

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA AND FINLAND: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

IRIS HAPPO

ABSTRACT

I was fortunate to receive a Fulbright scholarship to share my early childhood education expertise in West Central Minnesota. The main goals were to collaborate with partners in West Central Initiative Foundation while they were developing their early care and education system and to teach at the University of Minnesota Morris. I toured early care and education programs, met staff, gave presentations on the Finnish education system, and taught at the University of Minnesota Morris.

Keywords: early childhood education • pedagogy • Minnesota



INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a developmentally critical period in a human's life. Safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate care and education are a basic need during those first years, and people around the world are aware of the importance of early care and education. Historically, parents are children's first and most important teachers, with the added support of family and close relationships. However, professional early childhood care and education are needed when parents work outside the home.

Early childhood education is defined as the period of learning that takes place from birth to eight years old. The term "early care and education" (ECE) refers to the planned and purposeful whole of a child's upbringing, teaching, and care, with a particular emphasis on pedagogy. The phrase "child care" –or, as I use in this article, "early care and education" –means the act of professionally caring for and educating young children whose parents or caregivers work, go to school, or engage in some other economic activity that requires their attention away from the care of their children.

During the academic year 2021–2022, I accepted a Fulbright Scholarship to live and experience early childhood care and education in West Central Minnesota. My time in Minnesota was spent touring ECE programs, meeting staff, giving presentations on Finnish early childhood

The goal of my Fulbright project was to help Minnesota partners reframe the Early Childhood Education (ECE) system, making it more accessible, affordable, yet also high quality.

care and education, and teaching early childhood coursework at the University of Minnesota Morris. The goal of my Fulbright project was to help Minnesota partners reframe the ECE system, making it more accessible and affordable, yet still high quality.

In Minnesota, a multitude of advocates act to improve early care and education for children and families. One such dynamic organization is West Central Initiative, whose Early Childhood Initiative program provides a network of parents, educators, businesses, community leaders, faith leaders, policymakers, and two full-time staff who want to develop the best possible care and education for all young children in Minnesota. Because of their background in this area, West Central Initiative was a natural choice as the community partner that helped me in Minnesota. Working with their Director of Early Childhood Nancy Jost, and Early Childhood Specialist Marsha Erickson was a great pleasure. They were key people who helped me in my research on early childhood education in Minnesota.

In this article, I compare two early care and education systems, one in Finland and the other in Minnesota, to discuss their similarities, their differences, and the possible adjustments that can be made to strengthen both systems.

SIMILARITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

I begin with some similarities between the early care and education systems in Finland and the United States. Both countries started to develop early childhood education at the end of the 19th century. At that time, both countries developed kindergarten, which was based on the theories and practices of the German educator Friedrich Fröbel, who invented kindergarten. His educational philosophy was grounded in four principles: creativity, social participation, free self-expression, and motor expression. During World War II, when the workforce needed more women, both the United States and Finland adapted Fröbel's model into a formal childcare system to care for younger children. The influence of Fröbel's pedagogy can still be seen in early childhood education today, but research and practices in early care and education have evolved since those times. The pedagogical approach is based on knowledge of a child's growth and development. Both Minnesota's and Finland's ECE programs emphasize play, exploration, and active learning as the most effective way to educate young children.

In general, the pedagogical implementation of early childhood education is similar in Minnesota and Finland. In both places, teachers focus on physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, and they emphasize play as an integral component of developmentally appropriate programs for children.

Young children need secure, positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable about how to support their development and learning. The environment must be caring and safe. Both Minnesota and Finland stress the early childhood system as a combination of care and education and emphasize that early childhood education is a major step for future learning experiences.

According to the United Nations' Sustainable Education Goals, all children should have access to free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education. In addition, they should have access to quality early childhood care and education. This is the foundation of education in Finland. Through advocacy, Minnesota is working toward accessible, affordable, equitable, and quality care and education for every child. Early childhood is a significant stage of a child's path of growing and learning. ECE advocates are aware of the crucial importance of the early years before school in the success of future learning. The mission statement for West Central Initiative's Early Childhood Initiative is that "*children have the best possible start toward a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding. Parents are involved and family engagement is important*". In Finland, the goals are the same but stated differently: "*to promote children's holistic growth, development and learning in collaboration with their guardians*".

MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM

Minnesota and Finland are geographically distant from each other, but they have many commonalities. They both have four seasons, many lakes, and beautiful nature. They also have a large portion of sparsely populated rural areas. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why both Minnesota and Finland have developed a mixed delivery system in early care and education services. In a mixed delivery system, early childhood education programs can be implemented in different ways and places—through centers, school-based private preschools, and home-based child care.

Mixed delivery early care and education means that different entities provide the care and education based on the needs of the family. In Minnesota, depending on the community, family child care, Head Start, schools, and child care centers offer early childhood care and education. In Finland, parents can choose family day care, early childhood education, and care centers or, for example, clubs or playground activities.

A mixed delivery system meets the diverse needs of children, families, and communities and provides flexibility to parents to choose the most appropriate type of early childhood care and education for their children.

DIFFERENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

In Finland, early childhood education is a part of the educational system, and the right to access care and education is written into law. The municipalities are responsible for arranging the early care and education possibilities for every child.

