

quiet time and meditation” Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

7. ”After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation” Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

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Abstract

Modern societies organize ECEC services from their own cultural, social and political contexts, which is also reflected in the steering documents of the country and further in the work of teachers. In many of the countries children’s access to preschool has broadened and the benefits of high quality ECEC have been recognized (Garvis, Phillipson & Harju-Luukkainen, 2018). In Australia and Finland, concepts of play based learning, child initiated play or free play have been highlighted as founding pillars of the early learning environments. In this paper we take a closer look at ECEC environments in Australia and Finland through the lenses of 26 educators. They described in an online questionnaire children’s daily activities as well as indicated the amount of free play related to these activities. The research questions are answered with the help of content analysis and descriptive statistics.

7.1 Introduction

In educational research play has often be defined in multitude ways. For example Sutton-Smith (2001) have explained that we use the concept of play to cover a multitude of activities in childhood including most of the self oriented activities of children. The definition of play can be formed through the opposites: Play is not work, nor is it serious (Sefton-Green et al., 2015). It is intrinsically rewarding to the one whom is involved in the play, but may seem meaningless to those whom are observing it from the outside. Bondioli (2001) states that the problem of the defining play in developmental psychology is that the motive of play is generally overlooked because play is often considered as “a spontaneous and self-motivated activity” (p. 111). In general, play is described to be natural and spontaneous activity of children (Sefton-Green et al., 2015) and Pellegrini and Smith (1988) stated that when young children aged 2 to 3 years old are ‘forced’ to stay in classroom they play afterwards more vigorously.

In ECEC teachers and researchers are unified that there is a set of skills involved in play activities that can be practiced and learned by the children. Therefore, play can be encouraged by teachers who interact with children pedagogically (see Kangas & Brotherus, 2017; Bae, 2009). Further, the Nordic researchers are eager to state that everything that happens in early childhood education itself is playful and based on play (Pramling Samuelson & Asplund Carlson, 2008). Even children’s rights and democracy in education are shown to emerge only in free play activities (Bae, 2009). Play in ECEC is based on the concept in which the child is an active agent of learning. This concept is named as ‘the playing and learning child’, and there is an increased demand for playful education practices for children’s creativity, choices, initiatives and reflections (Pramling Samuelson & Asplund Carlson, 2008).

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Play based learning has been part of the ECEC methodology for decades. For example the Montessori method believes that play creates a space for children to research and explore their environment natural ways and should be supported sensitively while doing this (Wood, 2012). Play based activity has been shown to support children's agency and participation giving them a possibility to be active agents of their learning (see Hilppö, 2016; Kangas, Ojala & Venninen, 2015). On the other hand Bodrova (2008) raises a warning about trend of defining play only through learning. In her research she states that mature and self directed play is found to be the leading activity of children. This kind of play however does not take place in many ECEC settings because the time and space for children to freely get involved in play is reduced (Bodrova, 2008).

Every modern society recognizes the importance of play for children's healthy development. However how play is interpreted in the ECEC context and what type of role it is given in the everyday work varies. This variation is due to cultural, social and the political context of the country in question and we are approaching it through the cross-cultural approach to understand these educational practices and cultures in a certain time and context (Vlasov, 2018) and are aiming to create dialogue between two different ECEC cultures. As stated by Lyra (2010) a multi-voiced dialogical approach creates possibilities that can shape the discussion to become mutual perspectives and joint activity. Steering documents on the field of ECEC in each country gives us a window to interpret how children's play is viewed. Further how days are organized for children in the ECEC contexts gives us another window to view how adults around children emphasize play and interpret these steering documents. Conducting study through a cross-cultural approach allows there should be enough similarities to make comparisons meaningful but also sufficient differences (Mahon et al., 2012). That is why we have selected Finland and Australia, because both countries emphasize play within the curriculum. In this paper we take a closer look at ECEC environments in Australia and Finland through the lenses of 26 educators. These educators described in an online questionnaire, including open and close ended questions, children's daily activities as well as indicated the amount of free play daily. With free play we have described play, where children can freely choose whatever they want to do. From these premises we have formulated two basic research questions: How do educators in Australia and Finland describe the daily activities in ECEC context? And further how much free play time are children given in each country's context according to the teachers? The research questions will be answered with the help of content analysis and simple descriptive statistics.

