

# Drawing Partnership on Paper: How do the Forms for Individual Educational Plans Frame Parent - Teacher Relationship?

**Kirsti Karila**  
University of Tampere,  
Tampere, Finland

**Maarit Alasuutari**  
University of Tampere,  
Tampere, Finland

This article examines the Individual Educational Plan forms (hereafter IEP forms) used in planning for a child's early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finnish day care from the perspectives of social constructionism and discourse analysis. The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (Stakes, 2004 & 2005) require an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) to be drawn up for each child. Municipalities typically develop a local IEP form to be used in parent-teacher meetings at which the child's IEP is discussed. The study examines how these IEP forms construct and frame parental and professional involvement in individual ECEC planning, and demonstrates that the positions of the parties in the IEP forms can be illustrated by two frames: an interview frame and a contract frame. These frames are considered in the present article in relation to the aims and principles articulated in the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC, which define the parent-teacher relationship as representing a partnership. The article also discusses the implications of the governing functions of the IEP forms from the perspective of the parent and the teacher.

*Keywords:* individual educational plan, IEP form, partnership, curriculum, early childhood education, governance, discourse analysis, IEP forms.

## Introduction

Parental involvement in education is widely seen as beneficial for child's well-being and academic success (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001). This involvement can take many forms. Epstein (1995) describes six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. In the Finnish education system, parents have traditionally assumed a fairly passive role with respect to home-school collaboration. Besides providing adequate parenting, they have been expected to support their children's learning at home and to be ready for communication, particularly by participating in school events, which are typically aimed at all parents.

However, since the 1990s increased attention has been paid to parental involvement, and parent-teacher conferences have been established in many schools and in early childhood

education and care (ECEC) as a means of engaging all parents in their children's education.<sup>1</sup>

Parent-teacher conferences have a somewhat different role in Finnish compulsory education and in ECEC. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education requires schools to collaborate with parents on an equal basis, but makes no specific mention of parent-teacher conferences (Opetushallitus, 2004).

Instead, conferences are guided and regulated by local curricula, and their role and implementation therefore varies between municipalities and schools. In addition, they are

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kirsti Karila, e-mail: [kirsti.karila@uta.fi](mailto:kirsti.karila@uta.fi)

---

<sup>1</sup> In Finland, children start school and compulsory education in the year that they turn 7 years of age. Children aged 0-6 have a subjective right to early childhood education and care regardless of parental employment status. Nowadays about 70% of Finnish children aged 3 to 5 are in early education and over 90% go to preschool at age 6 (Anttonen & Sointu, 2006; Kartovaara & Sauli, 2007). Finnish early childhood education is predominantly publicly organized.

not a regular practice in all schools or with all class teachers. In Finnish ECEC, however, parent-teacher conferences are now standard practice throughout the country. The need for increasing parental involvement in ECEC was highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its country report on Finnish early childhood education at the turn of the century (see STM, 2000). In answer to this critique, the requirement for parent-teacher conferences was stated in the first National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care published in 2003 (see Stakes, 2004, 2005).

In this article we focus on parent-teacher conferences in Finnish ECEC and on how the documents that are used as an essential element in these conferences frame the positions of the parties involved.

The use of documents in parent-teacher conferences in Finnish ECEC relates to the conferences' specific aim of drawing up an individual educational plan (IEP) for each child<sup>2</sup>. The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC give no detailed instructions or models for the IEP, and only loosely describe its drafting, content and use (see Stakes, 2004, p. 29). As a consequence, Finnish municipalities have developed their own practices regarding IEPs, which typically include the drawing up of an IEP form to be completed during parent-teacher conferences. The forms are designed mainly by professionals and officials at

the local level. Parents are not involved in the design process (e.g. Alasuutari, 2010b; cf. Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

The parent-teacher conference and the IEP drafted during it nevertheless provide the main formal basis for actualizing parent-teacher partnership in Finnish ECEC. The term 'partnership' was first introduced in the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in 2003 and has since been implemented as a general characterization of the parent-teacher relationship in early education. According to the guidelines, partnership means 'a conscious commitment by parents and staff to collaboration for supporting children's growth, development and learning'. It requires 'mutual trust and respect, and equality' (Stakes, 2004, p. 28). In addition, parental knowledge is underlined (*ibid.*).

The national curriculum guidelines, with their emphasis on partnership and parental knowledge, challenge the traditional conceptions of parent-teacher collaboration in Finnish ECEC. Traditionally, expertise and professional knowledge have been underscored (e.g. Alasuutari 2003, 2010a & 2010b; Karila 2005 & 2006b), as also highlighted by the OECD country report on Finland (STM, 2000). The guidelines introduce a demand for early education teachers and practitioners to re-orientate themselves in relation to parents and require them to construct their professional identity accordingly. They also introduce a profoundly new approach to parental involvement. An intriguing question is to examine how these challenges are being met in Finnish ECEC.