In Minnesota, the administration of early care and education comes from a combination of education, human, and health services. Early care and education are usually delivered in four different forms: school-based programs are overseen by the Minnesota Department of Education; Head Start and center- and family-based programs are licensed and overseen by the Minnesota Department of Human Services; and several programs within each of these settings may be administered through the Minnesota Department of Health. The involvement of various departments in licensing and oversight of the different early care and education programs creates complexity.

ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

In Finland, each and every child under school age has an equal right and equal access to early childhood care and education. The legislative reform that made this equality possible did not happen without long-term planning, development, and advocacy. In Minnesota, advocates are vigorously carrying out similar actions. In both countries, the implementation of early childhood care and education comes from reliable research, which supports the objectives of and directly advocates for the common goal of high-quality early childhood care and education for every child.

The biggest difference in early childhood care and education between Minnesota and Finland is children's opportunities to participate. In Finland, early childhood education is part of the educational system, and therefore all children have an equal right to participate. The Finnish model is based on an integrated approach to care, education, and teaching, the so-called "educare" model. As care is integrated into education, children can stay in one place full-time every day.

The fee for Finnish early childhood education is income-based. In Minnesota, accessibility and affordability can depend on many factors: the availability of programs in one's community; a family's income or its ability to afford the programs; the amount of state or federal funding for slots in the program; the ability of state or federal funding to support everyone eligible; and, sometimes, access to transportation and parents' work status.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family engagement is an important part of early childhood education, both in Minnesota and in Finland. Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in programs that promote children's learning and healthy development. Early childhood care and education providers must engage families as essential partners while providing services that encourage children's learning and development.

Both Minnesota and Finland agree on the importance of family engagement. In both places, cooperation with parents is ongoing during the day, with emphasis on drop off and pick up times. However, the two places differ in the ways they implement family engagement in early childhood care and education. In Finland, educators draw up an individual Early Childhood Education and Care Plan for a child, prepared in cooperation with the guardians and the child. Early childhood educators do not usually do home visits, but meetings take place in early childhood education centers. Early childhood education services do not offer education for parents or guardians.

In Minnesota, parent education programs are an inclusive part of early childhood education services. Early childhood educators focus on enhancing parenting practices and behaviors, and their intention is to promote positive play and interaction between parents and children. These programs are useful in supporting parents and strengthening parenting skills. Family engagement activities are organized to involve families in the learning and development of their children. There are parent-child workshops, family field trips, family service projects where families can help each other, et cetera. In Finland, these kinds of activities are not included in early childhood education services.

CONCLUSION: ONE THING THAT WE COULD ADOPT FROM EACH OTHER

Minnesota and Finland have more in common in the field of early care and education than it appears at first glance. For example, both Minnesota and Finland emphasize pedagogy, and the program environments are much the same. What is vastly different is the system. Comparing is complex as both countries have unique societal and economic structures. The funding sources and the way early childhood education services are organized vary as well. However, the values, goals, and educational methods are the same.

Finnish early childhood educators are highly educated experts in their field. They know how to educate children and could utilize this knowledge more widely. Even with these strong qualifications, however, Finnish educators involved in early childhood education programs and services could learn about parent education from Minnesota parent educators. Finnish families need support in managing everyday life as well as in improving their parenting skills. The United States has produced a great deal of research and experience on family engagement and guidelines on how to implement it. Finnish early childhood educators have good contact with parents and guardians, but their expertise is not used for educating parents and guardians. Early childhood educators could utilize their knowledge in parent education to improve their work in family engagement.

In Minnesota, many different programs have various qualifications, including assessments, rules and regulations, funding sources, costs, ways to access and learn about them, different government oversight agencies, paperwork for the families and the staff, and different schedules. Therefore, the system might be complicated to understand and navigate. In Finland, the system is much simpler: the municipality is responsible for organizing the early childhood education programs. Regardless of the municipality, the program and requirements for it are the same. Families have different choices, but most families apply for the service from municipal authorities and pay the fee to their municipality according to their income. Every child has a right to early childhood care and education in Finland regardless of their parents' working status; that is not the case in Minnesota. In Finland, the family pays very little for early care and education; in Minnesota, parents can pay as much as the equivalent of college tuition for some programs. Minnesota could learn from Finland by simplifying the system, the administrative work, and the bureaucracy.

When planning and implementing early childhood care and education, it is important to remember that there is no greater investment than quality early childhood education and care. The more you invest, the more you get in return, and vice versa.

NOTES

1. Bredecamp, S. (2020). *Effective practices in early childhood education* (4th ed.). Pearson.
2. Böök, M. L., & Mykkänen, J. (2019). Finnish mothers' and fathers' constructions of and motions in their daily lives. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 63(3), 412-426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1376351>
3. Finnish National Agency for Education. (2021). *What is early childhood education and care?* <https://urly.fi/2Sg4>
4. Sanders, K., & Obregón, N. B. (2016). History of early childhood education policy. In *Sage Encyclopedia of Contemporary Early Childhood Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 676-684. Sage. <https://urly.fi/2QUy>



Iris Hoppo and Lacey Hoppe, Early Education
Center Director at MSUM Early Education Center,
Minnesota

BIOGRAPHY

Iris Hoppo, Ph.D., is a Principal Lecturer at Oulu University of Applied Sciences, School of Professional Teacher Education, Finland. She has worked as an educator for over 30 years and taught young children, vocational students, and students in higher education. She has specialized in early childhood education, special education, and pedagogy in higher education. Iris received a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence to Minnesota, United States, in 2021-2022. She can be reached at iuhoppo@gmail.com and www.linkedin.com/in/iiris-hoppo-3581b5161
