

What is Best for the Child? Early Childhood Education and Care for Children under 3 Years of Age in Brazil and in Finland

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Abstract Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies and practices are local, historically and socially context-specific constructions. In addition to local ideals and policies, discursive practices concerning ECEC are influenced by universal ideals that are described and assigned by the member states of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This article examines the complex, culture-specific domestication of the universal commitment to the ‘best interests of the child’ in policies and curriculum guidance concerning ECEC for children under 3 years of age in two countries, Brazil and Finland. The qualitative case analysis is based on the main national policies and curricular guidelines on ECEC in both countries. Brazil and Finland both emphasize in their ECEC policies and curriculum guidance the rights of the (young) child to participation and protection. Similarities are also found in their emphasis on the educational nature of ECEC Institutions. Brazil is, however, more diverse in the treatment of its heterogeneous population. In Finland, the ‘best for the child’ is considered to be similar for all, i.e. the concept is domesticated uniformly across the entire population regardless of ethnicity or social class. In Brazil, in contrast, ‘the best’ is differentiated further for different strata of the population. In Brazil, ECEC policies aim to increase attendance in out-of-home care, whereas in Finland, the best for the

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youngest (0–3 years.) children unfolds as home care supported financially by the state.

Keywords Early childhood education policies · Two Country cases · Brazil · Finland · Under three-year-olds

Résumé Les politiques et les pratiques d'éducation et de garde de la petite enfance (EGPE) sont des constructions locales, historiquement et socialement liées à leur contexte spécifique. En plus des idéaux et des politiques locales, les pratiques discursives concernant l'EGPE sont influencées par les idéaux universels qui sont décrits et attribués par les États membres dans la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant des Nations Unies (1989). Cet article examine la domestication complexe et spécifique à la culture de l'engagement universel envers "le meilleur intérêt de l'enfant" dans les politiques et les orientations des programmes d'éducation et de garde des enfants de moins de trois ans dans deux pays, le Brésil et la Finlande. L'analyse qualitative de cas est basée sur les principales politiques et lignes directrices nationales des programmes en EGPE dans les deux pays. Dans leurs politiques et lignes directrices de programme en EGPE, le Brésil et la Finlande mettent tous deux l'accent sur les droits des (jeunes) enfants à la participation et à la protection. On trouve aussi des similitudes dans l'accent qu'ils mettent sur la nature éducative des institutions d'EGPE. Le Brésil est toutefois plus diversifié dans le traitement de sa population hétérogène. En Finlande, le « mieux pour l'enfant » est considéré comme semblable pour tous, c'est à dire que le concept est domestiqué uniformément à travers la population entière, indépendamment de l'appartenance ethnique ou de la classe sociale. Au Brésil, au contraire, « le mieux » est différencié davantage selon les différentes strates de la population. Au Brésil, les politiques d'EGPE visent à augmenter la fréquentation de services en dehors de la famille, alors qu'en Finlande, le mieux pour les plus jeunes (0–3 ans) enfants se révèle être la garde familiale avec l'appui financier de l'État.

Resúmen Las políticas y prácticas de educación y cuidado de la primera infancia (AEPI) son locales, representando construcciones específicas de contextos históricos y sociales. Sin embargo, además de los ideales y políticas locales, las prácticas discursivas relativas a la AEPI son influenciadas también por los ideales universales que son descritos y asignados por los estados miembros de las Naciones Unidas en la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño (1989). Este artículo examina el complejo proceso de la « domesticación » (conocimiento y dominio) que la cultura específica hace del compromiso universal incorporado en las políticas que buscan "los mejores intereses para el niño" y la orientación curricular en relación la educación infantil y la atención a los niños menores de tres años de edad en dos países, Brasil y Finlandia. El análisis cualitativo de casos se basa en las principales políticas nacionales y las directrices curriculares de la AEPI de los dos países. Tanto Brasil como Finlandia enfatizan en sus políticas y en la orientación curricular los derechos del (joven) niño a la participación y a la protección. Las similitudes también se encuentran en su énfasis en la naturaleza educacional de las instituciones de AEPI. Brasil es, sin embargo, más diverso en el tratamiento de su población heterogénea.

En Finlandia, “lo mejor para el niño” es considerado como similar para todos, es decir, el concepto es adoptado de manera uniforme a toda la población, independientemente de su origen étnico o clase social. En Brasil, en contraste, ‘lo mejor’ es aún más diferenciado para los diferentes estratos de la población. En Brasil, las políticas de AEPI tienen como objetivo aumentar la asistencia en el cuidado, mientras que en Finlandia, lo mejor para los más pequeños (0–3 años) se considera como la búsqueda de posibilidades de desarrollar estrategias diferentes como la atención domiciliaria con el apoyo financiero del Estado.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies and practices are historically and socially context-specific constructions that vary among different countries and communities within countries (Fleer et al. 2009). Besides the universal ideals described and assigned by the member states of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), educational policies and practices are guided by local ideals and specific discursive practices that address the child, the family, and the role of the state in out-of-home care. In order to examine these aspects, this study investigated the complex, culture-specific ‘domestication’ (Alasuutari and Alasuutari 2012; Alasuutari 2009) of the universal commitment to the ‘best interests of the child’ in national policies and curriculum guidance for ECEC for children under 3 years of age in two very different cultural and socio-political contexts: Brazil and Finland. The domestication framework claims that exogenous policy models and arguments are actively adapted and adopted by nation-states, and in this process, the practices imposed by global blueprints are significantly shaped by local conditions and discourses (Alasuutari 2009). In this manner, the meaning and consequences of the national and local practices can differ significantly from their origin, despite being veiled in universal rhetoric, such as that of the ‘best interests of the child’.

