

Longitudinal Study of Changes in Teachers' Views of Early Childhood Education in the USA, Russia, and Finland

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ABSTRACT: This investigation examines changes in teachers' views of the needs of children in early childhood education (ECE) context in the USA, Russia, and Finland over the past two decades. In addition, it focuses on the teachers' views about their role in the process of child-rearing within formal ECE institutions. Moreover, the primary purpose of documenting teachers' views on children's needs, professional work, and centre-based child care, between these societal contexts from 1991 and 2011, is to better understand points of comparative change. The data was collected from child care centre teachers by applying the qualitative method of focus group discussions. The results suggest great changes both on the micro and macro levels of ECE in the contexts of investigation. Although the results suggest that individual encounters with children are idealized in each society, the economics and values beyond the child care setting define the limits of resources available to implement their pedagogical aspirations.

Keywords: *child care context, cross cultural study, change, society, case study*

Introduction

Societal complexities, including cultural norm pressures, and other functional expectations, are affecting the early childhood education (ECE) sector, and consequently the professionals involved in it (Rury, 2016). International focus on ECE has increased since the 1990s, beginning with global actions, such as the 1990 World Declaration on

Education for All and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Mahon, 2010). As societies evolve, the evolution challenges ECE teachers – and the teachers’ professional work – to react to these changes.

This international comparative investigation aims to understand changes in teachers’ views of the needs of children in three ECE contexts within the United States of America (USA), Russia, and Finland over the past two decades. In addition, it examines professionalism, focusing on teachers’ views about their role in the process of child-rearing within formal ECE institutions. Instead of straightforward comparisons within one country of investigation, the diverse national orientations of the selected societies provide interesting and contrasting contexts for conducting cross-cultural research due to the differences in their national orientations to family-child care dynamics. For instance, in Russia, society has traditionally had a strong ideological power over families (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina et al., 2006), whereas in the USA, families have power over child care choices if they can afford them (Barnett, 2010; Bennett, 2011; Scarr, 1998). In Finland, according to the legislation, child care services must be arranged by the municipalities according to the needs of the children and the families (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973; Revised in 2015).

The nature of the study should be understood as multiple case studies, and therefore the results cannot be overgeneralized to cover the entire socio-cultural context of each country under investigation. In order to improve clarity when reporting the results, the respondents are referred to as “American”, “Finnish”, or “Russian” depending on the obtained sample. National generalizations are impossible to achieve and undesirable (i.e. create stereotypes). Instead, this study aims to yield information on how the ideological and political issues of societies compare and contrast to the teachers’ own views regarding children, upbringing, and child care.

Theoretical Framework of the Investigation

Early childhood education has its roots in the cultural values of each society, and the implementation of early child care programmes are seen to reflect these values (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Rosenthal, 2003). Despite the well-accepted philosophy, from a psychological perspective, that children are perceived rather consistently from one culture to another, different societies conceptualize the culture of childhood in a variety of ways (Tudge, 2008). The structures of a society, its boundaries and its policies, regulate the reality of childhood in private and public institutions, such as within families and in child care centres. The regulation of childhood also involves the regulation of the teachers’ professional work, and both are defined as being culture-specific (Peterson, Veisson, Hujala, Sandberg & Johansson, 2014). Cross-cultural

research questions the self-evident nature of culturally bounded ECE practices. It may, metaphorically speaking, hold up a mirror to one's own educational system and its everyday practices.

In early education, the foundation for understanding children's behaviour is the awareness of contextual growth (Hujala, 1996) and the understanding that every child is an integral part of their social environment. The concepts of the child and child-rearing practices are included in formal ECE, moreover, maintaining a continuous impact on teachers' professional work within the field.

The theoretical approach of this study has its foundations in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, which offers a contextually defined structure for approaching early childhood education (Hujala, 1996; 2013). It gives insight into the understanding that child care provisions, including its pedagogical models and the growth environment, reflect the society in which it is situated and functions within. Triandis (1994) emphasized that educational processes cannot be viewed separately from the societal context: in order to understand the phenomenon as a whole, societal and cultural influences need to be considered as well.

