

The Paradox of Documentation in Early Childhood Special Education in Finland and Norway: Exploring Discursive Tensions in the Public Debate

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ABSTRACT

A child's right to special educational support is often ensured through documentation, which, as an institutional practice, is consequential. We explore documentation as a policy solution in Finnish and Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems, which have both been undergoing changes as the realization of special educational support is found to be insufficient. We investigate discursive tensions in the public debate regarding documentation and illustrate tensions between documentation as 1) a way of safeguarding a child's right vs. a barrier to support, 2) assessments requiring distance from vs. closeness to the child, and 3) decisions requiring pedagogical vs. administrative positions.

Keywords: *documentation, special educational support, early childhood education and care (ECEC), policy solution*

1. Introduction

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the Nordic countries is entrenched in documentation practices. The extent of documentation is growing in all of the Nordic countries (see, e.g., Alasuutari et al., 2014; Cameron et al., 2018;

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Takala et al., 2015). Documentation as an institutional activity has increased in all educational institutions, reflecting an international trend of increasing assessment (Alasuutari et al., 2014). The Nordic and other Western countries are highly documentarized societies in which assessment and documentation make it possible to evaluate, inspect, and self-assess the functions of educational institutions (Vallberg Roth, 2014).

ECEC in the Nordic countries shares common values, as well as global influences and increasing regulation of documentation and assessment (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022; Vallberg Roth, 2014). ECEC in the Nordic countries is known to adhere to a “Nordic model,” often defined in opposition to other approaches (specifically the Anglo-Saxon perspective; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). The Nordic model is characterized by a holistic approach to children’s learning and development, an emphasis of learning environments, and systemic approaches to evaluation and assessment. At the same time, it coexists with an increasing emphasis on documentation and assessment in education (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Despite its prevalence, the centrality of documentation is a new feature of ECEC in the Nordic countries (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Values highlighted in the Nordic model (such as democracy, an emphasis on play, and an absence of child assessment as a measure of quality) are not easily combined with governance through documentation and assessment. As the Nordic educational systems are strongly decentralized, municipalities play a major role in governing local ECEC institutions, leading to local variations in evaluation and documentation practices (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022).

Documentation is of special importance when it comes to early childhood special education, as it is thought to safeguard a child’s right to special educational support¹, raise the quality of ECEC, and create obligations for professionals (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2018). Support documentation is a well-studied theme in Nordic educational research (Vallberg Roth, 2017). Although documentation is often considered important (e.g., Takala et al., 2015), it is a demanding task for teachers and other professionals (Erixon & Erixon Arreman, 2017). Teachers often find documentation requirements difficult and time-consuming (Kovanen, 2002). The time used for documentation is not always considered well spent, as it leaves less time for actual teaching (Hirsh, 2014). Previous studies have shown that the influence of children and/or parents on special education documentation is limited (Asp-Onsjö, 2012; Barneombudet, 2017; Heiskanen, Alasuutari et al., 2021; Tveitnes, 2018). Moreover, the content of documentation has been found to focus on the child as a problem rather than on pedagogical solutions (e.g., Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2013; Heiskanen et al., 2018). Despite these findings, documentation is often considered necessary in order to safeguard the child’s right to support and is offered as a solution to issues with support.

1 In this article, special educational support refers to special educational assistance in the Norwegian system and to intensified and special support in the Finnish system.

Discussions on the implementation and extent of documentation are evident in recent public discourse on special educational support in ECEC in Finland and Norway. Both countries' ECEC systems have recently been under reform to address similar challenges. After expert reports in both countries revealed flaws in the realization of special educational support, changes to documentation practices were recommended. In Finland, it was recommended that administrative decisions be implemented, while in Norway, it was recommended that decisions for children with special needs be removed. These developmental paths arose almost simultaneously and provoked considerable discussion in both countries.