7.2 Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland

In this chapter we take a closer look at the Australian and Finnish ECEC context as well as the steering documents defining the work in these contexts. Here the definition of play is highlighted in the steering documents connected to the learning environment.

7.2.1 Australian Context and Early Years Learning Framework

Early childhood services in Australia consist of long day care (children aged 6 weeks to 5 years), kindergarten (children aged 3.5-4 years), outside school hours care, family day care, play groups and occasional care. Within Australia, early childhood education and care has undergone major changes since 2009. These have been founded on state and national commitments to improving the provision and quality of early childhood education and care for all Australian children and their families. Since 2009 there has been the introduction of a National Quality Framework that included the development of a National Framework for Australian early childhood services, national quality standards and a specific focus on structural improvement with mandated educator qualifications and staff to child ratios.

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Susanne Garvis & Jonna Kangas (2020). "After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation" Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

The Australian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (DEEWR, 2009) was designed for children from birth to 5 years in early childhood settings across Australia. The document describes the principles, practices and outcomes that support and enhance young children's learning and development. The framework also assists with transitions to school. The Early Years Learning Framework is built on the understanding that the principles of early childhood pedagogy (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 12-13) guide the practice of early childhood educators.

Within the framework play-based learning is mentioned numerous times as a pedagogy educators can implement. Play based learning is described as (DEEWR, 2009, p. 46): a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations.

Central to the concept of play-based learning in the Early Years Learning Framework is intentional teaching, which requires educators to be "deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decision and actions" (p. 46). The intention is that children engage in numerous play-based learning throughout the day. The definition given above also aligns with the focus of belonging, being and becoming which are foundations within the Framework. As such, there is a strong focus on the teacher planning a play environment that fosters learning. The play environment should create secure, safe and challenging spaces that promote play interactions and where learning is fundamental for achieving and maintaining quality early childhood education programs (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010). According to Kennedy & Barblett (2010), play in the framework is associated with physical outcomes, wellbeing outcomes, social and emotional outcomes, and cognitive and creativity outcomes. Thus it is important that educators regularly reflect on their planning, document and practice on how best to support play-based learning within early childhood settings.

Play-based learning in the Framework continues the support for child-initiated free play which has long been a foundation for Australian early childhood education. The dual emphasis however on play-based learning and intentional teaching is a key feature of early childhood reform in Australia (Grieshaber, 2010).

7.2.2 Finnish Context and Early Years Learning Framework

The responsibility for ECEC on the national level lies with the Ministry of Education and Culture further on the Finnish National Agency for Education. The municipalities are responsible in organizing ECEC services as well as ensuring their quality. Further the supervision of these services lies within the municipalities. The ECEC services can be organized by the municipality, private companies or NGOs. The ratio of these vary in different municipalities. In Finland children have a subjective right for ECEC. This is if the parents are working or studying. Those parents who are looking for work can have up to 20 hours of care weekly for their child. In cases where a family or a caregiver needs more support longer care days can be applied. However there are challenges with the subjective right. If the parents choose municipality led service over private one (which is often more expensive), their child might be placed further from home. Because of the fact that municipalities have to provide an ECEC placement for a child, from time to time some more popular areas run out of places and children are placed further away from their home. Further, in comparison to Sweden and other Nordic countries Finnish children participate less in ECEC. According to Terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus (THL) (2017), 243 946 children were enrolled in ECEC in Finland 2016 or approximately 68% of 1 to 6-year-olds. A To be published: [Globalization, Transformation, and Cultures in Early Childhood Education and Care Reconceptualization and Comparison](#) (eds.) by Faas, S., Kasüschke, D., Nitecki, E., Urban, M., Wasmuth, H. 2019