In this article, we examine municipal IEP forms as a means of investigating the above question. The focus is thus on both the IEP forms and the parent-teacher partnership. We examine how the forms construct and frame parental and professional involvement in parent-teacher conferences. How do they produce the parent-teacher partnership that the IEP and the conference are intended to actualize? Before describing our study more thoroughly, however, we will first discuss the concept of partnership.

### Partnership

Parent-teacher collaboration and parental involvement in education are increasingly discussed in terms of partnership (Alasuutari 2009 & 2010a; Hughes & MacNaughton 2000; Karila 2005, 2006a & 2006b; Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008;

---

<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1980s all children with special education or health needs have had tailored rehabilitation plans drawn up for them in Finnish ECEC by the teachers, parents and professionals in question (Suomen säädöskokoelma 1119/1985). These rehabilitation plans are similar to the individual education plans and individualized education programmes that are common practice in many countries (Reiman et al., 2010). It is easy to assume that these rehabilitation plans will have influenced the current Finnish system of IEPs. However, they can be seen as very different practices. The Finnish IEP system does not assume the existence of special needs, problems or disability, but is a universal practice and hence forms a very different starting point for parent-teacher collaboration. In the international context, the IEP model applied in Finland is a rare phenomenon. A comparable practice exists in Swedish preschools, but it is not as strictly enforced and, hence, not as broadly implemented as in Finland (e.g. Vallberg Roth & Månsson, 2008).

Oberhuemer, 2005; OECD 2001 & 2006; Powell & Diamond, 1995; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). For example, Powell and Diamond (1995) show in their analyses how US early childhood programmes have developed from perceiving the parent as a learner to defining them as a knowledgeable partner in the collaboration. Again, Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) argue that the notion of partnership dominates at the school level.

In educational discussion, the importance of partnership is generally motivated by Bronfenbrenner's theories on the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner notes the importance of cooperation between the two main micro-systems involved in child development: family and school (day care). The beneficial character and effects of parental involvement are often taken for granted in educational research. Usually the focus is on how to involve all parents in their child's education. Partnership is also frequently discussed from the perspective of family differences and cultural diversity (e.g. Phillips 2005; Pinkus 2006; TeWhariki 1996; Whalley 2001; Vincent & Martin 2002), and is also an important consideration in special education (e.g. Lake & Billingsley 2000; Laluevein 2010; Reiman et al., 2010).

However, recently, home-school collaboration and partnership have also been discussed from a more critical perspective. Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) argue that the constant 'othering' in the literature on parental involvement in early childhood education subordinates parental knowledge to professional knowledge (cf. Borg & Mayo, 2001). Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) state that partnership often equates with little more than parents' passive receipt of information. Indeed, it seems that educational partnership is often associated with practices that are primarily about advising, guiding and teaching parents, for example on how to support their child's cognitive development or learning at home (e.g. Whalley, 2001; cf. Millei & Lee, 2007), or which constrain the parental position in other ways (Alasuutari 2010b; Foot et al., 2002; McGrath, 2007).

The critical discussion on partnership is often rooted in sociological thinking and in studies of power and governance (see Foucault, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1996). Sulkunen (2009, p. 53) argues that partnership and contracts have become the favoured mode of relationship between public officials and citizens. Public services are thus, in principle, no longer

characterised by power and dependency relations, but by their contractual nature, and, consequently, the independence of the client and equality in the client-official relationship are accentuated. However, actual equality can never be reached between the client/citizen and the official; the contract merely disguises the existing power relations as a partnership (Sulkunen, 2007, 2009). Similarly, Franklin et al. (2003, pp. 5-6) state that the history of partnership is not just an evolutionary story of broadening participation, for example, in the processes of the schools. Instead, partnership reforms involve a double relation of linking the governing patterns of the state with civil society and the principles of individual action. Hence, the language of partnership can be seen as justifying mechanisms, such as home-school contracts, which seek to control parents and children (Borg & Mayo, 2001; c.f. Forsberg, 2007; Määttä & Kallioma-Puha, 2005; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997), and as another political and administrative steering instrument through which expectations and demands can be communicated to parents (Strandell, 2010).

Our approach in this article is in line with the critical studies on partnership. When considering partnership, we are interested in the power relations – the rights and constraints – which the IEP forms prescribe for teachers and parents. Our examination focuses specifically on the micro level of how the IEP forms frame and orientate interaction between parents and teachers, and we discuss our findings in the light of the benevolent aims and principles of partnership articulated in the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (Stakes, 2004, 2005). Before presenting the analysis and its findings we will, however, first describe our data and our methodological commitments.

### **Data**

Our data consists of forms designed for use in drafting individual educational plans (IEPs) in Finnish ECEC, usually in day care centres. The forms were collected during 2007 and 2008 from 15 municipalities throughout Finland. Some of the forms were available through the Internet, although online availability was not common practice. The majority were obtained through research and training contacts with early education teachers and administrators in the municipalities.

The case municipalities differ widely in population (from 6,700 to over 550,000) and jointly account for more than 27% of the Finnish population. The education of a large proportion of Finnish young children is thus being currently discussed by using the studied forms. As a qualitative study, the research does not aim at generalizations about Finnish municipalities or populations using random sampling. Instead, the purpose is to discuss the cultural understandings of parental participation in Finnish ECEC. To reach this aim, we have taken into account the concepts of variation and saturation in the data.