The outset of this study is that although there seems to be a tendency to develop documentation practices in ECEC systems that can be understood as a shared Nordic policy window (Kingdon, 2003) for change, their development does not have a uniform Nordic dimension. This seemingly univocal topical Nordic debate has country-specific priorities and nuances. In this study, we analyzed responses provided in public consultation rounds regarding documentation as a policy solution to issues in early childhood special education. Our aim was to reveal some of the tensions and negotiations regarding the role and the nature of documentation in these public debates. We addressed the following research question: *What kinds of discursive tensions characterize the public debate on documentation in early childhood special education in Finland and Norway?*

2. Theoretical Framework

Our starting point for investigating the public debate in Finland and Norway was the idea of a shared Nordic policy window for developing early childhood special education in the two countries. We adopted the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003) to conceptualize the documentation-related policy proposals in Finland and Norway as policy solutions to issues in early childhood special education. Policymaking related to the development of ECEC systems is a complex process that includes multiple influential actors and processes (Kingdon, 2003). Kingdon (2003) conceptualizes three streams – politics, problem, and policy – to illustrate three conditions for political change: *politics* with a focus on policymaking, *problems* as an identified situation that needs to be changed, and *policy* as a solution to the problem. When these streams are united in a way that combines political objectives, the problems identified, and the solutions offered to overcome them, a *policy window* (Kingdon, 2003) that enables change is created.

The process of developing a policy window to change documentation practices in Finland and Norway is founded on the development of their early childhood special educational systems. The Norwegian system has a long history of children's legal right to special educational assistance, with written expert assessments conducted by the municipal educational–psychological service (EPS). However, in 2018, a national expert report (Nordahl et al., 2018) made recommendations that entailed changes to the current legislation and to simplify documentation. In the Finnish ECEC system,

legislative requirements for child support were in many respects lacking before 2022, and practices varied (e.g., Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017; Heiskanen, Neitola et al., 2021; Vainikainen et al., 2018). To standardize practices, in 2021, a governmental proposal (Government of Finland, 2021) to renew the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 480/2018) recommended establishing children's legislative right to support, including the requirement to draft an administrative decision document.

In this study, we investigated how these documentation policies were discussed in public debates. The need to investigate documentation as a policy solution is grounded in the idea of the consequentiality of documentation. While a document records, for example, issues with a child's support, it also potentially affects and changes the reality that it describes (Ferraris, 2013). Consequently, we see documentation as not merely an educational tool, but as an institutional actor possessing power (Ferraris, 2013; see also Alasuutari, 2015). This consequentiality is also a central reason for adding documentation to safeguard the right to early childhood special education. Documentation makes recorded matters permanent and assessable, creates and deletes children's, parents', and professionals' rights and obligations, and creates institutional entities, such as the need for special educational support (see also Ferraris, 2013). However, the consequences of documentation are not automatically positive. Documentation as a process is not neutral, harmless, or innocent (Cooren, 2004; Dahlberg et al., 2007). It can also produce unexpected or negative consequences that are no longer completely under the registrar's control after the documents have been prepared. Negotiations on the role of documentation in current Nordic discourses illustrate that, though widely implemented, documentation is not a straightforward issue.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Contexts

3.1.1 Finland

Finnish ECEC is based on a pedagogical assessment of a child's need for support and the evaluation of the effectiveness of this support (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Support in ECEC requires a decision-making process in which both ECEC and special education teachers, as well as children's guardians, play a central role (Early Childhood Education 540/2018). However, legislative requirements for child support were lacking before 2022. Consequently, practices varied greatly, which endangered children's equal right to support (Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017; Heiskanen, Neitola et al., 2021; Vainikainen et al., 2018). Decision-making practices and the need for administrative, legally binding decision documentation for support have been one of the central aspects of the debate.

The policy window for the recent reform in Finnish ECEC was opened by a governmental program published in 2019 that announced the reform of support in ECEC. Previous national reports had already suggested that a model of general, intensified, and special support with administrative decision documentation could also

be implemented in ECEC (Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017; Vainikainen et al., 2018; see also Heiskanen, Neitola et al., 2021). After the work of the expert group (see Alila et al., 2022) and a new national study (Heiskanen, Neitola et al., 2021), in 2021, the policy solution, namely the government's proposal (Government of Finland, 2021) to renew the Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018), was published. This consisted of three focal proposals to develop support-related documentation in ECEC:

The chapter will provide for a child's right to support in early childhood education and care, the support to be provided, and the implementation of the support, as well as the assessment of the need for support, the adoption of an administrative decision, and an appeal. The proposals will create a stronger continuum of support for pre-primary and primary education. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021)

The government's proposal was accepted during parliamentary proceedings in December 2021. During the parliamentary proceedings, the administrative decision-making obligation was extended further from the description in the proposal. In current Finnish practice, an administrative decision on support for a child is made for both intensified and special support, and in certain situations also when the child receives general support. The model was implemented on August 1, 2022. This chain of documentation is presented in Table 1 for comparison with the corresponding system in Norway.