Child Care Systems in the USA, Russia, and Finland

Children's growth and development, and the impact of interventions affecting them, have been studied extensively by researchers in the United States (e.g. Bennett, 2011; Barnett, 2010; Burger, 2010; Halfon, Russ, Oberklaid, Bertrand & Eisenstadt, 2009; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). However, systematically organized child care is underdeveloped at best (e.g. the supermajority of teachers lack pedagogical training), and its availability and quality varies extensively. Furthermore, educational services are often designed and supported on the regional or private level for children under school age. ECE programmes for young children receive limited funding from the federal level, and affordability for parents can be an issue (Barnett, 2010; Bennett, 2011). Although anticipated in the early 1990s (Kagan & Rivers, 1991), a comprehensive national early childhood infrastructure has yet to emerge (Wortham, 2006). While a variety of programs exist on the market, limited options create high demand and prices, and fragmented ECE systems often create programme choice inequality, i.e. there is a large variation in the type of quality early childhood education that families may pursue (Barnett, 2010).

Russian early childhood education has a strong tradition and status in its society (Rubtsov & Yudina, 2010), and childhood is highly valued (UNESCO, 2010; Graves & Gargiulo, 1994). The function of ECE in Russia is dual: it serves the labour market by

enabling mothers to work, but the early educational and developmental aspects are emphasized as well (Taratukhina et al., 2006). The universal early childhood education system is coordinated and financed on the national governmental level; however, the quality of services varies regionally (UNESCO, 2010).

In Finland, child care services are integrated and universal systems, and designed to offer both early education and care. The governance of ECE services is centralized on the state level; the system is strongly subsidized and it is equitably available to all families. Finnish ECE policy, including the child-adult ratios as well as staff qualifications, is established in detailed legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). Despite the highly integrated service model and pedagogically educated workforce, there is no systematic quality management on the national level, and this causes variation in ECE quality (Hujala, Fonsén & Elo, 2012).

Research questions

The purpose of the study was to examine and follow how teachers' views of the needs of children in ECE have changed in the USA, Russia, and Finland between 1991 and 2011. In addition, it focuses on the teachers' views about their role in the process of child rearing within formal ECE institutions. The current study is part of a larger research project, "Education in a Changing Society" (Huttunen, 1992).

With three different cultural and societal contexts in mind, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How have teachers' views on children's needs changed in the USA, Russia, and Finland over the last two decades?
2. How has teachers' professional work in supporting children's well-being changed over the past two decades in the studied societies?

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data was obtained from child care centre teachers using focus group discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The aim of the focus group method was to generate knowledge among the informants of ECE in their society. The teachers, including all educators (n=2-3) of the same group, were invited to discuss together and formulate their joint answers to the questions asked. The questions under discussion

concerned children's needs, the well-being and position of children in society, the importance of early education, and the role of the teachers' professional work in ECE.

The data consists of samples collected in two different phases: the first round was in 1991 and the second in 2011. In the USA, due to the fragmented ECE system, the study was conducted in two cities in two different North-Eastern states: Virginia and New York. The Russian sample was collected from a city situated northeast from the Moscow metropolitan area, and the Finnish sample was collected from a city located in the eastern part of Finland. All of the research cities are relatively small, urban, university cities.