The concept of variation emphasizes the importance of considering the variance of the phenomenon under study and, in the ideal situation, including each category of the phenomenon in the data and addressing the question of generalizability (Gobo, 2004). By collecting forms from municipalities with different populations and, consequently, with differing service structures in ECEC, we have aimed at increasing the contextual variance in our data. According to our knowledge, the practices employed in designing IEP forms typically vary between smaller and larger municipalities, which may also have an effect on the contextual variance.

Another means to address the generalizability of the findings is to apply the criterion of saturation in the data analysis (see Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.188). This refers to limiting the number of cases included in the intensive analysis by continuing the examination until the investigation of further cases no longer contributes anything new to the findings. Hence, in our analysis we collected the first IEP forms through our personal contacts and then continued to collect further forms via the Internet, bearing in mind the concept of variation, until it became clear that analysis of the new forms would no longer reveal anything new in our results.

As mentioned earlier, the national curriculum guidelines provide no detailed instructions concerning individual educational plans. Consequently, the forms in this study differ somewhat from each other, especially in length. The majority of the forms (12/15) included a number of detailed questions concerning a variety of aspects of the child's life (care, family, development, character, etc.), whereas the remainder (3/15) comprised only a few broad questions about the child (e.g., the child's character, strengths and support needs). The

forms often contained two kinds of questions: questions for the parents to answer prior to the parent-practitioner conference, and questions eliciting information to be entered by the teacher during the conference. Besides our research, the IEP forms have not been studied previously.

## Methodology

In social research, the use of documents as data is not commonplace. The human action and behaviour that occur in talk are seen as primary, whereas documents are understood as merely props for action. They are assumed to be stable, static and pre-defined artefacts or objects and are often placed in the margins of consideration. When they are studied, the focus is usually on the content of the document and, consequently, the interest is in the language as a medium of thought and action (Prior 2003, pp.1-29).

We adopt a social constructionist perspective (e.g. Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999), which is based on the assumption of language as a form of action that has a constitutive role in social life (Burr, 1995, p.7). In addition, we follow Lindsay Prior's (2003, pp.1-29) viewpoint that documents – in this case the IEP forms – should be considered in terms of 'fields, frames and networks of action' engaging and involving creators, users and settings. Hence, we approach the documents as agents that can influence and structure human agents as much as they are themselves influenced by human agents (cf. Gubrium, 1989). From this perspective, the content of the document is not its most important feature. Instead, the production, use and function of the documents become the essential aspects of consideration.

Our focus is on the discursive function of the IEP forms. According to Prior (2003, pp.12-13):

*'Documents ... are constructed in accordance with rules, they express a structure, they are nestled within a specific discourse, and their presence in the world depends on collective, organized action.'*

The discourses in which the IEP forms are 'nestled' frame the actual parent-practitioner interaction in specific ways and represent a set of discursive practices. They exist as resources in the fields of action involved in this interaction and can be recruited to serve different functions and aims (see Prior, 2003, p. 13-14). The IEP forms can

thus be understood as agents in the parent-practitioner conferences. Their agency is produced in the premises and meanings that they imply and on which they seem to be constructed (cf. Vuori, 2005). These premises and meanings reflect the interpretative frames of the ongoing activity (planning for the child's education and care) and the interactional roles of its participants. They are the focus of this article.

On a more general level, the forms can be seen as a means of governance (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996). Governance refers to the implicit ways and technologies – the 'knowledges, instruments, persons, systems of judgment', etc. (Rose, 1996, pp. 26-27) – employed to influence and use power to shape and fashion the conduct of individuals in desired directions. From the governance perspective, ECEC planning and the IEP forms used in it constitute an institutional practice that attempts to maximize and also to constrain certain capacities or behaviours of parents, children and practitioners.

In the present analysis, we use a discourse analytic approach which is epistemologically based on social constructionism. Hence, we are interested in the patterns of language use in the IEP forms and in the constitutive role of these patterns with respect to parental and practitioner participation in ECEC planning and the partnership ideals (see Taylor, 2001; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Our key analytical tool is the concept of frame (Goffman, 1986, p.247), which refers to the premises that organize the perception of a social activity. These govern the subjective involvement of the actors in the particular activity and structure their experiences (ibid., pp.10-11). According to Goffman (1986, p.247), the frame of an activity is situational and maintained both in the individual minds and in the specific activity. The particular activity can also be interpreted by different organizational premises. Thus, in framing the activities, individuals can apply diverse types of frames (or frameworks). Each activity can also be framed in several ways (ibid., p.25). When viewing IEP forms as agents framing parent-teacher interaction, therefore, we acknowledge that the forms are not in a fully determining position. The human agents decide on their use. They can also apply different frames in organizing their interaction.