Table 1: Documentation processes in Finnish and Norwegian ECEC systems

STEP OF THE PROCESS	FINLAND (FROM AUGUST 2022)	NORWAY
Stage 1: Referral is sent to investigate needs		A referral is sent to EPS. Guardians' consent is needed. Assessment is funded on the report of ECEC and tests.
Stage 2: Needs are identified, planning starts	Teachers* conduct the assessment (needs, effectiveness of support) with guardians and, if needed, an interdisciplinary team. Assessment is documented into an ECEC plan.	Expert assessment and recommendations for support are carried out by EPS.
Stage 3: Administrative decision is made	Municipality makes a decision on support measures. Guardians and the child are heard. Guardians can appeal.	Municipality or county municipality makes a decision on special educational assistance, based on the expert assessment. Guardians can appeal.
Stage 4: Child support is planned	ECEC teacher drafts a child's ECEC plan, including support measures.	ECEC can draft an individual education plan (not mandatory).
Stage 5: Child support is assessed and developed	Teachers* conduct an annual assessment of the effectiveness of support with guardians and document it into an ECEC plan.	ECEC conducts an annual overview of the special educational assistance and assessment of child's development.

*Teachers refer to both ECEC teachers and early childhood special education teachers, who work in close collaboration.

3.1.2 Norway

The Norwegian special education system is based on a child's individual right to special educational assistance (Kindergarten Act §31, 2018). The EPS is the expert authority in cases related to special educational assistance. With the consent of a child's guardians, the EPS conducts an expert assessment before a decision is made and documented (Kindergarten Act §33, 34). The assessment determines whether the child needs special educational assistance, sets goals, and determines the type of assistance needed, including the scope and competence required of those who will provide it (Kindergarten Act §34). The chain of documentation before receiving special educational support includes a referral to the EPS, an expert assessment by the EPS, and a decision by the municipality (see Table 1).

Norway's special educational system has come under sharp criticism over exclusionary practices, a lack of adequate support and competent personnel, and delayed support initiatives (Barneombudet, 2017; Nordahl et al., 2018; Royal Ministry of Knowledge, 2019–2020). Among other things, the latest expert report (Nordahl et al., 2018) pointed out that the EPS spent a considerable amount of time and resources on expert assessments, delaying children's support and requiring competent special education professionals to write documents instead of supporting children. As Nordahl et al. (2018, p. 216, authors' translation) put it, "It is a paradox that personnel with special educational competence write expert assessments, while children and youth often meet assistants."

The Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018) emphasized that legislation and expert assessments contributed to upholding an individual perspective as a prerequisite for special educational support while paying little attention to pedagogical practices and the educational environment. As a policy solution, the report made several recommendations for changing the special education system. The most controversial point was the suggestion of removing the individual right to special educational support and related documentation. Nordahl et al. (2018) argued that the general policy on support for all children rendered the individual right to special educational support redundant and even created a barrier to inclusion and support.

The recommendation to remove the individual right to special educational support (Nordahl et al., 2018) was not pursued in the subsequent white paper (Royal Ministry of Knowledge, 2019–2020). Instead, other measures were implemented, such as large-scale initiatives to increase competence and inclusion in special education so that more children could receive support without expert assessments and decisions.

3.2 Research Data

We investigated statements from public consultation rounds in the two countries. Regarding Finland, we investigated the hearing statements on the government's proposal to change the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Government of Finland, 2021). In Norway's case, we examined the hearing statements on the Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018). In both countries, organizations, stakeholders, and individuals participated in the public consultations.