Brazil and Finland were selected for comparative investigation because they represent very different cases in terms of the diversity and size of their respective populations, as well as differences in political and historical background and current economic status. As such, it is assumed that the above universal ideals will have specific local translations when interlinked with local ECEC practices.¹ The heterogeneous cultural, social and economic status of the people and states in Brazil present very different challenges with regard to early childhood services compared to the relatively homogeneous population and public service structure in Finland.

The primary focus of the study was on the youngest children in institutional out-of-home care, as the education and care of the youngest are entangled in a range of tensions between institutional and domestic care and education, particularly in terms

¹ Our perspective on the two country cases is that of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’: one Finnish author spent more than 3 years in Brazil, while one Brazilian author visited Finland briefly and has lived outside of Brazil. Our analysis is done collaboratively linking both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives on the two countries. Originally, our comparative approach was motivated by various contrasting and divergent observations that illuminated the practices we observed, making the ‘familiar strange’ in a comparative context (Piattoeva 2010).

of the values, roles and responsibilities of the parents, practitioners and states. Strong discourses on the priority of mother's care are being challenged by structural changes in societies and an increasing need for an out-of-home work force, as well as by the emphasis on life-long learning, early intervention and equality through institutional care. At the same time, new scientific knowledge on the developmental abilities of 0–3-year-olds has changed current understanding, creating pressure to re-evaluate ECEC practices. Previous knowledge highlighting the importance of the experiences of the first 3 years of life with respect to child well-being and development is being complemented with critically debated views on young children's participation and 'voice' in early childhood services (e.g. Johansson and White 2011). By placing the spotlight on the most controversial age group—the youngest children at the juncture of institutional and domestic care—we attempted to tease out the context-specific discourses and practices related to the domestication of the 'best interests of the child' in Finland and Brazil.

In the following, we first discuss the term 'best interests of the child' and then present our methodological approach, which build on domestication and comparative methodology. After presenting a general overview of ECEC in both countries, we then describe and discuss the results of the domestication of the 'best interests of the child' concept with respect to under threes in the national contexts of Brazil and Finland.

The 'Best Interests of the Child'

The starting point for the present analysis was the ideal of the 'best interests of the child' presented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The roots for this commitment can be traced to the years following the Second World War, when international communities such as the United Nations engaged in extensive discussions on human rights and, particularly, children's rights, leading to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959). Based on the notions of physical and mental immaturity, a child needs special protection and care, including legal means for protection both before and after birth. This original declaration explicitly stated the importance of strong investment in childhood and childhood happiness for the benefit of nations and individuals. Local authorities and national governments were called to recognize these rights and to pursue them through legislation and other means. In 1989, following slow progress in the defence of childhood and the rights of the child, the United Nations introduced a more powerful document—the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In the following year, the Convention gained the status of international law through ratification by 193 Countries, including Finland and Brazil.

The principle of 'the best interests of the child' is introduced in Article 3 of the Convention: 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, *the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.*' (1989, italics added). Instead of providing a concrete definition of 'best', various articles of the convention characterize this principle by referring

to the well-being of the child and addressing various responsibilities of states regarding children's rights to participation, protection, and provision. Following this, the interpretation of 'best interests' is dependent on the interpretation of children's rights, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents, extended family and/or other persons legally responsible for the child. Thus, the ideal manifests itself as an overarching principle to be applied in ECEC, even though there is no 'universal yardstick by which children's best interests can be measured' (Kjørholt 2008, p. 15).

The Convention does, however, contain the following aspects that are generally or clearly applicable to early childhood educational services:

- Need for special safeguards and care by reason of physical and mental immaturity (Preamble/introduction).
- Principle of equality and diversity; children's rights should be respected and ensured free of any kind of discrimination (Article 2); they also have the right to enjoy their own culture and language (Article 30).
- Family as the 'fundamental group of society and the natural environment for ... growth and well-being' should be afforded 'the necessary protection and assistance' (Preamble; Articles 12, 27, 3, 5).
- Standards for care in institutions and accessibility; 'States parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established ... particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision' (Article 3); and 'States parties shall ... ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services' (Article 18).
- Children's right to education that develops the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities (Articles 28, 29); 'child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society' (Preamble).
- Principle of right of free expression of views in all matters affecting the child, where the views are given due weight in accordance with age and maturity (Article 12).
- Children's right to rest and leisure, play and recreational activities (Article 31).