breakdown in numbers of children participating in ECEC in different ages suggest the following, 0.7 % of children under 12 months participated in ECEC, 28% of one-year-old children participated in ECEC, 54 % of two-year olds participated in ECEC and 78 % of 5-year olds were participated in ECEC. The reason for this may relate to the support system structure available for parents with young children in Finland. Parents who want to care for their children under 3 years old at home are eligible for a home care allowance. This allowance is not available when the child attends daycare run by the municipality or a private organizer. In 2012, about 50 % of children under the age of three were cared for at home and can explain the reason why children under 5 years old do not participate in ECEC as actively. A reason for the popularity of this allowance and of concern to the Government is that 90% of recipients of home care allowance are mothers with low levels of education and with several children. The concerns relate to Finnish mothers are at risk of becoming marginalised from the labour market and that may also result in children's marginalisation from public early childhood education (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016, p. 582). In the working team there is at least one teacher with an academic bachelor's degree and one to three adults with lower educational degrees. One team member can be in charge of four children that are younger than the age of three. When the children are older than three years of age, the team member can be in charge of up to eight children. It is a common practice that a working team consists of three staff members and 12-24 children (Kangas, Harju-Luukkainen, Brotherus, Kuusisto & Gearon, 2019).

In Finland, on the highest level ECEC is guided by the and Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018) and Child Welfare Act (417/2007). Further, two steering documents guide the practical work on the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector: (1) Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016a) and (2) the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016b). The first document guides the work for children under the age of six and the latter the work with children during the pre-primary year. These documents were prepared in large collaboration networks with specialist educators from the field and included, ECEC specialists, researchers, trade union representatives as well as administrators.

In the Finnish national core-curriculum for early childhood education and care (2016a) the role of play is strongly emphasized. The curriculum states that play creates joy and pleasure and thus is motivating activity. This should not only be considered as a tool to achieve learning goals. In the main concept Act on Early Childhood Education of learning the core-curriculum adopts play based approach and states:

„The concept of learning is based on the conception about a child as an active agent of her own learning. Play is meaningful for the learning of children. The concept of learning is based on holistic approach and learning happens when children play, explore, moving around, taking care of the learning environment, through self-expression and creativity“ (p. 20).

The Finnish curriculum follows a socio-cultural learning paradigm of learning as social and meaningful activity, where the child is active in meaning making: A child learns through play, but in play child is not learning through cognitive assignments but more through the way of being, living and perceiving the world. The elements that are combine through play are enthusiasm, co-operation, and challenging personal skills and competences (Finnish National core-curriculum of early childhood education and care, 2016a, p. 14).

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Susanne Garvis & Jonna Kangas (2020). "After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation" Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

Further, the Finnish ECEC, is based on an integrated approach supporting children's wellbeing through care, education and teaching, the so-called "educare" model and where learning through play has an important role. Here, children's active engagement is highlighted. According to Kangas, Ojala & Venninen (2015) when implementing any of the Finnish national core-curriculums of ECEC (2016a and 2016b) teachers must ensure that children's initiatives and actions are taken into account. It suggests that teachers support and guide children to become conscious of their own learning. Teachers are advised to listen to children, provide them with opportunities to show initiatives, let children decide on their activities, explore, draw conclusions, and express their thoughts (Kangas, Ojala & Venninen, 2015). The role of play is also emphasized in the context of learning communities as following:

"An operational culture that encourages children to play recognizes the significance of play for a child's well-being and learning. The staff recognizes factors that set limits to play and develop approaches and learning environments that promote playing. The children and staff have the opportunity to experience the joy of doing things together and playing together... Room, time and peaceful settings are given to children's initiatives for playing, experiments and experiences. Playing children and adults are given an opportunity to concentrate on play" (Finnish national core-curriculum of ECEC, 2016a, p. 29).

According to Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlson (2008) play is a free action "free play", where children may choose tools, toys, place and even play mates and thus have full influence in their own and peers actions. This is possible through certain practical rules taking in place in the operational culture in preschools (Aras, 2016; Broström, 2013; Kalliala, 2012). The researchers of early education practices have found controversial issues about play as free action of children. For example studies of Kalliala (2012) show that during free play only powerful and strong children have the chance to make choices while others are following their lead. In addition, studies about participatory learning show that teachers believe that children's participation is achieved when certain part of day is reserved for free play and teachers don't need to support children in social skills and participation during teacher initiated activities (Leinonen ym. 2014; Bae, 2009). Aras (2016) has stated that play is seen a less valuable activity that children can involve themselves while teachers are preparing the class for more important learning activities. In these studies teachers participated in play only when children had disagreements they could not solve themselves (Aras, 2016). Also Kangas and Brotherus (2017) have shown that when teachers need to intervene children's self-initiated play, they often cancelled it.