The participating child care centres were required to meet the criteria of providing an all-day programme for groups of 3–5-year-olds. Due to the differences in the ECE systems within the societies, the amount of centres participating in the study varied. Altogether 17 different child care centres participated in 1991, while 11 centres participated in 2011. The total number of focus groups increased from 39 discussions during the first phase to 43 in the second phase. In the USA the amount of focus groups discussions decreased from 14 (1991) to 8 (2011) due to difficulties in recruiting participating centres during the second phase. In Russia, we organised 11 (1991) and 14 (2011) discussions. In Finland, research activity increased from 14 (1991) discussions to 21 (2011). In order to be validated and permitted to conduct international research, the ethics of the study were assessed and officially approved by the University of Tampere and Tampere Area Ethical Review Board. The informants were assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Conducting international research is a methodological challenge for researchers, who need to be aware of the ethical problems inherent in cross-cultural research. Triandis (1994) argues that in order to reduce ethnocentrism, it is important to analyse each culture in its own terms. In this paper, the theoretical underpinnings derive from the emic-etic approach (Pike 1967; Harris 1976; Berry 1989). Emics, i.e. the insider views on the studied phenomenon, represent the ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culturally specific. Etics, or the perspectives of the outsiders, on the other hand, discuss the same components on a universal level (i.e. considering generalizations in each culture). In this study, the interpretation of the preliminary results is done in cooperation with native researchers in order to overcome cultural barriers and enhance the emic-understanding of the results.

The epistemological orientation of the data analysis was inductive, and followed the objective hermeneutical method adjusted for educational research by Siljander and

Karjalainen (1991). The method of objective hermeneutics guided the analysis process in order to allow a deep interpretation of the data. The analysis process started by a holistic interpretation of the transcriptions, where the aim was to detect themes related to the research questions. The first phase of the analysis was carried out country by country, and by separately analysing the data from the two time cohorts. During the second phase of the analysis, the changes in the themes between the time cohorts were explored, and preliminary results were constructed. In the third phase of the analysis, native researchers were engaged in the process as experts of the ECE culture and research in their society. The purpose was to validate the findings by revealing the latent meanings and social constructions through an interpretation and cultural meta-analysis of the results (Siljander & Karjalainen, 1991). The results should be viewed as a dialogue of the etic (i.e. focus group data) and the local emic (i.e. interpretations of the native researchers) (see, e.g. Pike, 1967).

Results

Changes in teachers' views on the needs of children in the USA, Russia, and Finland

In the focus group discussions, the teachers were asked to describe children's needs, and the things they would change in their society to meet these needs, i.e. in order to promote the children's general well-being and quality of life. The reporting of the results is done country by country. Findings are provided in a descriptive manner to make the contextual changes within the studied societies visible.

Consistent emphasis on the emotional well-being of children in the USA

For two decades, according to the American teachers, the most important need of children was considered to be emotional well-being. In 1991, teachers requested improvements in children's education and care both on the micro and macro level. On the macro level, they wanted a broader emotional change in the social prestige of childhood, and called for more time, love, and care for children, instead of material wealth. Teachers suggested that children need acceptance and a sense of self-worth. In consideration of each child's own family being at the core of fulfilling these emotional needs, comments were made emphasising this, such as *"love and affection from parents or guardians. A strong relationship with family members. To be able to understand and to care."* (American teachers, 1991)

On the macro level, teachers expressed a need for investment in the early education system in order to ensure quality education programmes for children. Society must *“value education more, so that more federal money is put towards quality day care.”* (American teachers, 1991) In addition to formal ECE services, teachers requested support for parenthood. Teachers defined the children’s fundamental need as that of *“being loved and feeling that they are important as individuals. They need to feel safe and secure.”* (American teachers, 1991). The teachers suggested that in a loving and safe atmosphere, guided by adults who are attentive, children had an opportunity to grow up well-balanced with strong self-esteem. Social relations in general as well as a balanced growth environment and learning atmosphere were considered important in promoting the development of children.

Twenty years later, the views of the American teachers considering the basic needs of children have expanded from a focus predominately on family to a focus on professional child care as well. While two decades earlier, parents were considered to have the main responsibility for the child’s emotional well-being, in 2011 the influence on the child’s well-being was perceived to be equally shared by the home and child care. Adult activity was considered to have a great impact on the child’s psychological development, which can be stimulated by secure boundaries and consistent child-rearing: *“Children are most influenced by the people that teach and raise them – parents and teachers. Parents and teachers spend the most amount of time with the child. Our beliefs and opinions easily rub off and influence children.”* (American teachers, 2011).