The initial analysis of the data involved carefully reading and performing a case analysis of each form. At this stage the focus was mainly on the structure and content of the forms. A

comparison of the case analyses and their consideration at a more conceptual level provided the initial ideas concerning the interpretative frames. More data was then collected and the ideas investigated further. In addition to the content and structure of the forms, the phrasing and discursive aspects of the enquiries were examined (see Wood & Kroger, 2000). The analysis process also included consideration of and reflection on the self-evident aspects and the missing or 'silent' issues of the forms.

## Results

The positioning of parents and practitioners in the IEP forms can be illustrated by two frames: an interview frame and a contract frame. The interview frame is more prevalent in the data, since the queries in the forms are designed mainly to elicit parental accounts and descriptions. However, the two frames are not mutually exclusive, as both occur in each form.

### *The interview frame*

By interview frame, we refer to an approach in which parents are expected to account for and report about their child and child-raising practices. This expectation is made evident firstly in the way the forms are designed to be used. Often the form includes an instruction for a parent to fill in at least part of the IEP form at home before meeting with the teacher. In the parent-teacher conference, the teacher then goes through the answers with the parent(s). Secondly, the expectation is usually also made evident in the formulation of the questions, which are addressed primarily to the parents. Often this is done by including the phrase 'your child' in the questions. Furthermore, the form rarely allows space for the teacher to respond to the same questions or to describe their observations. Thus, the parents are assigned the position of informants, merely reporting on their child, and the teacher is positioned as a recipient of the parents' responses. The child her/himself is not heard or involved in this context.

The interview frame appears to give parents an opportunity and space to express their views and opinions about their child and their child's education. The parents seem to be positioned as knowledgeable partners in the discussion. However, upon closer examination of the questions used, this positioning becomes less certain.

Parents are usually expected to give information about their child's daily functioning and care (eating, sleeping, hygiene, and outdoor activities) and his or her character and personality. In addition, they are frequently asked about the child's development and skills, the family, and parenting practices. While some of these areas of inquiry can be considered relevant and important to early education, questions about parenting, for example, are somewhat remote from the daily aims and practices of institutional education.

Questions regarding parenting typically concern the child's media use, boundary setting, and reading to the child, although questions concerning conflict situations and disagreements are also common. (Examples<sup>3</sup> are reported in Appendix)

In Example 1, the question invites the parent to describe the ways in which conflict situations within their family are dealt with. The question also indicates what is supposed to be achieved in a conflict situation – i.e. resolution – as well as the desired means of achieving this – i.e. through joint action ('we'). Hence, the question implies implicit norms of family conflict resolution and standards for assessing it. It is also interesting that the question does not explicitly address conflicts involving the child, but can be understood as addressing family conflicts in general. Although the IEP forms' questions concerning family conflicts do not usually specifically address the family as a whole, they nevertheless allude to family life in general, since they inevitably concern parenting practices. Consequently, they – like other questions alluding to parenting – open up the possibility to assess the parents' parenting ability and family life. Moreover, they can communicate and invite discussion about family ideals and 'proper' parenthood and, thus, educate parents about them.

Parenting is addressed and parents are positioned as objects of 'education' also in more implicit ways by the IEP forms.

In Example 2, parents are invited to describe their observations of their child's ways of interacting and expressing her/himself in different contexts. On the one hand, the questions seem quite straightforward. They are formulated using everyday language and they deal with everyday

issues. On the other hand, they assume emotionally sensitive and observant parents. These characteristics are consequently constructed as parental ideals.

The questions in Example 2 also assume certain child behaviours as being ordinary (being emotionally expressive, sometimes wanting to be alone). This illustrates how questions about a child's everyday behaviour can produce and reflect specific cultural frames and understandings about being a parent and a child. These frames and assumptions may exclude or make it more difficult for parents from different cultural backgrounds to participate in the discussion about their child's IEP.

Moreover, the ECEC forms seem to structure the parent-practitioner interaction according to professional and institutional culture and language. None of the forms asks what the parents see as important in their child's early education and care, or what they would like to discuss at the meeting with the teacher. Parents are, as a rule, expected to discuss only the issues specified in the forms. Often they are also assumed to be proficient in the use of professional terms and concepts. This is particularly true with respect to questions concerning the child's development, which are highly typical in the IEP forms (Alasuutari & Karila, 2010), some examples of which are given in Appendix (Example 3).

In the example, most of the words used, such as 'emotional' and 'life', are common, everyday terms. However, as a concept, 'emotional life' belongs within the professional sphere, not the vernacular. Moreover, the second question concerning the child's developmental phase draws heavily on concepts of developmental psychology. This is typical of the IEP forms. The language used is often divorced from the everyday, being derived mainly from professional child development literature. Parents are thus expected to consider their child in terms of the classifications and categorizations of developmental psychology and to be able to engage in psychological discourse.