7.3 Method

Research conducted online has become more important across the globe. This is because people spend much more of their free time online and they are also connected to different social networks and interest groups. According to Laaksonen, Matikainen & Tikka (2013) it is possible to collect data and conduct different types of research using modern social media platforms. In this research we used online platform called Facebook. Research participants were part of a closed social interest group for early childhood education teachers and they were asked to complete our online questionnaire. With the help of the online questionnaire we were able to collect both textual and numeric data. The questionnaire was used so that we would get a pre understanding of some similarities and differences in the ECEC context in Australia and Finland. This in order to have a possibility to go further in the research later and To be published: [Globalization, Transformation, and Cultures in Early Childhood Education and Care Reconceptualization and Comparison](#) (eds.) by Faas, S., Kasüschke, D., Nitecki, E., Urban, M., Wasmuth, H. 2019

to do some interviews. The textual data was analysed with the help of content analysis. Content analysis examines patterns and structures from textual data. It selects the key features that researchers want to pay attention to, develop categories and aggregates them into perceptual constructs in order to grasp the meaning (Gray & Densten, 1998). Descriptive statistics were used in order to give an overview of the numeric data. Because of the small sample size no further statistical analyses were done. The advantage with a online questionnaire is to quickly gather material and to get an overview of the topic at hand. However, the disadvantage is that it is sometimes difficult to get answers in social networks or interest groups and further that the answers might not be as rich in information as an interview would be.

7.4. Data

The data consists of preschool teacher's descriptions of the days in preschool setting collected during fall 2018 online. In all 10 teachers answered from Finland and 16 from Australia to the questionnaire, which consisted of both open ended and closed questions. As background variables we asked about the teachers work experience. In Finland 37,5 % of the teachers had worked for 1-5-years, 25 % 6-10 years and 37,5 % for more than 10 years. Similarly, in Australia 18,8 % had worked for 1-5-years, 31,3 % 6-10-years and 50 % more than 10 years. Therefore, in the Australian group the teachers had a bit more experience than in the Finnish group. Also in the Australian data 18,8 % of teachers worked on private sector 68,8 % on a governmental or municipal sector and 12,5 % on something else. In Finland only one of the teachers worked on municipal sector. Most of the teachers in the Finnish group worked with 3-5-year old children as well as in Australia. Of the teachers in Finland 12,5 % worked with 3-5-year old children, 62,5 % with 6-7-year old children and 25 % with an mixed age group. In Australia 87,5 % worked with 3-5-year olds and 12,5 % with mixed age group. There were also differences in the educational background of the teachers, for the benefit of the Finnish sample. In Finland 37,5 % had a master's degree 50 % bachelors and 12,5 % post-secondary non-tertiary education. In Australia 12,5 % had a master's degree, 87,5 % a bachelor's. In the Australian data 6,3 % of the preschools had a specific pedagogical focus, in Finland none of them.

7.5 Results

7.5.1 How much free play time are children given in each country's context according to the educators?

The first question related to how much time was devoted to free play over a day as reported by the teachers. The variance in free playtime in Finland was between 40-70% of the day, with a mean of 53.5% of the day. Australia was higher with free play having a variance of 46-96% of the day, with a mean of 74.5%. This suggests that there could be more free play in the Australian preschool, however it is unclear if both cultures work from the same definition of free play.

7.5.2 How do educators in Australia and Finland describe their regular daily activities?

In both of the countries the descriptions of the teachers were time based, so that the day was divided into different blocks of activities which lasted for some amount of hours or minutes. Also the day was seen as something that started from the morning and ended when it was time to close. However, there are many children whose parents work in shifts or children that are unable to attend preschool for some reasons during "regular" hours. These children did not have a place in the daily descriptions. In general the Finnish descriptions of the daily activities were much shorter compared to the Australian ones and did not have as much

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Susanne Garvis & Jonna Kangas (2020). "After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation" Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

detailed descriptions. This might have to do with the linguistic challenges, when the teachers in Finland usually don't use English as their primary language of communication.