Along with the emotional and psychological needs, teachers in 2011 emphasized the importance of meeting children’s physical needs, such as proper nutrition, adequate housing, and appropriate health care. In addition, the child’s right to a quality early education was emphasized. Teachers proposed that when the basic needs and the basic care of the child were fulfilled at home, the child care setting could provide opportunities for the child’s comprehensive growth and development in a stimulating learning environment. *“While at school”,* the teachers clarified *“we provide children with nutritious and healthy food, a warm safe environment, and quality education”* (American teachers, 2011).

Societal change towards family-centeredness in Russia

For the last two decades in the focus group discussions, Russian teachers agreed unanimously that emotional needs are children’s most salient basic needs. In the discussions in 1991, the teachers raised children’s need for loving, caring, and individual attention from the adults around them as a key issue. The teachers stated that *“children lack care and love. Parents should spend time with their kids as much as possible.”*

(Russian teachers, 1991). The teachers emphasized the significance of the home atmosphere, parents setting an example to their children, and the importance of authoritative behaviour towards children. The teachers also expressed a concern that parents did not spend enough time with their children, and they were concerned that children's emotional needs, as well as warm interaction with their parents, were neglected.

In the discussions, Russian teachers agreed that after the economic and political reforms in 1991, general societal change was needed in order to improve the well-being of citizens. A strong belief in the state's role in ensuring the well-being of children was clearly seen in the teachers' responses. According to the teachers, a substantial restructuring of administration was needed, and demands for allocating resources and support to the families and the ECE system were emphasized. These changes were seen as essential when trying to improve early childhood education, as *"the structure of the whole society must be changed in such a way that there would be better material well-being for people and good conditions for family life. In time, people's attitudes towards each other will change."* (Russian teachers, 1991).

In the former Soviet Union, families were subordinate to the state and official child care, but today the situation appears to be the reverse. State-centeredness diminished in the early 1990s, and the focus of policy discussion was gradually transferred to the family. A new law stipulated that parents were the primary care-givers (Federal Law On Education, 2012). Consistent with this shift in the state's focus, teachers emphasized the mother's role as the primary care-giver in ensuring the upbringing and well-being of the child. Teachers were unanimous that the main thing children needed was *"attention, affection, and care from the parents"* (Russian teachers, 2011). As in 1991, teachers in 2011 were still concerned about the parents' lack of time and attention towards their children, since many of the children spent long hours in child care. Teachers suggested that *"in order to fulfil children's needs to be loved by their parents, it is necessary to shorten mothers' working hours and increase the leisure time of parents"* (Russian teachers, 2011). The teachers' concern was understandable in the light of the study by Alieva, Stasjuk, Fadeeva, Aslanova, and Uvarova (2011), which documents that both parents had long working hours until late in the evening. They suggested the need for a new kind of labour force policy so that parents of young children could work shorter hours, and focus more on family life. The political and societal shift has made it necessary to reconsider the responsibilities of the state and the individual.

In 2011, teachers also demanded more societal prestige for work in ECE. They asked for more financial resources from the state in order to strengthen the material basis of the child care centres and to enable the creation of a versatile learning environment for

children. In addition, the participants postulated that the deteriorated status of ECE should be restored to its prior level. This was in line with the OECD policy review of Russia, which confirms that the status of ECE had decreased (OECD, 1998, 55–57). In 2011, teachers felt that elevating the status of ECE professionals was crucial. In the former Soviet Union, salary differences between professions were insignificant; raising the salaries of the child care staff was seen by the participants as modern, concrete evidence of the appreciation of educational work.

From care routines to emphasizing children's emotional well-being in Finland

In the majority of the discussions in 1991, Finnish teachers listed physical needs and basic care as the major needs of children. Teachers listed *“food, rest, physical activities, outdoor play, and safety”* as children's most crucial needs in support of their well-being, and assessed that *“these can be met relatively well in child care”* (Finnish teachers, 1991). Children's physical needs were seen as the basis for their balanced and holistic development. Twenty years on, educational aspects are now more emphasized in child care, but the traditional daily schedule of the child care centres remains constructed according to basic care situations (e.g. allowing enough time for rest and providing an adequate lunch). Basic care that focuses on children's physical needs has been perceived to be fundamental in Finnish early education (Niikko, 2008) and therefore the predictable daily schedule and adult-oriented didactics were considered as key elements in professionalism in the latter part of the last century (Huttunen, 1989).