The overall positioning of the parents in the interview frame is contradictory. On the one hand, the frame gives parents a say in the ECEC planning and assumes them to be knowledgeable partners who can provide information that is relevant to their child's early childhood education. On the other hand, the frame produces an asymmetric relationship between parent and teacher, since it positions the parents as objects of evaluation and education and assumes that

<sup>3</sup> The translations of the examples follow the original Finnish text as much as possible. Therefore they are not always good English.

they will adjust to the professional discourse and confine themselves to the issues that the designers of the forms (the professionals) have defined as important. Moreover, parents are not expected to interfere with the pedagogical practices or routines of the institution, neither regarding their own child nor the child group (cf. Alasuutari 2010b). As such, the parent's position as an educational partner is very limited. The teachers are, then, mainly positioned as information recipients, gatherers of information, and evaluators. The forms typically do not provide space for the practitioners to document their views or notions about the child and his/her education. The forms are therefore clearly not constructed to support the transparency of the educational practices of the institution in question or the disclosure of professional opinions concerning the child (cf. Stakes 2003, 2004).

#### *The contract frame*

The contract frame is manifested in the design of the IEP form's questions, which assume the documentation of an agreement between the parents and the institution, or the setting of goals for the child's development and education. All of the studied forms provide space for such documentation, but there is considerable variation in how the 'contract' is assumed to be made and what it should cover.

Some of the forms provide space for an 'agreement' or 'goals' at the end of the form. However, most forms contain several specific items which require agreement. In many cases, each main heading or query is followed by a space for recording agreements or goals. Example 4 illustrates the latter case.

In the example, the parent(s) and the teacher are expected to document an agreement on each of the issues mentioned in the form. Here, the formulation 'we' assumes that the agreement gives a say to both parties. The issues to be agreed on are given broad and somewhat abstract titles. It is difficult to conclude from these titles what the agreement is precisely about or how it should be composed. The agreement could be understood as being to provide a joint description of the child, for example regarding his/her emotions. It could also be interpreted as a decision to provide mutual notification on certain issues, such as the child's experiences of day care. Equally, the spaces allocated for agreement could be used for documenting goals for the child's development, or aims and means for his/her

education. The 'Thinking and learning' heading, for example, lends itself quite naturally to the latter interpretation, whereas the 'Experiences of day care' heading leads less readily towards defining developmental goals. Thus, the loose formulation of the titles leaves room for different interpretations. On one hand, this allows the parents and the teacher freedom to define their own focus of their agreement. On the other hand, the potential for varied interpretation may make it more difficult to apply the information gathered from the forms in the everyday practice of the institution.

The IEP forms use the term agreement mainly in reference to the contract between the parents and the early education institution (see Example 4). In a few of the forms, the term 'goal' is also used. Usually, these forms include additional space for recording agreed goals and the measures for achieving them. Hence, these forms direct ECEC planning firstly towards achieving expected changes in the child's development or learning and, secondly, towards considering the behaviour and methods to be used by the adults in promoting this change. The forms seem to pursue a pedagogically-oriented discussion in which parents are assumed to have a say.

Example 5 is taken from one of these less common IEP form types. It is pedagogically oriented in the phrasing of its goals, and shows an expectation that a detailed plan for the child's ECEC will be drafted. It is also exceptional in the sense that besides day care, it explicitly positions the home as the other environment where the child's developmental practices are assumed to be supported.

In some IEP forms, goal setting and agreements are not aimed solely at institutional education. In several of the forms these can also be interpreted as referring to family life and parenting, although this is not done explicitly.

The example 6 is taken from a form which provides a space after each main heading to record what was agreed and what goals were set. The headings are specified with examples, as shown in the example above. Some of these specifications are explicitly about parenting or family life (e.g. 'limits set by the parents'). Others are more general, but also invite discussion about family life and parenting (e.g. eating). As a result, the agreements and goal setting are also likely to involve parenting practices and family life.

In principle, the contract frame positions the parents and the teacher as 'equals' in drawing up

a plan for the child's education. However, the IEP forms are rarely specific about what the 'contract' should cover or what form it should take. The contract can therefore be understood in several ways. The contract can be more or less pedagogically oriented and aimed strictly at institutional education, or it can also encompass family life and parenting. The boundary between private and public seems to be unclear, as is the overall scope of the individual educational plan.

### Conclusion

In this article we examined the individual educational plan forms (IEP forms) used in 15 Finnish municipalities to frame and guide parent-teacher conferences concerning early childhood education and care planning. We approached the forms as agents influencing parent-teacher interaction (see Prior, 2003). Our main focus was on how the IEP forms position the parties and construct their relationship in the parent-teacher conference.

The Finnish national curriculum guidelines and legislation on ECEC emphasize equality and partnership in the parent-practitioner relationship. Hence, they underline the reciprocal nature of parent-teacher collaboration. Strandell (2009) argues, however, that the meaning of equality is not clarified in the national steering documents. On the one hand, parents are given the status of experts, while on the other hand, the use of this expertise seems to be confined and limited. In addition, parents are viewed as targets of education and assessment in the parent-teacher collaboration. Our analysis of the local IEP forms supports these arguments.