In the Finnish example below there are not that many possibilities for children's own activities and free play during a regular day. Further, most of the activities during the day are teacher-led and there is a clear focus on learning through themes. Also children's own interests have a designated place, they are discussed during circle time. Teacher number 2 from Finland described their regular daily activities as following (note, the text is edited to make it more readable):

"The children come to preschool between 07-09 am. The activities start at 9 with circle time, that varies a lot in length depending on what we are doing that day. Circle time is for the children, we discuss together and the teachers aim to get the children's voices, thoughts and interests about the subject at our hands. Circle can be between 20 min up to 1 hour. Then approximately 1,5-2 hours is spent performing the tasks that have been planned and discussed at circle time, after lunch the children listen to a story, that also varies from 20 min up to 50 min depending on the children. The books we read are planned to enhance and broaden the focus of the themes we work with, we always engage the children to part take in discussions about the story and how it correlates with what we have learned. Sometimes the children bring their own books, which they get to present and then we read them together. After this, at approximately 1pm the free play starts, free play doesn't mean that the teachers step out altogether, they are involved when we need or want them to participate."

Similarly, teacher number 6 from Finland described their daily activities. However, here the free play was described as one of the activities for the day having its own time block. In total in this preschool free play time was offered twice per day, according to the teacher. There was also a designated time for learning related activities.

"We open at 7. Free play until breakfast. Then we go out for 45 minutes. Preschool activities for about 90 min. Lunch 30 min. Storytelling / rest for about 30 min. Free play for an hour. Outdoor activities for 1 h. Snack time for 30 min. Free play for 75 min. Outdoor activities for 1 h. We close at 17."

In the Australian examples, free play was much more in focus in the descriptions, where the teachers appeared to have less involvement than in Finland. Also the focus of the description was on the children and not on what the teacher was doing at certain points of the day.

One Australian teacher (number 22) described the daily activities as:

"Children start their day outside (rain, hail or shine!) Parents and siblings are encouraged to stay and play. We then go inside and offer a breakfast buffet (where children make their own food provided by a local charity) and we spend the next hour inside, children playing with intentionally planned, adult guided learning (from targets set in individual plans). After another hour, the doors and open and children can choose to play inside or outside (and have their snack when they want) We stop for lunch altogether; children prepare the area (usually outside on mats) This time is planned for conversation and social learning. After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation (children have their own cushions) Then we have a planned intentional teaching time outside (usually focussed around

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gross motor development) The children pack up and then we end the day with quiet activities and families are invited to come and play at the end of each session. One whole group and one small group time is planned and intentional each session.”

In most of the responses from Australian teachers, the blending of indoor and outdoor activities appeared a common characteristic of free play One teacher commented (Australian teacher number 12).

”Start the day on the mat and have a gathering and welcome which lasts about 15mins. The children then participate in an indoor-outdoor program throughout the morning. The children can choose where they play and with what they play from things out in play spaces. They can ask for other and different resources and/or these are offered to extend on what the children are working on. There is about 3 hours of this time and the children can access their morning tea and have it at any time during this 3 hours. The children then all gather again for another group time which is an active one that normally lasts about 30 mins and we then eat lunch together at 3 tables. The children all then have a short relaxation period of about 15-20mins followed by a short group time if they are seeming responsive. Then back to indoor-outdoor play for about another 2.5-3hours. The children all gather together during this time for a shared fruit platter. The children are in attendance for 7.5hours, twice per week. In terms of how long the children spend at the activities during indoor-outdoor play; it varies from child to child but often it is for long periods, sometimes hours.”

The child’s choice was another common theme that appeared in many of the comments from Australian teachers. Children were able to choose the activities they would like to undertake as well as where they would like to undertake the activity (inside or outside). Australian teacher (number 17) described the daily activities as following:

”When the children arrive they have time inside so that everyone can settle in and have some breakfast if they would like. Children get to choose their own activities and quite often their parents will stay and interact for a while before they leave. This if for an hour. We then stop and have morning meeting and talk about importnat things happening that day, have a big drink and have some adult led discussions. 20-30 minutes. After this we stop for snack as a group we sit on picnic rungs and eat. After this we open up for our indoor/outdoor program. This goes for around 2 hours and majority of children will spend the first hour outside and then start moving between the indoor/outdoor space. the last hour of the day is lunch on the tables and then quite activites for the left over time 20-30 minutes.”

