-cultural, political, historical, economic, linguistic and religious roots. In Finland the practice of early childhood education is defined as those years preceding elementary education in school. In addition to this early childhood education is deemed to extend to the afternoon activities of young school children aged between 7 to 12 years age.

University studies that focus on learning and teaching are located within Early Childhood Education degrees and thereby promote the notion of early education as a distinctive field of science. The focus of research in the field Early Childhood Education is to analyse and define the growth and upbringing of young children, likewise learning and teaching and the complex connection between child development and the environment. The science of Early Childhood Education as a basis for training to become teachers of young children constructs the professional practice of early educators and is founded

upon research based knowledge as a basis for pedagogical solutions. The current professional expertise of early childhood educators, assumes that university graduates who have completed the specialist early childhood degree programs have the necessary knowledge and skills to exercise a theoretically conceptualized pedagogical practice as teachers of young children.

After transferring early childhood training programs to the university institution the objective set for academic Early Childhood Education became the further analysis and development of the content of this field of study, including ontology, epistemology and argumentation of ECE paradigms. This preliminary work served as the basis for training and teaching in Early Childhood Education, as well as and the development of ECE as its own discipline. The substantial increase in research coincided with the incorporation of Early Childhood Education into the university system. One could say that the overall mission of Early Childhood Education research is to generate new knowledge – both for the practice field for the further development of practice, as well as the discipline's theoretical base, both of which promote the further development of Early Childhood Education as an academic discipline. Public recognition of the importance of early education as a distinctive discipline may be reflected in the speed at which universities in Finland established professorial level appointments in early education (Husa & Kinos 2001). However, despite this enthusiasm of the Finnish universities, professorial appointments by themselves were not sufficient to ensure the legitimacy of "Early Childhood Education" as a university discipline. The former Finnish Minister for Education, Ms. Rask, in a letter dated 2001, declared that there was no need for reforms in educational policy to incorporate Early Childhood Education, and therefore it was not accorded the status of an academic discipline within the university system in Finland at that time.

One obstacle to the emancipation of early education within higher education system in Finland was the old school-based educational discipline. Acceptance of 'newcomers', such as early childhood educators to be incorporated under the scientific banner of 'education' was a difficult process. Such newcomers constituted a threat to the existing academic structures; especially as such a process would require them to undertake internal reappraisals. Although the

development of fields of science is an internal process within the world of science, there is an element of societal perception in the acquisition and legitimizing of status by new fields of academic study. The world of academia is intricately tied to value-bound society and reflects what that society deems to be worthy of further cultivation and/or what disciplines are seen to be worthy of academic status. For example, the notion of a faculty of Information Sciences, a title which may be relatively novel for a faculty, has come to be a place where new fields of information sciences are constructed.

Likewise, in economic sciences the new fields of logistics and insurance have been introduced. The legitimacy of these fields of study has not been questioned due to their role in increasing a nation's financial competitiveness in a globalised world. Yet, fields of studies where women are in the majority, such as Nursing Science and Early Childhood Education, find their claims to being endorsed as a scientific field within the university system have indeed been questioned and condemned. The professor emeritus in sociology, Professor Eskola (2006), for instance, conceded that it was a long time before he could write 'nursing science' without quotation marks until he understood the significance of status as an academic science as an indicator of the values of society.

The development of society inevitably poses new challenges for the renewal of the world of academia. International emphases on the importance of Early Childhood Education and increasing participation in the scholarly discussion on early education have served to secure its position in academia.

THE RESEARCH DISCOURSE OF EARLY EDUCATION

Researchers can shape the conception of childhood, and through this the conception of Early

Childhood Education through their choice of research themes, theories and methods by which they acquire knowledge and by which they analyse reality. In the past, the lives of young children have been researched mostly through the paradigms of developmental psychology. This is now being usurped by researchers of 'childhood studies', whose orientation is largely based on sociology.

In recent years in Finland, the internal paradigm discussions within academic early education have been both enlightened and more critical. In fact, internationally, the emergence of a more academic approach to Early Childhood Education has been apparent in discussions on early pedagogy (Cochran, 1993; Smith, 1996; Woodhead, 1998), professional growth, leadership, management and quality (Ebbeck & Wani-ganayake, 2003, Goelman, Forer, Kershaw, Doherty, Lero & LaGrange, 2006; Hujala, Parrila, Lindberg, Nivala, Tauriainen & Vartiainen, 1999; Walsh & Gardner, 2005) and as a definer of pedagogy to support children's learning (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Hujala, Puroila, Parrila and Nivala, 1998; Vartuli & Rohs, 2006). Woodhead (1998) has criticised the "developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum" discourse, widespread in Western countries, for being based on the view that children's development occurs in the same way everywhere. Woodhead (2004) insists on the new early education paradigm, which better corresponds to the reality of children living in the global world of the 21st century. Woodhead offers two contrasting views about children's rights to development. He describes *individual development discourse* in terms of the three N's (Normal, Natural, Needs) and *context development discourse* in terms of the three C's (Context, Culture, Competency) (Table 1). Essentially, social and cultural reality is conveyed to children. The ontology of "life" in a society shapes the paradigm shared in the society in relation to how