By considering these principles of the Convention regarding the 'best interests of the child' and with the spotlight on the youngest children (0–3 years.), the goal of this work was to investigate the complex, culture-specific 'domestication' (Alasuutari and Alasuutari 2012; Alasuutari 2009) of this universal commitment in the national policies and curriculum guidance for ECEC in Brazil and Finland.

Domestication and Comparative Paradigm

The domestication concept refers to the processes and outcomes of the adaptation of exogenous models to local conditions and originates from research on the adaptation of new technology in domestic routines by Alasuutari (2009). Among other phenomena, domestication has been recently applied to the field of early childhood

education for the purpose of understanding how international trends are domesticated with respect to local conditions (Alasuutari and Alasuutari 2012). The domestication framework builds on world culture theory in that it assumes international policy models and arguments to influence action at the local level, and claims that international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank or the OECD, function as central carriers of world culture (Meyer and Kamens 1992, p. 168, in Dale 2000, p. 435). As suggested by Soysal (1994), the discursive frames facilitated by global models both provide models for and restrict the actions and policies of nation-states. By acting upon these principles, nation-states reproduce them and the definitions of the global system (ibid.). In other words, states articulate their interests and mobilize new policies and strategies according to what is acceptable and available within the broader institutional environment (ibid., p. 33). The domestication paradigm, instead of simply claiming convergence, takes into account the active local translation of global models and the resulting changes to both the local context and the model (Alasuutari and Alasuutari 2012). As we claim above, universal declarations are prone to various interpretations due to the ambiguous and contested nature of the principles and values they embody. These interpretations are necessarily context-bound. Thus, in each national case, ‘the best interests of the child’ are negotiated against internationally accepted norms and domestic conditions and cultural expectations, leading to results that both make the ambiguous international models concrete and preserve cross-national heterogeneity despite globalization.

The domestication paradigm offers a logical point of entry for the cross-national, comparative analysis undertaken in the present article. In examining the assumption that the influence of global models (in the form of policies, norms and internationally accepted arguments) at the national level is conditioned by local circumstances, it is crucial to examine how exogenous models are adopted in as diverse settings as possible. To this end, we draw on the comparative logic of ‘individualizing comparison’ (Tilly 1984) and ‘contrast of contexts’ (Skocpol and Somers 1980). These methods share similar premises in seeking ‘to contrast specific instances of a given phenomenon as a means of grasping the peculiarities of each case’ (Tilly 1984, p. 82) and ‘to bring out the unique features of each particular case ... and to show how these unique features affect the working-out of putatively general social processes’ (Skocpol and Somers 1980, p. 178). The logic of the individualizing comparison is well captured in the metaphor of the mirror: one national setting is treated as a reversing mirror that sheds light on the distinct characteristics of the other case (see Tilly 1984, p. 90). In this manner, the cases offer a commentary on one another’s character (Geertz 1971 in Skocpol and Somers 1980, p. 179), and therefore, ‘increase the “visibility” of one structure by contrasting it with another’ (Bendix 1977, pp. 16–17 in Skocpol and Somers 1980, p. 180). The analytical return of this comparative methodology is maximized when as different cases as possible are chosen for comparison (ibid., p. 179), thus, justifying the choice of Finland and Brazil as the case countries. It is important to bear in mind that the world culture and domestication approaches do not lead us to examine the effects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) on national policies in any linear manner. Instead, we approach the Convention as an instance of

world culture or globally floating ideas on good childhood and care, and we are interested in how these broad notions are translated and integrated at the national level.

Research Data and Methods

Despite apparent differences in the general organization of care for young children, both countries define their ECEC practices through national policies and curriculum guidelines that include general information on the legislative background, guiding values and definitions of ECEC services. In Finland, regulation of ECEC activities occurs in a de-centralized manner, through indirect guidance and information provision by the Ministry of Education (before 2013 by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health). The National Curriculum Guidelines for ECEC (2005) provide a national tool, a core plan, for planning and guiding ECEC at the local level. In Brazil, according to the national framework, the planning and definition of pedagogical practices should also occur at the local level. All day care centres, both public (non-profit) and private, are required to draw up a pedagogical plan or a political-pedagogical project in order to be eligible for a municipal licence to operate (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1996). Despite apparent similarities, in comparison to Finland, the Ministry of Education in Brazil offers an extensive number of national documents on, for example, children's rights in ECEC and quality guidelines, as well as many other sources available online for states, municipalities, ECEC professionals and a wider audience.

Both countries have national legislation and a constitution that generally defines the rights and roles of citizens. For the purpose of our analysis, national legislation that directly addresses either ECEC practices or the rights of the child in and to care and education were selected. The Brazilian documents included the *Statute on the Child and the Adolescent* (Law 8.069/1990), *National Education Guidelines and Framework (LDB)* (Law 9.394/1996), *Law on Maternity Leave* (Law 11.770/2008), and *National Ten-Year Plan for Education* (Law 8.035/2010). In Finland, the examined legislation included the *Act on Children's Day Care* (36/1973) and *Act on Child Home Care Allowance and Private Care Allowance* (1128/1996). In addition, the main national policies and curricular guidelines for ECEC were identified and analysed; from Brazil, the *National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education*, vol. 1–3 (1998), the *National Policy Definition on ECEC: 0- to 6-Year-Olds' Right to Education* (2006), the *National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education* (2010); and, from Finland, the *Decision in Principle of the Council of State Concerning the National Policy Definition on ECEC* (2002) (hereinafter Decision in Principle) and the *National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland* (2005) were selected.

