9. **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

“Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is committed to respecting each child’s uniqueness. A positive attitude towards children makes it possible for them to learn to think positively of themselves and to look at themselves with appreciation. ECEC creates conditions that promote considerate behaviour and acceptance of differences. The educator gives the child opportunities and an adequate sense of security to develop autonomy.”

*Early Childhood Education and Care, Information for Parents of Young Children*

The NUT delegation had the opportunity to meet Maiju Paananen, a Researcher in Pre-School and Elementary Education at the University of Helsinki’s Department of Teacher Education and to visit the Eira Day Care Centre (Päiväkoti Eira) in Helsinki.

Of the many aspects of Finnish education that the delegation witnessed, its system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was without doubt one of the highlights. Finland has an affordable high quality system designed around the needs of both young children and their families. It is delivered in local neighbourhood day care and early education centres which are open at times to meet the needs of working parents (typically 6am/7am to 5pm/6pm), including shift workers (with a few centres open 24 hours). It is provided by highly educated, fully-qualified early education teachers and day centre staff; it is focused around learning through play and meeting the needs, interests and aspirations of young children as individuals to be nurtured and supported in their early childhood development. It values all children regardless of race, ethnic background or family circumstance and it is fully inclusive to meet the needs of children with special educational needs. It is a system that gives children such a good start in life that they enter compulsory schooling aged seven as rounded, self-confident and highly capable young people, fully ready to begin their formal education. It is a system from which Britain could readily learn if only there were the political will and courage to do so.

**HOW ECE WORKS IN FINLAND**

Early childhood education and care (ECE) comprises care, education and teaching. Since 2013, responsibility for its provision has lain with the Ministry of Education and Culture. ECE in Finland has two main goals:

- To fulfill the child care needs of parents and their children under school age; and
- To provide early childhood education.

**MATERNITY/PATERNITY LEAVE**

Maternity provision and parental leave in Finland is more generous than in the UK. A mother is entitled to a maternity allowance and maternity leave. Childcare is seen as the responsibility of both parents and the right to participate in the labour market is regarded
as an equalities issue. A high proportion of women return to work after having children, with up to a year’s maternity leave being typical.

**CHILDCARE CENTRES**

Every child has a guaranteed right to a place in a childcare centre which can be in a kindergarten or in smaller family day-care groups in private homes.

Fees are moderate and calculated in relation to parental income and family size. For a family with income under 20,000 euros a year, day care is provided free of charge while those with income over 60,000 euros a year pay the maximum fee of 264 euros per month for one child (based on 2014 income levels/charges).

The adult-child ratio in childcare centres is one adult to seven children for three to six year-olds in full-time care; and one to four for children under the age of three. This compares with a ratio of one adult for every 13 children aged three and over in registered early years provision or maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained schools in England.

**PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION**

From the age of six, all children have the right to attend, free of charge, pre-primary education which it is the obligation of the municipalities to provide. Although it is not compulsory, in practice over 90 per cent of families take up this offer. It is premised on learning through play. Pre-primary education can be delivered either through day care centres, as part of their overall offer to parents, or in dedicated pre-primary education centres or schools.
**STAFF QUALIFICATIONS**

ECE staff are required:

- To have at least a secondary-level degree in the field of social welfare and health care;

- One in three of the staff in a day care centre must have a post-secondary level degree (Bachelor of Education, Master of Education or Bachelor of Social Sciences); and

- Pre-Primary teachers are required to have either a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in education.

**THE ECEC CURRICULUM**

The National Curriculum Guidelines and the Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education provide the bases for locally determined curricula. Each day care centre draws up its own curriculum based on these national and local guidelines.

The core content areas of ECEC are based on the following orientations:

- mathematical orientation;
- natural sciences orientation;
- historical-societal orientation;
- ethical orientation; and
- religious-philosophical orientation.

Aims and goals are set for educators, there are no performance requirements for children.

**HELSENKI ECEC PROVISION**

Pre-school age children in Helsinki are cared for in the following facilities:

- 59% attend municipal day care centres
- 5% attend private day care
- 25% receive care through a home care allowance payment (delivered by parents)
- 5% receive family day care
- 6% receive care through a contract or purchased service.

**CHILD HEALTH**
Day care centre works closely with health professionals in the city’s child health clinics. All children receive a full physical and mental health check when they reach the age of four which includes an evaluation of their language and mobility skills. Ahead of the check, day care centre submit a child evaluation form to the clinic. The outcomes of the checks are shared with the day care centres and if concerns are identified, a support plan is put in place.