Table 1. An early child development debate (Woodhead 2004)

<i>Major theme</i>	"Ns"	"Cs"
Universality and diversity	Normal Childhood	Contexts for childhood
Influences on development	Natural Processes	Cultural Processes
Status of the child	Needs of children	Competencies of children

children and education are perceived or interpreted. The culturally defined paradigm shapes teachers' views of children and their interactions with children. Woodhead (2004) concludes that the educational philosophy and practices within all institutions producing early education are socially and culturally constructed.

Discourse concerning the view of the children's individual development defines development as a normative, maturational and developmental process. Hence, the developing child is perceived through development needs. Traditionally, however, theories of early childhood education have perceived development as determined from within. Education is thus supported as a necessary pre-requisite to learning. In terms of early childhood pedagogy, this has meant that the educator's role is to determine the child's developmental needs, to assess shortcomings and on this basis to support the child's progress from one developmental level to another. This orientation towards child development has served to introduce "developmentally appropriate" thinking and practice into early childhood pedagogy (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bredekamp & Rosengrant, 1992). Moreover, normality discourse highlights that the developmental perspective has a perception of diversity among children as fairly marginal. It does not take into account children's different experiential backgrounds, learning styles, different ways of playing and communicating, personality development and social awareness. Normality discourse in pedagogy likewise does not account for the different ways that different growth contexts relate to children, nor does it consider the different expectations of growth contexts or the objectives for growth.

Another discourse that defines development as contextually embedded is based on the socio-cultural theory. There child growth and learning are perceived as contextually and culturally constructed processes. It is this Vygotskian view (Vygotsky, 1978) which brought culture-based scrutiny to early education. It emphasised that the child's growth and learning are always culturally produced "processes and products". Rogoff (1990) applied the contextual developmental paradigm to early childhood pedagogy. She stressed that educating children as guided participation is always culturally determined. Woodhead (1998) replaced "developmentally appropriate" with "contextually appropriate". He emphasised universally, children have a fun-

damental need to identify with the culture in which they live. In early education the "contextually appropriate approach" always sees the child as a part of her or his context. Development is scrutinised from the perspective of the emancipating child. Thus the point of departure of education is becoming aware of the connection between the child and the context of growth. The discourse of context perceives the child to be full of opportunities and a competent social actor in co-operation with adults and other children. The child is respected as an individual citizen and her or his emancipation in the community is supported. The child as an active, learning team member and the adult as the partner enabling the child's guided participation, create new challenges to scrutinize Early Childhood Education through the child's growth and learning and through the new teachership emerging from within the field (Hujala, 2002).

EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY EDUCATION

As the principle of lifelong learning has gained momentum, the significance of education and training has increased. The individual's capacity for learning during the first years of life is greater than it will ever be during the rest of one's lifetime. The basis for emotional life and self-esteem evolve significantly through the first years of life and in relation to early human relations. Childhood also includes the right to education and the right to be educated. Early childhood education is, therefore, of value in itself to the child.

Kajanoja (2005; 2006) made calculations about the connection between the success of the national economy of Finland and the conditions of children in this country, drawing to a great extent on the longitudinal research of Pulkkinen and her research group. Kajanoja demonstrated that favourable conditions in childhood are crucial in the formation of human and social capital. Human and social capital in turn account for two thirds of economic growth. Thus, one could say that the conditions of childhood are a significant factor in shaping the economic success of a society. According to Pekonen and Pulkkinen (2002) the cause-and-effect relationship, between the developmental background of childhood and the ability to function as an adult, is so strong that one might even suggest it resembles determinism. In a study that followed children from childhood to adulthood, there

were no participant who had had better than average conditions until the age of eight, who ended up with weaker than average social functioning ability at 36 years age. Conversely, poor initial conditions only seldom led to good social functioning ability. A good childhood includes among other things economic and emotional security and stability, parents spending time in ways that are favourable to children and a good quality of day care and schools. Kajanoja (2005) concludes his study by stating that investing in children and early childhood education is a significant success factor for the national economy.