Within these documents, we first identified discussions regarding 'under threes', 'zero to threes', or the 'youngest children'. In the Finnish curricular guidelines, children are mainly referred to generically as 'child', 'children', or sometimes 'younger' and 'older' children (see Rutanen 2011) without explicit reference to the children's age. In Brazil, depending on the document, children are either discussed

in general terms or a clear distinction is made between zero- to three-year-olds and four- to six-year-olds, as in the National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998). The sequences of texts referring to the ‘youngest’ were then investigated through qualitative thematic content analysis, in which the principles of the ‘best interests of the child’ presented above were applied as lenses to guide the observation and interpretation of parallels and differences.

The legislative and curriculum guidance documents contained a number of contradictions and ambiguities and represented a controversial, rather than clear-cut and uniformly voiced, discussion (see also Onnismaa and Kalliala 2010). This illustrated that education and care for under threes are a contentious matter, fuelled by various voices and actors representing religious perspectives, scientific knowledge, diverse cultural practices and economic conditions. The preliminary reading also showed that the documents differed enormously in terms of rhetoric, assumed audience and the details of discussion. Following the domestic, socio-cultural and historically specific conditions of ECEC practices in both nations, the national documents were formulated to respond to very diverse needs, as apparent, for instance, in the selection of issues and the argumentation used in the documents. Thus, in addition to analysing the content of themes related to the ‘youngest’ children, the analysis was extended to the general argumentation concerning the ‘best interests of the child’ in the diverse documents that set the stage for ECEC practices. In the following, we first present a general overview of the case countries, and then discuss the results of the analysis in terms of three broad themes: (1) *Where and by whom should children be cared for?* (2) *How to care for and educate the youngest?* and (3) *The tension between equality of care and socio-economic diversity.*

Overview of ECEC in Brazil and in Finland

Brazil and Finland are characterized by enormous differences in history, economic development, cultural tradition, religion and ethnic background. In Brazil, levels of economic and social development vary significantly between social classes, with the richest 20 % having a standard of living comparable to the developed nations (Rossetti-Ferreira et al. 2002). Diversity and inequality within Brazil are measured based on extensive statistical data in various areas of development, education and working life (ibid.). Other authors suggest that in terms of service structure organization and policy making, diversity within Brazil is sustained by the federal system of government, which incorporates states that not only follow federal guidelines but also have freedom to create their own policies (Freitas et al. 2009, p. 281). Finland, on the other hand, is a country within the European Union, characterized by extensive development of the Nordic welfare state service system after the Second World War, with a recent redirection of its welfare policies in a neoliberal direction (Strandell 2010; see also Karila 2012).

A comparative overview of the structure and historical background of ECEC in the case Countries is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of early childhood education and care in Brazil and Finland

	Brazil	Finland
Historical background of ECEC	Provision of care for poor families with an emphasis on health education. Currently: emphasis on citizenship	Provision of care for poor families and emphasis on health education. Currently: play-based curriculum
Institutions for over and under threes	Nursery (crèche) for under threes and pre-school (pre-escola) for over threes	Since 1973 no division between under threes (nurseries) and over threes (kindergarten)
Attendance rates	0-3-year-olds 18.4 % and 4-6-year-olds 76 % in non-domestic care	1-year-olds 31 %, 2-year-olds 50 %, and 3-year-olds 67 % in non-domestic care
Starting age in institutional care; state support for home care	Youngest children around 4 months old; paid maternity and parental leave 4-6 months	Youngest children around 10 months old; paid maternity and parental leave 10 months followed by home care allowance until 3 years of age
Adult-child ratio (legislation)	0-2-year-olds 1 adult to 6-8 children; 3-year-olds 1 adult to 15 children	0-3-year-olds 1 adult to 4 children; 3-6-year-olds 1 adult to 7 children
Central administration	Before 1996 ECEC for 0-3-year-olds under the Ministry of Social Affairs; for 4-6-year-olds under the Ministry of Education. Since 1996, all ECEC transferred to the Ministry of Education	Before 2013, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Since 2013, under the Ministry of Education and Culture.
Forms of care (funding)	Public (state, municipal) and private day care centres (NGOs, non-profit organizations, philanthropy, entrepreneurs). Family day care (not promoted) or private nannies.	Majority are public (municipal), also some private day care centres. Family day care has been popular for the youngest children (0-3 years.), but is currently decreasing rapidly. Private nannies also optional, but seldom used.
Training requirements	Bachelor's, Master's or ECE course at university	With under threes, one in three should have bachelor-level training in ECE; two with secondary level training (nursery nurses). Family day care minders complete a few weeks' course.
General observations	In practice, mostly separate systems for higher socio-economic groups (private day care) and compensatory approach for the others. Enormous heterogeneity in different states and between rural and urban areas.	Relatively homogeneous in terms of resources and practices. Parents typically opt for home care for the youngest (0-3 years.), facilitated by extensive home care allowances.