The analyzed material included two documents (one Finnish and one Norwegian) proposing policy changes and 421 hearing statements. The data from Norway consisted of the Nordahl report and 352 hearing responses. The Nordahl report is a 287-page document published in 2018. It includes a review of ECEC, in primary and secondary school, and state and local support systems, an analysis of the system, and recommendations for a renewed pedagogical system. It was written by an expert committee appointed by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and led by Professor Thomas Nordahl. The hearing responses were collected and made available to the public online (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018). They include responses from departments, directorates, county governors, county municipalities, municipalities, other public institutions, universities and other higher education institutions, schools, ECEC institutions, teachers/school employees, and private persons.

The Finnish data included the Finnish government's proposal concerning the ECEC Act (148/2021 vp) and 69 hearing responses provided in a public consultation round. The government's proposal includes a justification section (state of child support in Finland and other Nordic countries, justifications for reform, and evaluation of consequences and costs) and the law articles to be amended. The proposal was subjected to an open consultation round for stakeholders and the general public from May 4 to June 11, 2021. The hearing responses (from universities and other higher education institutions, municipalities, regional state administrative agencies, ministries, disability and other organizations and associations, trade unions, ECEC providers, and private persons) were collected and made available to the public online (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

3.3 Analysis

In the first stage of the analysis, we analyzed the Finnish and Norwegian data sets separately. This phase consisted of reading the data and selecting parts of the documents, including writings about documentation practices. Based on our tentative observations, we decided to employ the concept of discourse to continue the analysis. In this study, we defined discourse as a "frame of reference" or "rules" that govern what is acceptable and meaningful to say about a topic (Burr, 2003; Hall, 2001). There are numerous discourses on any topic, each constructing it in different ways. We saw statements and writings as discursive practices that produce broader discourses. They can be said to belong to the same discourse "to the extent that they are painting the same general picture of the object in question" (Burr, 2003, p. 66).

Both authors conducted an initial categorization of the predominant discourses and discussed it in two validation meetings (Given, 2008). Three main discourses were identified, and the data were coded into these three discourse categories. The first author coded the Finnish data using ATLAS.ti 9 software, and the second author coded the Norwegian data using NVivo software. The coding was confirmed in a third validation meeting.

Subsequently, we focused on the tensions emerging from each of the three main discourses and compared the Finnish and Norwegian discourses. We discussed categorizing the data segments into particular discourse categories, describing in detail the dimensions and discussion priorities within the discourses. As our analytical approach was inductive, during this phase, we also delimited and deepened the focus of the analysis. For example, we discussed exactly what would be included in our delimitation of documentation.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Key factors that increase research reliability are regular and detailed validation meetings (Given, 2008), which enable triangulation (Patton, 2015) in the analysis. Such detailed and regular validation meetings were particularly important, as due to language barriers, we were unable to familiarize ourselves with each other's data entirely. To increase trustworthiness, we translated selected excerpts (some dozens of quotes) representative of the dimensions of the discourses in the two countries into English. This enabled us to avoid a single researcher's subjective interpretation (Patton, 2015). Moreover, the first author played a significant role in the Finnish developments, having acted as a principal investigator in a project commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture on the challenges in child support in Finland (see Heiskanen, Neitola et al., 2021 for the description). To ensure objectivity, the regular validation meetings helped us consciously distance ourselves from the topic and related preconceptions, as well as critically reflect our perspectives in relation to the topic.

The challenge in our study was to sufficiently isolate the phenomena under investigation to gain a thorough understanding while not losing sight of the diverse contexts in which documentation was discussed or the subjective nature of our observations (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014, pp. 669–670). As public debates are multidimensional, we needed to simplify the illustration of the discourses to identify the key elements of the debate in each country. We are not providing an all-encompassing description of the debates in the two countries but highlight their emphases, including their differences and similarities.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

We followed the ethical principles of research in Finland and Norway throughout the study. The data were publicly available; consequently, neither permission nor consent was required. However, to ensure that we used the data and reported the findings in a way that respected the anonymity of the people involved, our methodological choices did not focus on the differences between the writings as such, but on the discourses that they represented. As discourses represent broader cultural ways of using language, the results do not represent a particular writer's viewpoint. To ensure the writers' anonymity, we selected excerpts that were representative of multiple authors. We also modified the excerpts so that the writers would not be mentioned or portrayed in a negative light.