The forms seem to aim at partnership and a 'client-centred' approach in the collaboration by giving considerable space for documenting parental views and accounts of the child and the child's education and care. They also assume that parents and practitioners make mutual agreements on matters concerning the child and/or setting goals for the child's development and learning. However, the forms rarely illustrate reciprocity, since most of them do not address early childhood education or provide space for the documentation of teachers' views on the child and their pedagogical practices. Teachers are usually given a say only in the agreements. Otherwise, they are positioned as recipients and evaluators of the parental accounts and as silent actors. Hence, in most cases, the IEP forms do not assume or

support the transparency of the educational and pedagogical practices of the early education institution, but set them outside the sphere of parental involvement and educational partnership. Consequently, they construct a parent-teacher asymmetry which assumes the practices of the institution as being the sole realm of professional expertise.

Here, our findings also correspond to the arguments of Hughes and MacNaughton (2000), according to which parents are often placed in a subordinate position to preschool workers, especially with respect to knowledge, where scientific (and universal) knowledge of the child trumps experiential knowledge. The parent's knowledge and experiences are seen as anecdotal, subjective, ad hoc, individualized and applicable only to a specific child (*ibid.*, p. 243).

The parents' subordinate and asymmetrical position is also constructed by the content of the IEP forms' questions, many of which implicitly position parents as objects of assessment and education. This positioning occurs either through questions that explicitly address aspects of parenting, such as setting limits for the child, or by necessitating discussion about family life implicitly, for example by querying the child's daily functioning at home. As a result, the line between private and public is blurred. Forsberg (2007) describes a similar phenomenon with respect to school letters, where the acts of writing and reading school letters can be seen as boundary-transgressing acts in which parents and teachers meet, schools' and parents' responsibility for children overlap, and relations between private and public are negotiated (*ibid.*, p. 275).

Parent-teacher IEP conferences can be viewed as a setting in which the privacy and publicity of family life and parenting are negotiated on a regular basis.

Consequently, it is a setting in which, as Franklin et al. (2003, pp. 5-6) argue, the governing patterns of the state are linked with individual action and where ideals of a 'good' parent and a 'normal' child and family are produced and transmitted (cf. Millei & Lee, 2007).<sup>4</sup> In parent-teacher interaction, negotiating privacy and publicity and setting the boundaries between

<sup>4</sup> Although the focus here is on the governance of the family and the child, the implementation of the IEP practice can also be understood as the governance of professionalism in ECEC. The practice constructs and defines a specific role and particular competencies for the professionals.



the individual and family life are often sensitive issues and a source of criticism by parents (e.g. Alasuutari 2003 & 2010b; Forsberg, 2007). Therefore, how these issues are dealt with seems to be one of the key elements to the success of individual ECEC planning from both the parental and professional viewpoint (see Alasuutari 2003, 2009 & 2010b).

The positioning of parents in ECEC planning illustrates their pedagogicalization (see Popkewitz, 2003) and the role of early childhood education as a technique of governance in contemporary societies. ECEC services – as any educational institution – function as an agent in “cultural reasoning” (Bloch et al., 2003) and produce discourses that regulate the lives of children, parents and families. Blurring the boundary between private and public is an important element in these processes. Educational partnership is not only a means of empowering parents, but also a means of exercising power over them and their children (cf. Borg & Mayo, 2001; Forsberg, 2007, Määttä & Kallioma-Puha, 2005; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). IEP forms can be seen as an illustrative example of an instrument of governance that underlines parental responsibilities. In them, parents are constructed as being responsible for monitoring, evaluating and developing their child and child raising

practices under the guidance of experts (see Millei & Lee, 2007; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1996).

The present study provides an example of how the nationally articulated ideas and premises of Finnish ECEC, which are at the same time connected to the international discussion and ideas about early childhood education (see Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2010), are translated at the local level and in the everyday practices of early education institutions. The national aims and ideologies express particular discourses of parental and teacher involvement and positioning in individual ECEC planning and in early education in general. In the production of local IEP forms, these discourses are interpreted by early childhood professionals and officials at the local level and ‘translated’ from national ideologies to locally relevant goals. Our findings suggest that, in this translation process, educational partnership, as a new ‘development’ in Finland, has been constructed as a form of client interview that remains framed by the premise of professional expertise and confines the parental position to the role of giving account of their child and family life and being a target for pedagogicalization. We, however, acknowledge that our findings apply only to the IEP forms. How this partnership is constructed in actual parent-practitioner interaction is deserving of further study.

### **Acknowledgment**

Maarit Alasuutari’s research was funded by the Academy of Finland, project number 116272.