Sources: Campos et al. (2006), Ministry of Justice, Finland (1973), (2005), Freitas et al. (2009), Karila (2012), Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil (1996), Ministry of Education, Brazil (2010b) Niikko (2006), OECD (2006), Strandell (2010), Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos (2010), Välimäki (1998)

Where and by Whom Should Children be Cared for?

In their ECEC policies, both countries refer to legislation that defines day care as a right of the child, an option for families and an obligation of the state. Children have a right to out-of-home care before compulsory school age (six in Brazil, seven in Finland) (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1996; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002). However, the ‘best’ place to care for young children is defined somewhat differently in the countries’ ECEC policies. In Brazil, this is described fairly explicitly, whereas in Finland it is defined more implicitly, not as a clear goal, but in terms of ‘what is usually done’.

The Brazilian National Education Guidelines and Framework Law and National Policy Definition state that children have a right to care, free of charge, in non-domestic settings, i.e. care that extends beyond that offered in relatives’ homes and non-professional family day care settings (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1996; Ministry of Education, Brazil 2006, pp. 12–16). Institutional ECEC is characterized as a national goal for the youngest: in Brazil’s Ten-Year Plan for education, one of the main aims is to increase under-three-year-olds’ attendance in non-domestic ECEC services to 50 % by 2020 (Ministry of Education Brazil 2010b). In contrast, in Finland, institutional care for infants and very young children is not discussed as a goal in the Decision in Principle defining the national goals and values for ECEC. Contrary to Brazilian policies, family day care is presented as an available option for the youngest, even though there is an increasing shortage in the availability of such care: ‘parents are often looking specifically for care provided in the care minder’s own home, particularly in the case of very small children or families where the parents are on shift work. It is important to ensure the continued availability of this form of care.’ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002, p. 14). In addition, home care-oriented practices are facilitated by the Finnish parental leave allowance system, home care allowances and an extra allowance that many municipalities offer to families (Ministry of Justice, Finland 1996; see also Karila 2012). These aim at prioritizing home care for under threes, as stated in the Decision in Principle: ‘Society provides support to help parents take care of newborn babies and small children themselves at home’ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002, p. 10). In other words, parents’ right to benefit from child care services as described in the Convention (1989, Article 18) is guaranteed but with an explicit emphasis on home care.

According to the statistics, in both countries, a majority of under three-year-olds do not attend any organized form of full-day day care outside the family, regardless of the child’s subjective right and state subsidized funding for families in line with the principles of the Convention (1989, Article 18). Particularly in Brazil, this state of affairs highlights the existing contradiction between policies promoting institutionalized collective day care and low actual attendance rates (see Table 1). Diverse child care arrangements are being made in families, regardless of the ‘best for the child’ proposed in the national policies and plans. The Brazilian statistics indicate that out-of-home care attendance for children under threes is closely linked to the socio-economic level of the family. Families of lower socio-economic level

tend to rely more on home care, and a similar tendency is observed with women with low educational background (Mello 2011).

The legislation and policies not only characterize the ‘best place’ for the ‘youngest’ but also define who should take care and educate the children and how. Both countries also address the central question of the roles and responsibilities of parents and professionals in taking care of the child. In both countries, in line with the Convention (1989, Articles 12, 27), parents are defined as bearing the main responsibility for the well-being, caring for and responding to the needs of the child (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002; Ministry of Education, Brazil 2006). The national policy in Brazil (*ibid.*) defines the role of professionals in ECEC as complementing the role of the family in this task. Similarly, the Finnish national policy states that parents carry the main responsibility for the education and well-being of the child, and that the ‘central function of daycare...is to support the parents in nurturing and educating their child’ (*ibid.* p. 12). This characterization is in line with the Convention, in which assistance afforded to families is underlined (1989, Preamble; Article 18).

In the Finnish and Brazilian legislative and curriculum guidance documents, the general ideal of the ‘best interests of the child’ is seldom explicitly mentioned. In the Finnish curriculum guidance, ‘the best interests of the child’ is explicitly mentioned in the context of educational partnership with parents: ‘ECEC partnership is built on the child’s needs, and the realization of the *child’s best interests* and rights being the guiding principle in all ECEC activities’ (National Curriculum Guidelines...2005, p. 31, italics added). Parents and professionals are both viewed as being in a position to offer information about an individual child in order to determine appropriate educational practices for that child. In other words, in Finland, in the ideal case, ‘the best’ for the child is interpreted and negotiated in dialogue between parents and professionals who each contribute relevant information to the discussions (see also Karila 2012). As a contrast to Finland, Brazil’s National Curriculum Reference openly addresses the dilemmas that institutions might encounter in working with families with very diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Regarding ‘educational partnership’, the curriculum reference explicitly warns against discriminating against poor parents and adopting moralist attitudes towards families (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil vol. 1. 1998, p. 75). In curriculum, a reference is made to ‘the latest insights’ and ‘most recent theoretical ideas’ to support its argumentation to practitioners; thus, new scientific knowledge is used as a tool for argumentation to offer practitioners an alternative to possibly discriminating perspectives.