In the comments above, space is also made for parents to be involved and stay in free play at the start of the day. Parental involvement is an important concept in Australian early childhood education and allow connections between the home and early childhood education environment. In the Finnish data we could not find any comments on parents or parental collaboration.

7.6 Conclusion

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Susanne Garvis & Jonna Kangas (2020). "After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation" Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

Children's self-initiated play is defined as important in the steering documents both in Australia and in Finland. However, in Finnish steering documents this type of activity is described in great detail. According to the teachers in Finland there was very little room for free play for children during or between the daily activities. Much of the activities were teacher led. Also in Finland teachers described that the children had less free time to play compared to Australia. In Finland the teachers described that 53,5 % of the day included free play time and similarly in Australia the mean was around 74,5 %. These differences might be due to different cultural definition of children's free play.

The Australian context shows times of intentional teaching and free play throughout the early childhood programming. The concept of play-based learning appears to be strongly implemented from the framework into practice, which may explain why the teachers had a higher percentage of play throughout the day and also why play-based learning was a strong focus in their descriptions. Concepts around children's agency and choice in play also became evident in the teachers comments and pointed towards key difference perhaps around child development and the role of play in children's learning.

In Finland the National core curriculums for ECEC (2016a and 2016b) state that the learning environment should be dynamic and developing as well as promoting children's participation. However in previous research the physical environment as well as the social and mental environment including rules, atmosphere and interaction are found to be rather permanent and non-developing (See Kangas & Brotherus, 2017; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). For example Kangas and Brotherus (2017) found that the physical environment remains the same even the teachers are aware of children's development and new skills. Thus the learning environment was not considered essential for supporting children to develop their self-regulation and resilience skills. The researchers however found some evidence that in rare situations the physical learning environment were transformed by teachers and children to represent something new (like a shop, space craft etc.). Also Leinonen and Venninen (2012) showed that even staff considered children's participation and initiatives important in everyday interaction, children don't have changes to make changes to their physical or social environment (including rules).

Also daily activities, or the path of time and space is often considered to be permanent and nonflexible in Finnish ECEC. Previously Brotherus (2004) and later Kangas and Brotherus (2017) have shown that during ten years the concept of daily schedule is tight and adult led, and children won't have opportunities to participate or influence to the designing of it even though the national curriculums (2016a and 2016b) have went through a grand reformation and the learning approach have been transformed from constructive to more socio-cultural direction (see Kangas et al., 2019; Kumpulainen, 2018).

In the Australian context, children could choose to move from the inside space to the outside space freely at various points throughout the day. Time and space was perhaps more fluid when compared to the Finnish ECEC. Teachers led some activities while children also led other activities.

This small study has highlighted the importance of understanding culture of societies to understand early childhood education. As such, we postulate five key ideas for researchers to think about when discussing play in international contexts:

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- The descriptions of play, free play and play-based learning may differ across countries because of variation in culture and context, as well as steering documents.
- The planning of play in early childhood education activities over a day varies in countries, based on cultural understandings and steering documents.
- The role of the teacher and child in play may also differ. Some countries may advocate for more teacher involvement, while other countries may advocate for more child choice.
- Space and time are important considerations around play. Some countries may have fluid understandings around the role of space and time in play (such as Australia), while other countries may be more rigid (such as Finland).
- The role of parents in play in early childhood education may also differ. Some countries welcome parents to stay and enjoy activities with their child, while other countries don't encourage parents to get involved in play.

Overall, we can reflect that many of the differences between the two contexts are based on cultural understandings that have developed from understanding steering documents as well as traditions in early childhood education practices. More research is needed in this area with larger comparisons across countries to explore differences. While play is firmly embedded within early childhood pedagogy and a tool for child learning, what it looks like and how it is implemented varies across contexts. Thus, we urge academic communities to return to beginning conversations of “What is play?”.

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Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Susanne Garvis & Jonna Kangas (2020). "After lunch we offer quiet time and meditation" Early Learning Environments in Australia and Finland Through the Lenses of Educators

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