4. Results

4.1 Documentation as a Way of Ensuring Individual Rights vs. a Barrier to Support

A central tension in the discourses in both countries was related to negotiations on documentation as a way of ensuring individual rights, as opposed to documentation as a barrier to support. The bureaucratic nature of documentation was often highlighted as a major barrier to support. In Finnish discussions, the focal point was that the increased workload due to the new responsibilities might hinder the reform's success and even endanger child support. It was often stated that the bureaucratic nature of administrative decisions and documentation jeopardized the immediate availability of support. This was similar to one of the Nordahl report's (Nordahl et al., 2018) key arguments for removing the individual right to support. The Norwegian debate highlighted the time-consuming bureaucracy of referrals and the expert assessment documentation needed before a decision was made. At the same time, it was argued that removing expert assessments would increase the workload of ECEC teachers by requiring *them* to document children's needs more thoroughly.

The Finnish debate also highlighted *the need to establish the right* to ensure support for children. This was deemed important to ensure that the system would treat everyone equally and create a continuum from ECEC to basic education. In this respect, administrative decision-making was considered a good solution. The same arguments appeared in the Norwegian debate. The Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018) argued that many children did not receive the support that they needed because of the documentation and bureaucracy ensuing from the establishment of the legal right to support. The Norwegian debate revolved around whether *the legal right was a barrier to support*, whether it needed to be strengthened, or whether the issue lay not in the legislation but in practice.

We basically agree that all children are covered by current legislation, [but] at the same time, we are concerned about how it will work in practice. Experience shows that rights are an important prerequisite for children with special arrangements to receive the necessary help and support. (Norway)

In the Finnish discussions, there were contradictory arguments about the need for *more detailed documentation to ensure a child's right to support*.

Another dimension in the legal rights discourse was *guardians' right to appeal a decision*. In the Finnish debate, an important argument for establishing the legal right to special education was related to the administrative decision documents that made it possible for guardians to appeal if support was not provided.

The child and guardians will benefit substantially from the administrative decision (documentation), as it will record the forms of support to be provided and the support services to which the child is entitled. This will ensure that if rights are unfulfilled in accordance with the decision, the guardians can

request rectification and appeal. The guardians' position will also be strengthened by the fact that before deciding, the ECEC provider should consult the child's guardians. (Finland)

Thus, the administrative decision documents were thought to strengthen the guardians' position in terms of both offering the possibility to appeal if rights were unfulfilled and establishing that the ECEC provider should consult guardians before deciding. Similar arguments were prevalent in the Norwegian debate, emphasizing the need to maintain guardians' rights to appeal decisions or their fulfillment. However, in the Norwegian system, decisions are based on expert assessment documents (Kindergarten Act §35). Although guardians must provide consent before an expert assessment and decision, the expert assessment documents can, in principle, not be appealed. This was pointed out by respondents.

4.2 Documentation as Assessments Requiring Distance from vs. Closeness to the Child

A second tension was related to negotiations on documentation as an assessment practice that required either distance from or closeness to the child. One of the main criticisms in the Norwegian Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018) was directed at the system of expert assessments. In the debate, respondents agreed that the expert assessment documents were often of poor quality. Nevertheless, central to the discussions was the need for external, independent experts to assess children's needs and to produce documents that established the basis for children's right to receive special support in ECEC.

The fact that Norway has a statutory right for children and youth to an educational–psychological examination and an expert assessment by a statutory body that is professionally and financially independent before a decision is made on special measures and arrangements is considered by us a strength rather than a weakness because neither ECEC nor schools can take random measures without having examined what the individual child or youth is struggling with and thus needs. (Norway)

Thus, the need for expert assessments was tied to the notion that children must be thoroughly examined by external experts to implement effective support measures. As the extract above shows, there was a concern that without this, measures would be random and ineffective. The Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018), on the other hand, critically questioned the power and authority of professional experts, such as the EPS, and suggested that teachers should be able to make assessments of children in most cases and seek advice from and collaboration with other professionals when needed.

This was somewhat similar to the system proposed in Finland. Although, unlike the Norwegian system, the Finnish system does not include expert assessment documentation, a focal point in the Finnish data was the emphasis on expertise coming from the child's proximity (particularly ECEC professionals and parents). It was often

stated that teachers' pedagogical expertise and knowledge of the children should be trusted as a basis for decision-making, along with the viewpoints of the parents, who know the children best. Although interdisciplinary assessments (e.g., including a child psychologist, therapist, or doctor) were also deemed important, they were rarely considered a prerequisite for a decision.