In addition to legislation on the minimum educational requirements for professionals (Ministry of Education, Brazil 2010a, b; Ministry of Justice, Finland 2005), the curricular guidelines in both countries characterize the ‘ideal’ caretaker for the youngest children. This discussion is particularly explicit in Brazil. The characterization of the caretaker in Brazil reflects the existing division into ‘nurseries’ for birth to three-year-olds and ‘pre-schools’ for four- to six-year-olds (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1996). The National Curriculum Reference explicitly attempts to overcome the strong historical discourses that have defined ECEC professionals as ‘substitutes for the mother’, whose main role

has been to respond to the emotional needs of the children. This conception is now replaced with professionalism that goes beyond ‘just’ a loving and personal relationship with the child (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998, p. 18; see also Campos et al. 2006). In other words, it is not in the ‘best interests of the child’ to base ECEC professionalism solely on mother-like practice.

In Finland, the role of the professionals is discussed more in terms of what should be done with the ‘youngest’ (see next section). In terms of educational requirements, for each group of 12 children aged zero to three, one professional in three must have bachelor-level training in ECEC, and two should have secondary level training (nursery nurses), while family day care minders are required to complete a course lasting a few weeks (Ministry of Justice, Finland 2005). For three- to six-year-olds, the ratio is seven children to one professional. In other words, similar to Brazil, when addressing the ‘suitability of the staff’ (see 1989, Article 3), younger children require more adults than older children (see Table 1)—but the professionals in both age-groups have similar educational requirements, excluding family day care minders.

How to Care for and Educate the Youngest?

The Brazilian and Finnish legislative and curriculum guidance documents differ in how they describe the youngest children and ECEC practices based on children’s ‘needs’. While the Finnish documents focus on the ‘general’ child, in some cases ‘younger’ and ‘older’ children are also mentioned. Although the division between nurseries and kindergartens was abolished in 1973 (Ministry of Justice, Finland 1973), ‘younger’ can be interpreted as referring to the ‘under threes’, which are still grouped separately in most day care centres (see also Rutanen 2011). According to the Finnish guidelines, ‘the younger the child is the more she/he needs to be cared for by adults’ (National Curriculum Guidelines...2005, p. 16). Although care, education and teaching are seen as intertwining dimensions in ECEC (see also Niikko 2006), the curriculum guidelines state that ‘these dimensions receive a different emphasis according to *the age of the child and the situation. The younger the child is the greater the extent to which interactions between the child and educators take place in care situations*’ (ibid., italics added), adding that these situations also include education and teaching. In other words, in ideal conditions, ‘very young children’ are positioned in a caring relationship with an adult. Furthermore, the relation with same-age peers is set in doubt: ‘very young children play in interaction with adults or older children’ (ibid., p. 21).

Brazil’s curricular framework for ECEC still openly reflects the history of the country’s two parallel systems, separately serving the poorer population (nurseries) and those of higher socio-economic status (kindergartens) across all age levels. In an attempt to address this situation, current policies emphasize that the traditional role of nurseries—which used to focus mainly on health, hygiene and nutrition—has changed towards a more integrated approach in care and education, also for the youngest (Ministry of Education, Brazil 2006; Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998; Freitas et al. 2009). This emphasis has been reinforced by the inclusion

of early childhood education for under threes ('nurseries') in the Brazilian Constitution under 'education' (Presidency of the Republic, Brazil 1988) and with the inclusion of ECEC for birth to six-year-olds as a first step in the national basic educational system (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1996).

Brazil's National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education offers a detailed developmental psychological account of young children's development from birth, infancy, and initial separation from mother towards autonomy. Particular attention is paid to the 'beginning of day care attendance' (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998), where the particularities of arranging the first days of care for infants are described. The assumption is that infants attend out-of-home care and they, as well as their parents, need special attention in the adaptation process. There are also detailed descriptions of care and possible educational activities for the youngest children, such as the organization of meals and physical activities such as infant massage (*ibid.*). Somewhat different to the Finnish perspective, the National Curriculum Reference underlines child's social environment, discussing relations with peers during children's first year of age and caretakers' role in providing an environment that affords interaction among infants (*ibid.*, p. 31; Rossetti-Ferreira et al. 2010).

In addition, the construction of child identity through dialogical relationship between the caretaker and the child is also mentioned (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998). Besides presenting children's needs as organic, biological 'basic needs', they are also presented as socially and culturally constructed and valued, identified and responded to differently in different settings. In addition, the guidelines contribute to the new ethos in which children are seen as subjects and citizens and are described as actors emphasizing their right to social participation. Parallel to the agentive approach, the Constitution (Presidency of the Republic, Brazil 1988) and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (The National Congress, Brazil 1990) underline the notion of the child as living a particular moment of development and with particular rights to protection.