**DAY CARE CENTRE VISIT: EIRA DAY CARE CENTRE (PÄIVÄKOTI EIRA), HELSINKI**

The NUT delegation visited the Eira Day Care Centre, in southern Helsinki. We were met by Mr Jerkka Laakkonen, a teacher at the centre who is also a member of the Board of the Helsinki Kindergarten Teacher and Early Childhood Education Union. Jerkka gave a presentation to the delegation about the organisation of early childhood education and care in Helsinki and showed us around the centre.

The centre is a medium-sized neighbourhood facility providing both day care and pre-primary education for 67 children ranging in age from 11 months to seven years. (The delegation was told that larger centres typically serve 150 children). The centre is staffed by five teachers, all of whom are educated to Bachelor’s or Master’s degree level; two assistants for each group of children (which range in numbers depending on the children’s age) and a SENCO. It is open from 7am to 5.30pm. Children with special needs children are fully integrated.
CURRICULUM AND ACTIVITIES

The centre uses its own curriculum, which is based on the national core curriculum for early education and the Helsinki city guidelines for early education. Each child has an individual early childhood education plan which is drawn up between the centre and the child’s parents in the autumn term and evaluated each spring. Weekly activities are planned in advance by staff and sent home to parents each Friday outlining activities for the following week along with a package of pictures showing their child’s activities during that week.

One child is chosen to be ‘person of the week’ and encouraged to bring in their favourite toys and music, share their family photographs and news and invite their group to their home. The centre has created a special ‘person of the week’ fireplace where that child can curl up and sleep during nap time.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

EIRA places great importance on its partnership with families in order to make the centre’s everyday activities and the meaning of play visible to parents. Special family days are held where parents are encouraged to come into the centre and take part in activities with the children.
PLAY IS THE BASIS FOR LEARNING

Play is the basis for all activities and there is a big emphasis on both indoor and outdoor sports in hired gymnasiums and sports' fields, as well as music and arts, construction, stories and other activities. Children generally work in small groups, each with a dedicated teacher and support assistants, but come together as a whole group for some activities such as music and sports. On some days children choose the activities they will engage in but on 'lottery days' children are randomly allocated to take part in specific activities. Friday is 'game day' when children bring in their favourite games from home.

Children receive a free daily meal and snacks and are encouraged to serve themselves as soon as they are able to do so.

A TYPICAL DAILY SCHEDULE AT EIRA

7am: Centre opens
    Free Play
8am  Breakfast
    Free play
9am-10am: Outdoor activities
10am-11am: Small group activities
   Free play
11.15am: Lunch
12pm-2pm: Resting/Reading
2pm: Afternoon snack
2pm-5.30pm: Repeat of morning activities/outdoor activities
5.30pm: Centre closes

**OUTDOOR PLAY - LEARNING TO TAKE RISKS**

Eira Day Care Centre is organised on five floors of an old house that was bequeathed to the city. It has little outdoor space and it was not the obvious environment for a childcare centre. But the indoor space was well used and the centre placed a big emphasis on outdoor play in the neighbouring parks, playgrounds, open spaces and city centre facilities.

Children play outdoors all year round in all weathers. Helsinki experiences cold weather and snow for a large part of the year and it is an accepted part of life. Outdoor activities are an important aspect of Finnish culture across all ages and at Eira this is also the norm. Small children don their snowsuits and go skiing and skating, build snow houses and dens. They get on trams and buses (which are free for children) and visit the city’s galleries, museums and libraries. Families are relaxed and comfortable with this approach. All that is required from them is that they sign a permission form once a year.

The delegation were struck by the contrast with Britain, where schools and nurseries are often hidebound by risk assessments; by restrictions imposed by
insurance companies fearing legal claims; where many children spend increasing amounts of their free time indoors watching television or online; and many parents are increasingly risk averse.

Playing, Exploring, Taking Risks – All in A Day’s Work at Eira
IMPRESSIONS

The delegation were impressed by the centre's resources, highly trained, skilled and motivated staff and the range and quality of the activities that the children were engaged in. Eira clearly provided a bustling, busy, happy, creative, secure and loving environment in which children were free to play, explore, thrive and develop at their own pace.

Many British nurseries and pre-school centres offer the same high quality care and education for children, but it was the scale of this national network of high quality early childhood education centres that so impressed us. The fact all families are entitled to receive such high quality care as a right, that it is subsided and affordable (and free for six-seven year olds), that it is child centred, designed to meet the needs of working parents, and delivered in local neighbourhoods by highly qualified professionals, sets it apart. In Britain access to affordable provision of this quality is a lottery, dependent on where families live and largely available only to those on high incomes or to children placed by social services. **All Finland's children are given the best possible start in life and this is surely one of the keys to its educational success.**