The provision of support for a child's development and learning must be needs-based, and it must be based on a pedagogical assessment of the need for support. In addition, the provision of support should not be diagnosis- or referral-oriented, and this should be more clearly reflected in the proposal's explanatory statement. (Finland)

Regarding the establishment of a legal right and administrative decision documentation, the Finnish debate revolved around concerns about the extent to which teachers' pedagogical competence was sufficient for assessment and decision-making. This bears similarities to the Norwegian debate. However, the debates differed in that the need for external and independent expertise was emphasized in the Norwegian discussions, which implied that ECEC providers' competence alone was not considered sufficient.

The professional environment that exists within the EPS is important, and the EPS should have an "outsider perspective" for the best of children and youth. (Norway)

In the Norwegian debate, the outsider perspective was linked, among other things, to the EPS as a body of external experts capable of assessing the ECEC's environment. There was tension between the need for an outsider perspective and for assessment documents to be based on expertise close to ECEC and the child. In the Finnish discussions concerning the identification and assessment of children's needs, on the other hand, the issue of an outsider perspective was not apparent. Conversely, the role of early childhood special education teachers was a focal point, bringing an outsider perspective to Finnish documentation practices as well. However, the debates in both countries concerned the need for the official decision documents to be produced.

4.3 Documentation as Decisions Requiring Pedagogical vs. Administrative Positions

In both countries, municipalities (and county municipalities in Norway) are responsible for the documentation of administrative decisions. In the Finnish debates, the right of the child and guardians to be involved in decision-making was also highlighted. In Norway, this issue was primarily discussed in relation to expert assessments. The decision documents, however, could also be seen as resource administrators in terms of both providing and expending resources. A central dimension of the Norwegian debate was the additional financial resources needed after a decision was made. In Finland, extra resources are not required after a decision is made, but local resources

are reallocated to accommodate it. The Nordahl report (Nordahl et al., 2018) pointed out that the Norwegian system offered institutions incentives to provide children with special educational support. However, the debate was concerned with the administration of financial resources if the system of expert assessments as the basis for decisions was abolished.

Not having an independent unbiased service [the EPS] to assess children's abilities, needs, rights, and measures is possibly a case of "letting the fox guard the henhouse". (Norway)

Somewhat similarly, the Finnish debate also questioned the right to decide on resources. It was quite univocally stated that despite the importance of trusting teachers' pedagogical knowledge in making support-related decisions, no one without a leadership position should decide on child support resources.

If the child's own teacher is responsible for deciding on intensified support, the need for intensified support can increase considerably. If intensified support requires a reduction in the group size or an assistant, then who will decide on the allocation of resources? (Finland)

In both countries, the debates revealed tensions related to who should have the authority to decide on resources. However, the Finnish debate was more concerned about leaving the decision to individual teachers, while the Norwegian debate also questioned the authority of leaders of educational institutions and municipalities to make these decisions without external recommendations from the EPS.

5. Discussion

In this study, we investigated discursive tensions in the public debates on documentation in early childhood special education in two Nordic countries, namely Finland and Norway. We investigated policy solutions (Kingdon, 2003) to issues related to the documentation of child support in ECEC. By adopting concepts of the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), we considered similar developments in Norway and Finland as a potential Nordic policy window for change. The results illustrate how debates in both countries problematize and negotiate discursive tensions regarding documentation as policy solution (Kingdon, 2003).

The first discourse category reveals tensions related to the legal right to child support as a means of ensuring or hindering support. The Finnish debate focuses on the administrative decision documents following the decision, while the Norwegian debate is predominately concerned with the legislation itself and expert assessment documentation as the basis for decisions. The discussions position documentation as a central institutional actor in creating and ensuring children's right to support. However, the consequences of documentation (Ferraris, 2013; Prior, 2008) are presented as a twofold issue. On the one hand, documentation creates an institutional

reality by safeguarding the child's right to support. For guardians, this manifests itself especially in the possibility to appeal. On the other hand, documentation is seen as a threat to child support because it increases bureaucracy and slows down support processes (see also Hirsh, 2014). The latter consequence is one of the main arguments for removing the individual right to support and expert assessments in Norway and an argument against administrative decision-making in Finland. Nevertheless, in both countries, the role of documentation in ensuring a child's right to support seems to outweigh its bureaucratic nature. The need for extensive and standardized documentation practices is supported in both countries.

