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Implementation evaluation of the 2016 national core curriculum for early childhood education and care – Deployment and contents of early childhood education and care curricula

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The 2016 national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (hereafter ECEC) is the first binding document steering the implementation and development of ECEC. The municipal providers and private service providers of ECEC use the curriculum as a basis for their local ECEC curriculum and the ECEC plan of each child. The deployment and implementation of the curricula are key quality components of ECEC.

This is the first part of the two-stage evaluation regarding the implementation of the national core curriculum for ECEC. The evaluation produces information on the functionality of the curriculum system in ECEC (national core curriculum, local curriculum and the child's ECEC plan), the production processes of local curricula and the contents of the curricula and plans. The information obtained through evaluation also provides a foundation for further development of the national system and for political decision-making processes. Evaluation data helps examine national questions related to equality and quality of ECEC.

To collect information on the implementation of the national core curriculum, a survey was sent to all municipal providers, private service providers of ECEC and private family day care providers that operate as part of private service provision. In addition, content analysis was used to examine local curricula and children's ECEC plans. The response rates were 91 among municipal ECEC providers, 57 among private service providers and 60 among private family day care providers. In accordance with the statistical grouping of municipalities by Statistics Finland, the results of the survey were compared between rural, semi-urban and urban municipalities and, where applicable, between providers (public and private service providers).

According to the evaluation, the curriculum system is mostly functional and the local implementation process went well. However, the local process was hindered by an excessively strict schedule as well as insufficient resources in terms of finances and the allocation of time. Even though the

local curriculum process for ECEC was primarily considered successful in the survey, document analysis showed that the transition from the national core curriculum into tangible, local curricula to help guide the operations had not yet been comprehensively fulfilled.

The key factors in the success of the process were personnel's participation in supplementary training as well as successful planning of the process.

According to the evaluation, the process was less successful in rural and semi-urban municipalities when compared to urban municipalities. In rural municipalities, issues were caused by the long distance to the training location and the difficulty of finding substitutes.

Private family day care providers were unaware of the various sections in the local ECEC curriculum, even though it is binding to them. Children's ECEC plans drawn up in private family day care were often inadequate. According to the results, private family day care providers feel that the core duty of family day care is to provide basic, homelike care instead of pedagogically inclined early education. The results raise a question of how well the steering system in its current form serves the needs of the various types of ECEC. Based on the results of the evaluation, it is necessary to consider the family day care providers' abilities to implement and achieve the objectives set in the national core curriculum for ECEC in various types of operation.

On the grounds of the results, more attention should be paid to the equality of children in ECEC services and the consistent quality of services in Finland.

The second stage of the evaluation in 2018–2019 will examine the implementation of the national core curriculum in terms of the personnel involved in ECEC. The second stage will supplement the results of this evaluation and form an overall picture of the functionality and implementation of ECEC curricula.