## References

- Alasuutari, M. (2003). *Kuka lasta kasvattaa? Vanhemmuuden ja yhteiskunnallisen kasvatuksen suhde vanhempien puheessa* [Who is raising the child? Mothers' and fathers' notions about the role of parents and professionals in child development]. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Alasuutari, M. (2009). What is so funny about children? Laughter in parent practitioner interaction. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 17(2), 105-18.
- Alasuutari, M. (2010a). Striving at Partnership: Parent-Practitioner Relationships in Finnish Early Educators' Talk. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18(2), 148-61.
- Alasuutari, M. (2010b). *Suunniteltu lapsuus. Keskustelut lapsen varhaiskasvatuksesta päivähoitossa* [Planned childhood. Parent-teacher discussions on the child's education in day care]. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Alasuutari, Maarit & Karila, Kirsti (2010). Framing the Picture of the Child. *Children & Society*, 24(2), 100-11.
- Anttonen, A. & Sointu, L. (2006). *Hoivapolitiikka muutoksessa. Julkinen vastuu pienten lasten ja ikääntyneiden hoivasta 12:ssa Euroopan maassa* [Care Policies in Transition: Public Responsibility in Child Care and Elder Care in 12 European Countries]. Helsinki: Stakes.
- Bloch, M. N., Holmlund, K., Moqvist, I. & Popkewitz, T. (2003). Global and Local Patterns of Governing the Child, Family, their Care, and Education: An Introduction. In M. N. Bloch, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist & T. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Governing Children, Families, and Education. Restructuring the Welfare State*, (pp. 3-31). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Borg, C., & Mayo, P. (2001). From 'Adjuncts' to 'Subjects': Parental involvement in a working-class community. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22(2), 245-266.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Burr, V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 76(9), 701-712.
- Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental Involvement and Students' Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1), 1-22.
- Foot, H., Howe, C., Cheyne, B., Terras, M. & Rattray, C. (2002). Parental Participation and Partnership in Pre-school Provision. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 10(1), 5-19.
- Forsberg, L. (2007). Involving parents through school letters: mothers, fathers and teachers negotiating children's education and rearing. *Ethnography & Education*, 2 (3), 273-88.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, (pp.87-104). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Franklin, B. M., Bloch, M. N. & Popkewitz, T. S. (2003). *Educational Partnerships and the State: The Paradoxes of Governing Schools, Children, and Families*. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An Invitation to Social Construction*. London: Sage.
- Gobo, G. (2004). Sampling, Representativeness and Generalizability. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium & al. (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*, (pp.435-456). London: SAGE Publications.
- Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gubrium, J.F. (1989). The Descriptive Tyranny of Forms. *Perspectives on Social Problems*, 1, 195-214.
- Hughes, P. & MacNaughton, G. (2000). Consensus, Dissensus or Community: the politics of parent involvement in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1(3), 241-58.
- Karila, K. (2005). Vanhempien ja päivähoiton henkilöstön keskustelut kasvatuskumppanuuden areenoina. [Discussions between parents and day-care staff as arenas of educational partnership] *Kasvatus*. 36(4), 285-98.