The dual emphasis on children's vulnerability and participation rights is also visible in the Finnish policies and guidelines, where children's right to secured growth, development and learning is emphasized together with secure and healthy environments that allow a range of activities (National Curriculum Guidelines...2005). As a value is placed on 'gradual build-up of autonomy', practices are coloured by children's need for protection and parallel right to participation. A direct reference to the Convention (1989, Article 12) is apparent in the requirement to 'listen to children': one of the leading principles in Finnish ECEC is children's right to 'receive understanding and have their say *in accordance with their age and maturity*' (*ibid.*, p. 12, italics added). Clearly, in relation to 0- to 3-year-old children, such a right is challenging to interpret, as the characterization of the 'young child' draws on developmental approaches that emphasize the development of subjectivity along with *verbal language*. Similarly, Becker (2007), in discussing the Brazilian context, states that children's participation rights under the Convention are conditional, as rights are to be considered in relation to *children's developmental maturity*. The challenge of communicating with young children is also presented in the Brazilian National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education and

Sports, Brazil 1998): the younger the child, the more challenging it is to attribute meaning to children's knowledge due to a lack of verbal communication. The role of caretaker is, thus, framed as a 'sensitive interpreter' able to interpret and build on the existing knowledge of the child.

In general, the Finnish and Brazilian curricular guidelines both emphasize that children have different developmental and age related needs that need to be taken into consideration in planning the space for care and education (National Curriculum Guidelines...2005; Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998). Again, the Brazilian National Curriculum Reference is more specific in describing the needs of the youngest children and the environment suitable for responding to those needs. For example, it is explicitly noted that birth to one-year-olds require space for crawling and experimenting with their first steps and for interacting with other children (ibid.).

The Tension Between Equality of Care and Socio-economic Diversity

In the Finnish curriculum guidelines, the values of ECEC are stated as following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), national legislation and other guidelines. Related to the central value of human dignity, four overall principles are stated as applicable: in addition to the '*child's best interest*' they are '*non-discrimination and equal treatment*', '*the child's right to life and full development*' and '*giving due weight to the views of the child*' (National Curriculum Guidelines...2005, p. 12). Similarly, the Decision in Principle underlines that, following the Convention, the 'best interests of the child are to be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children' (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002, p. 15).

In its description of ECEC principles and 'ideal' practices, the Decision in Principle emphasizes that children must be treated equally as individuals (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002, p. 15). This requirement is contextualized by referring to family background as a source of *possible inequality*: 'society's role is to ensure the availability of good quality day care for all children irrespective of their family's socioeconomic position or other social status or the area in which they live' (ibid., p. 16), and further: 'Quality early childhood education *smooths out differences* due to the children's home environment and in this way gives all children the chance to develop according to their own capacities.' (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002, pp. 15–16 italics added). In this characterization, it is assumed that children have a 'capacity' or developmental path that can be achieved by excluding the effects of family background. The picture is more complex, however, as the Decision in Principle also acknowledges children's right to 'their own culture': 'The children of cultural minorities should have the opportunity to grow up as members of their own culture and of Finnish society' (ibid.). This Finnish policy emphasis reflects the notion of a somewhat homogeneous nation-state with a small number of ethnic minorities in comparison to Brazil (see also Vandebroek 2007).

In Brazil, the policies and curricular framework for ECEC are more specific and elaborate with respect to diverse family and cultural backgrounds. Diversity is brought to the fore, and sensitivity is emphasized in relation to children from

different backgrounds and language traditions, and children from rural areas. Minority children are acknowledged as equal members of society and, explicitly, as being entitled to have their own cultural background incorporated as a starting point for ECEC planning and implementation (Ministry of Education and Sports Brazil 1998; Ministry of Education, Brazil 2010a). According to the National Curriculum Reference, diversity enhances joint learning: *'The cultural plurality... ethnic diversity as well as diversity of beliefs, traditions and values that characterize the Brazilian population, are defining principles in the ECEC institutions. Work with diversity and 'living together' with differences broadens the horizons of practitioners and children alike..'* (Ministry of Education and Sports, Brazil 1998, vol. 1, p. 78). Similarly, the value of professionals with diverse backgrounds (socio-economic level, gender and ethnicity) is underscored for 'learning to live together' (ibid.).

Similar to Finland, but with a stronger emphasis on poverty, Brazil acknowledges the unequal starting points of children (Ministry of Education, Brazil 2010a) and, as a result, ECEC is structured to be sensitive to diversity and inequality. The Brazilian documents highlight the importance of sensitivity to structural inequalities and vulnerabilities and the challenges presented by the country's extremely diverse economic conditions. Following this, in the National Ten-Year Plan for Education, the justification for improvement of quality and universal access to ECEC services is based strongly on economic benefits to society as well as the fight against poverty and enhancement of social equality (Ministry of Education, Brazil 2010b).

In some respects, the Brazilian legislation and policies still bear echoes of the early origins of ECEC in the fight against poverty and the (poor) family as related sources of unfavourable influence in the child's life. Previous analyses of the policy framework suggest similar observations. For the poor, rural, predominantly black and indigenous population, the policies follow a 'needs approach', whereas for the higher socio-economic class, the service provision is more related to the 'discourse on rights', similar to the discourses in wealthier countries (Rossetti-Ferreira et al. 2002, referring to Jonsson 1998).