The second discourse category reveals tensions regarding the role of documentation in assessing children's educational needs – specifically, whether assessments require distance from or closeness to the child. The Finnish debate centers on ECEC teachers' expertise, competence, and special position as pedagogical leaders and on the extent to which they need interdisciplinary collaboration. Early childhood special education teachers are positioned as central actors and as “semi-outsiders”, who have more expertise to assess the situation. Finally, the role and expertise of guardians is highlighted in the Finnish debate. The Norwegian debate, on the other hand, primarily highlights the need for outsider-perspectives and external, independent expertise, namely EPS. At the same time, the closeness of EPS in relation to ECEC in Norway is also discussed. This can be attributed to differences between the two systems (see Table 1). The Norwegian system is based on expert assessments by the EPS, while Finnish administrative decisions are based on pedagogical reports compiled directly by ECEC providers.

However, as a special kind of documentation, *resource-related documents* (administrative decisions in Finland and decisions based on expert assessments in Norway) are seen as different in terms of resource allocation. This is illustrated in the third discourse category, which reveals tensions regarding documentation as decisions requiring pedagogical or administrative positions. Both countries are concerned with the right to decide on resources, upholding the necessity of leaders to make decisions. However, the Norwegian debate also emphasizes the need for external recommendations from the EPS as a basis for decisions. Overall, resources are at the center of the debates in both countries, revolving around increased bureaucracy and the authority to decide on resources. Overall, the discourse highlights the consequential nature of documentation (Ferraris, 2013), as it positions certain documents that are related to the allocation of resources as special, or, to borrow from Ferraris (2013), as strong in the sense that they have special consequences in ECEC institutions. Therefore, special competence and a certain position are required to draft them.

These three discursive tensions picture the challenge of documentation in ECEC from three different lenses. There are elements in the debates (closeness vs. outsider-perspective; required position) that are more context-bound, related to specific traditions and systems. This can be expected as, according to Kingdon (2003), policy solutions need to be clear, detailed, and appropriate for existing values and ideologies

and to anticipate new problems resulting from the introduction of reforms (see also Santos & Kauko, 2022). While the tension between a child's right to support and the bureaucratic and the resource-demanding nature of documentation seem to encompass the overall discussions in both countries. To summarize, there is an evident paradox of documentation: it is both beneficial and an obstacle.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Documentation can be considered a justified practice with a clear purpose only if it has a clear aim and positive consequences for a child. Because of the paradoxical nature of documentation, the increase in the extent and amount of documentation is not automatically beneficial, nor does it increase the quality of ECEC. The overall purpose and the possible pitfalls of documentation should always be considered when developing policy and local documentation practices, such as forms, instructions, as well as when drafting documents. As documentation is often considered bureaucratic and time-consuming, it should also be manageable for the producers. The changing demands of documentation often require a reorganization of ECEC and special education to ensure that documentation does not obstruct implementation of a child's support.

Our study sheds light on the complex nature of developing educational systems, highlighting a paradox of documentation in ECEC. In the Finnish system, in which there was no prior requirement of administrative documentation practices for child support, and practices varied widely, more documentation was seen as the right policy solution. In the Norwegian system, issues caused by rigid documentation practices led to calls to simplify documentation and remove the individual right to special educational support. Based on this study, we do not know what shape documentation will take in future practice, or whether the proposed policy solutions or decisions made were the right ones. Time will tell how these practices are implemented and what their consequences will be for children, guardians, and professional practices. However, our investigation provides insights into the developments in two Nordic countries and makes it possible to question what often goes unquestioned. A broader perspective expands the understanding and assumptions underpinning special education in ECEC beyond local or national viewpoints (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022). This study contributes to the wider scientific discussion on documentation and informs policy-makers and practitioners about the pitfalls of documentation. The results can be used to inform the development of local systems and processes. In the future, the implementation and consequences of documentation practices warrant further investigation.

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