- Karila, K. (2006a). Kasvatuskumppanuus vuorovaikutussuhteena. [Partnership as interaction] In *Kasvatusvuorovaikutus* [Interaction in education], (pp. 91-108). K. Karila, Alasuutari M., Hännikäinen M., and al. (eds.), Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Karila, K. (2006b). The Significance of Parent – Practitioner Interaction in Early Childhood Education. *Zeitschrift für Qualitative Bildungs-, Beratungs- und Sozialforschung*, Heft 1, 7-24.
- Kartovaara, L., & Sauli, H. (2007). *Suomalainen lapsi. Sosiaalilastoseminaari 12.4.2007*. [The Finnish Child. Social Statistics Seminar] Helsinki: Statistics Finland. Retrieved from [http://www.stat.fi/ajk/tapahtumia/2007-04-12\\_esittely\\_suomi\\_lapsi.pdf](http://www.stat.fi/ajk/tapahtumia/2007-04-12_esittely_suomi_lapsi.pdf)
- Lake, J. F. & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An Analysis of Factors That Contribute to Parent-School Conflict in Special Education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240-251.
- Laluvein, J. (2010). Variations on a theme: parents and teachers talking. *British Journal of Learning Support*, 25(4), 194-199.
- Määttä, M., & Kalliomaa-Puha, L. (2005). Sopiva yhteiskunta? Koti, koulu ja uusi sopimuksellisuus [Contracting society? Home, school and the new contractualism]. In K. Rantala & P. Sulkunen (Eds.), *Projektiyhteiskunnan kääntöpuolia* [The Project Society Inside Out]. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- McGrath, W. H. (2007). Ambivalent Partners: Power, Trust, and Partnership in Relationships between Mothers and Teachers in a Full-Time Child Care Center. *Teachers College Record*, 109(6), 1401-1422.
- Millei, Z., & Lee, L. (2007). 'Smarten up the Parents': whose agendas are we serving? Governing Parents and Children through the Smart Population Foundation Initiative in Australia. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8(3), 208-221.
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (2008). *Governing the present: Administering economic, social and personal life*. Oxford: Polity.
- Nichols, S. & Jurvansuu, S. (2008). Partnership in Integrated Early Childhood Services: an analysis of policy framings in education and human services. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 9(2), 118-30.
- Oberhuemer, P. (2005). Conceptualising the Early Childhood Pedagogue: Policy Approaches and Issues of Professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 13(1), 5-16.
- OECD (2001). *Starting strong: early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD (2006). *Starting strong: early childhood education and care 2*. Paris: OECD.
- Opetushallitus [The Finnish National Board of Education]. (2004). *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet* [National Core Curriculum for Basic Education]. Helsinki. Retrieved from [http://www02.oph.fi/ops/perusopetus/pops\\_web.pdf](http://www02.oph.fi/ops/perusopetus/pops_web.pdf).
- Phillips, Anne. (2005). Participation, Inequality, Self-interest. In *Activating Participation. Parents and Teachers Working towards Partnership*, ed. G. Crozier and D. Reay, (pp.83-96). Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books.
- Pinkus, S. (2006). Applying a family systems perspective for understanding parent--professional relationships: a study of families located in the Anglo-Jewish community. *Support for Learning*, 21, (3), 156-61.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (2003).Governing the child and pedagogicalization of the parent. In M. N. Bloch, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist & T. S. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Governing Children, Families and Education. Restructuring the Welfare State*, (pp 35-61). New York: Palgrave.
- Powell, D. R. & Diamond, K. E. (1995). Approaches to parent-teacher relationships in U.S. early childhood programs during the twentieth century. *Journal of Education*, 177(3), 71-94.
- Prior, L. (2003). *Using Documents in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Reiman, J. W., Beck, L., Coppola, T. & Engiles, A. (2010). *Parents' Experiences with the IEP Process: Considerations for Improving Practice*. Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), Oregon.
- Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge, England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Stakes. (2003). *Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet* [National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland]. Helsinki: Stakes.
- Stakes. (2004). 'National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland.' Retrieved from <http://www.thl.fi/thl-client/pdfs/267671cb-0ec0-4039-b97b-7ac6ce6b9c10>.
- Stakes. (2005). 'Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet. Toinen tarkistettu painos.' ['National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.] Retrieved from <http://www.thl.fi/thl-client/pdfs/7eef5448-e8a3-4887-ab97-19719ea74066>.
- STM (2000). 'Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland.' Ministry of Social Affairs and Health Publications.
- Strandell, H. (2010). Policies of Early Childhood Education and Care – Partnership, and Individualisation. In A. T. Kjørholt & J. Qvortrup (Eds.), *The Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market: Child Care Policies and Practices at a Crossroad?*, (pp. 222-240). Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Strauss, A. L. & Corbin, J. L. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Sulkunen, P. (2007). Re-inventing the Social Contract. *Acta Sociologica*, 50(3), 325-33.
- Sulkunen, P. (2009). *The Saturated Society: Governing Risk and Lifestyles in Consumer Culture*. London: Sage.
- Suomen säädöskokoelma: Laki lasten päivähoidosta annetun lain muuttamisesta (1119/1985). [Finnish Legislation: Act on the changes on Day Care Act.]
- Taylor, C. (2006). Challenging partnerships in Australian early childhood education. *Early Years: Journal of International Research & Development*, 26(3), 249-65.
- Taylor, S. (2001). Locating and Conducting Discourse Analytic Research. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor & S. J. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse as Data. A Guide for Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Vallberg Roth, A-C. & Månsson, A. (2008). Individuella utvecklingsplaner som uttryck för reglerad barndom. Likriktning med variation [Individual development plans as expressions of regulated childhood – equivalence with variation]. *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige*, 13(2), 81-102.
- TeWhariki. (1996). Early Childhood Curriculum. Ministry of Education, New Zealand. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Whalley, M. (2001). *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
- Wood, L. A. & Kroger, R. O. (2000). *Doing Discourse Analysis. Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Vincent, C. & J. Martin. (2002). Class, Culture and Agency: researching parental voice. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 23(1), 108-27.
- Vincent, C., & Tomlinson, S. (1997). Home-school relationships: 'The swarming of disciplinary mechanisms'?. *British Educational Research Journal* 23(3), 361-377.
- Vuori, J. (2005). Ilmoita perhesuhteesi! [Tell Your Family Relations]. In V. Heikkinen (Ed.), *Tekstien arki. Tutkimusmatkoja jokapäiväisiin merkityksiimme* [The Everyday of Texts. Research on Daily Meanings], (pp.137-60). Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

**Appendix A.**

**Example 1.**

How do we resolve conflicts at home? \_\_\_\_\_

**Example 2.**

Interaction:

- a) In which ways can joy and sorrow be seen in your child?
- b) When does your child want to be alone?
- c) What is your child's attitude towards adults?

**Example 3.**

The child's emotional life (ways of expressing emotions, acceptance of boundaries):

\_\_\_\_\_

Description of the child's developmental phase(daily functioning, motor development, language development, learning skills and memory, cognitive skills):

\_\_\_\_\_

**Example 4.**

We have agreed the following (on) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

Child's emotions: \_\_\_\_\_

Experiences of day care: \_\_\_\_\_

Thinking and learning: \_\_\_\_\_

**Example 5.**

Date	What is the child practicing?	How? - in day care - at home	Goals and responsibilities of day care and practitioners	Evaluation

**Example 6**

Practices of daily care

- Eating (habits, eating sweets); sleeping; clothing and dressing; hygiene and toileting; good manners; limits set by the parents and by day care

Date and participants    Observations    Issues we discussed/agreed on    Follow-up of goals and their evaluation