Discussion

This study attempted to investigate the complex, context-specific 'domestication' of the universal commitment to the 'best interests of the child' within national legislation, policies and curriculum guidance for ECEC in Brazil and in Finland. The focus was on care and education policies for the youngest children, i.e. under threes, as this age bracket, being positioned at the juncture of institutional and domestic care and education, is exposed to a range of tensions. Due to the fact that ECEC policies and practices constitute historically and socially context-specific constructions, it was assumed that universal ideals, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), would lead to particular translations when interlinked with local contexts and specific discursive practices. Brazil and Finland were selected for a comparative investigation as they represent very different cases in our attempt to increase the visibility of one structure by contrasting it with another.

Both Brazilian and Finnish governments underline the central value of human dignity and the child's right to life and full development, stressing that children should be treated equally as individuals (1989, Article 3). Thus, both countries have constructed their policies not merely for the sake of fulfilling an obligation to guarantee day care services (Article 18), but as a means to promote children's rights to participation, protection and provision in accordance with the international Convention. Both countries also define day care as a *right of the child* before compulsory school age.

Our analysis suggests that the characterization of the 'best' place for care, education and well-being for young children varies. In Finland, home care-oriented practices are privileged, and family day care is presented as the 'often preferred' option by parents for the under threes, despite a decrease in supply of these services. In contrast, in Brazil, non-domestic settings for care and education for the youngest are set as a goal, and local governments are determined to increase attendance in such institutions. The definitions of 'best' or 'right' place for the young child and the 'right' person to take care of the child were identified as being deeply related to the wider economic, political and social conditions of each country. In Finland, home care is facilitated by parental leave allowances, whereas in Brazil, non-domestic settings are understood as an important means to overcome poverty, structural inequalities and vulnerabilities. As attendance rates are closely linked to the socio-economic status of families, this goal is particularly aimed at families of lower socio-economic status who are in receipt of public services.

In both countries, parents are considered to bear the main responsibility for children's well-being (see Preamble, Articles 12, 27, 3, 5), with professionals complementing this task in ECEC (Article 3). Interestingly, a somewhat different account of this 'partnership' is presented in the legislative and curriculum guidance documents of the two countries. In Finland, practices are based on negotiation between parents and professionals and jointly agreed definition of the individual needs of the child (see also Karila 2012). Other analyses of Finnish policies argue that the construct of a 'weak family' in need of constant support and guidance has formed the background for legitimizing the 'relatively heavy emphasis on social work' in Finnish ECEC practices (Onnismaa 2010 in Onnismaa and Kalliala 2010, p. 273). In Brazil, a note of concern is raised in relation to possible tensions and conflicts. Here, the 'best for the child' is constructed in sensitive, and potentially tense, negotiations among various actors, where the boundaries and interpretations of 'partnership' depend on the educational background and socio-economic level of the parents and the professionals.

In both countries children's needs are presented as either biological 'basic needs' (see Preamble) or as socially and culturally constructed, reflecting the notion of children as subjects, citizens and actors in their everyday life (see Article 12). There is, thus, a dual emphasis on children's abilities, which encompasses vulnerability and needs for protection in parallel with participation rights. With their somewhat vague descriptions, both countries' policies reflect the challenge that this age group presents for policy and practice, that is, how to define participation for children who lack verbal communication (see e.g. Johansson and White 2011). Within this context, the professional's role oscillates from being a 'substitute for the mother'

towards a professional mastering the practices of care, education and teaching (Articles 28, 29). Thus, there is ambivalence and ambiguity with regard to caring for and educating young children, which is reflected in the diverse ways in which young children's social relations and activities are understood and valued (Article 31). Brazil exhibits a stronger emphasis on peer interaction within a social group formed by children of similar age, as compared to Finland.

One significant area of tension and ambivalence identified in both countries related to equality of care and diversity of child background (see Articles 2, 30). Both countries refer to family background as a possible source of inequality. In Finland, the emphasis is on paving the way for equal development for all children across the board 'regardless' of family background—despite its inescapable influence—while at the same time attempting to recognise, the right of children of cultural minorities to 'their own culture'. In Brazil, diversity is more widely discussed in terms of gender, ethnicity and the cultural backgrounds, language traditions and regional identity (urban/rural) of families and professionals, and within this complexity, minority children are entitled to have their own particular cultural background as a starting point for ECEC planning. However, prominent calls for non-discrimination and equal treatment, critical voices have been raised regarding the actual, discriminating practices (Rossetti-Ferreira et al. 2002).

In conclusion, Brazil and Finland have both issued national policies and ECEC guidelines aimed at achieving the overarching principle of the 'best interests of the child' regardless of the broad spectrum of differences in local, contextual practices within each country. By examining selected articles of the Convention within the paradigm of domestication, it was possible to illustrate how translations of the 'best interests' are conditioned by local interpretations of children's rights and of the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and the state.

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