The importance of early childhood education in child care for the child comes in three ways. Firstly, early childhood education is the keystone of a person's life, growth and learning. Early childhood education in child care is "a childhood project" in which childhood is explored in terms of the child and childhood. Early childhood education adds significant value added to the child's cultivation by offering many kinds of stimuli for growth and learning and a peer group community in which the child can develop his/her own social capital (Pulkkinen, 2002). Lillian Katz, professor *emerita* in early education (Bredenkamp, 2004) describes the added value of professional early childhood education to the home upbringing using the metaphor of dinner parties. While eating, the feeling of hunger disappears regardless of what is eaten and how. People eat at dinner parties but in addition they also gain much more that is beneficial – socialising, joy, getting to know many different kinds of food etc. In childhood services the lives of small children acquire value added in the shape of a wide variety of quality stimuli designed to improve the child's quality of life here and now and to provide as a basis from which to meet the future. The value of early childhood education services is based on a high-quality pedagogy, and at the core of which is the child. The child is viewed as a learner full of opportunities, encouraging the child to have faith in her or himself and in her or his prospects and attempts to address learning difficulties in advance. Education is based on team work in which the parents and professional educators form a co-operation team. Leadership that works is responsible for the quality of implementation in these core tasks (Hujala et al., 1999, Ebbeck et al., 2003).

Secondly, early childhood education in child care has an indirect effect on children by sup-

porting the upbringing at home. Families in the grip of working life are more vulnerable than before, and more is required of them in performing their child rearing responsibilities. Reconciling work and family life also determines the child's everyday life. Family-centred day care assumes holistic responsibility for creating high-quality childhoods and supports the parents in this endeavour as well. Thus the importance of early education in child care is also influential to home upbringing and to the children there. Value is added through child care vis à vis the family. In child care the adult's goal-oriented supervision and the peer group support the child to learn things which may not necessarily have been possible or available in the home environment.

A third advantage of early childhood education is its connection to the school system. Early education is the first and most critical stage of lifelong learning. Neurological research has shown that 90% of brain growth occurs during the first five years of life, and 85% of the nerve paths develop before starting school (nb. at the age of 7 in Finland). Early education has also been shown to be economically and socially beneficial. The long-term economic benefit of early education exceeds the economic costs. In addition, children's participation in early childhood education is a significant promoter of social equality (Kajanoja, 2005; Woodhead, 2004).

The effectiveness of early childhood education both on children's social and cognitive development has been demonstrated. For instance, the results of the PISA Study of 2003 demonstrated the long-term effects of early childhood education on school achievement including the fact that children who had participated in early education performed significantly better in mathematics in secondary school. French research, on the other hand, has demonstrated a connection between participation in early childhood education and experiences of success in the lower school (EI Pan-European Structure Policy on ECE (2006). The connection between early childhood education and school success was highly significant among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus early childhood education is a significant source for enhancing social equality. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that the effectiveness of Early childhood education lies in its ability to promote children's communication and cooperation skills.

Children who have been in early childhood education perform with distinction in school more than others; they have fewer problems at school than others. However, the positive effects are contingent upon early childhood education being of good quality which responds to the needs of individual children and parents (Melhuish, 1993).

THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION LEADING THE WAY

The recent history of early Childhood Education in academia and the training based thereon in the scientific world is both its strength and its weakness. The training of kindergarten teachers in its earlier developmental stages gained many valuable influences from the class-teacher training on which it was modelled. Early education is currently in a position to give something back to the teaching of the earliest classes in school. The Early Childhood Education provides a clear theoretical basis for developing the pedagogy of learning in the earliest classes in school which has traditionally been referred to as the didactics of reception teaching. There is consensus on the need for better co-operation among early childhood education, preschool education and reception education, and in many respects, this cooperation is flourishing (Fors-Pennanen, 2006; Karikoski, 2008).

Conflicts have arisen, however, in joint development work due to the fact that early childhood education and its preschool education and reception education have been viewed more as an administrative trend than as academic and theoretical field. It has not been discussed whether the underlying differences between early childhood education, preschool education and reception education are based on the divisions in the traditions of administrative factions or on the paradigmatic differences emerging from the academic discipline of Early Childhood Education. The challenge of academic Early Childhood Education is to introduce ontological and epistemological issues of early childhood into the discussion and, thereby, activate teachers and other professional educators and parents to consider what conceptions we have of the child, of learning and of the role of adults in the upbringing of young children from birth to eight years of age. Developmental guidelines for these children cannot be found in administrative bases but in research-based knowledge of how chil-

dren learn, grow and develop and how it is possible to promote and support the child's learning. A shared understanding of growth and learning in early childhood based on the academic discipline of Early Childhood Education can deliver a strong foundation for seamless co-operation and hence for the educational continuum from Early Childhood Education to General Education.

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