The second most emphasized element discussed by the teachers in 1991 was connected to the children's sense of psychological security, which was seen to be depend on having consistent relationships and an encouraging and accepting atmosphere, both at home and in child care. The basic needs of children, according to teachers, were connected to the children's *“sense of security, warm relationships, adult responsibility for the children and justified tasks, proper basic and health care, a stable emotional life, and warm and genuine human relationships”* (Finnish teachers, 1991). It was considered an adult responsibility to make an effort to form a tender, psychologically secure, and nurturing environment for children. The psychological sense of security in Finnish child care is perceived to be realized in basic care situations, since a positive and attentive approach during these situations enhances the children's sense of security (Niikko, 2008; Tiusanen, 2008).

In Finnish discussions, teachers' expectations of support from society were divided in 1991. On the other hand, the teachers suggested that parents should be offered the opportunity to choose the child care service that suited them best. The government was seen as responsible for supporting families both financially and on the labour

force-policy level to ensure that parents would have the chance to take care of their children at home if they so wished. Teachers argued that *“families should have the opportunity to choose the child care solution that best serves their needs: home, child care programme, or something else”* (Finnish teachers, 1991). In turn, every child’s subjective right to formal ECE was proposed and the government was required to offer programme access to every child. In addition, teachers called for the societal appreciation of ECE. Investing in children was to be seen as an investment for the future.

Twenty years later, in 2011, the views of the Finnish teachers had changed: basic care was no longer listed as the most significant developmental need. Instead, children’s emotional needs, such as their need to feel accepted and loved, were strongly emphasized. The role of the safe home environment was now seen to be most crucial for the well-being of children, and the teachers’ role was *“to support parents in their parenting, and to offer each child developmentally appropriate early education”* in child care (Finnish teachers, 2011). On the other hand, teachers expressed a view that financial troubles or mental health problems in the parents’ relationships could increase the risk of children being in an unsafe atmosphere during upbringing.

In the discussions in 2011, teachers hoped for changes in general societal attitudes in the direction of non-materialistic values. Society was seen to emphasize the importance of paid work and teachers therefore proposed flexible working hours for parents, more family time, and *“less stress and extra-activities. Better economical choices for parents to take care of their child at home. A need to shorten children’s days at child care,”* and *“enough staff”* in child care (Finnish teachers, 2011).

While twenty years ago, the subjective right to ECE was called for, in 2011 Finnish respondents expressed a desire to restrict it. Even though the Act on Children’s Day Care (1973) defines it otherwise, the constant tension in public discussions remains between care and education. The main emphasis of this discussion regards whether the child care system in Finland should be seen as a child’s right to early education or as a labour force policy solution for parents (Repo & Kröger, 2009). There seems to be an increasingly prevalent conception that a child should not be taken to child care if one of the parents stays at home (Kinos & Palonen, 2012). This may reflect the critical discussion that child care is not considered an optimal environment for a child to be raised in in the light of attachment theory, because it might endanger the secure mother-child relationship (Rusanen, 2011). In addition, the quality of child care has been criticized for not being satisfactory from the youngest children’s point of view, since the activities are typically adult-centred instead of child-centred (Kalliala, 2012). Broadly considered, though, Finnish ECE is mainly of high quality (Hujala, Fonsén & Elo, 2012; Roos, 2015; Heikka, Fonsén, Elo & Leinonen, 2014).

Changes in the teachers' professional work

With the second research question, we investigated teachers' perceptions of professional work in supporting children's well-being. In addition, we focused on how these perceptions have changed. The topic of the group discussions followed these questions: What would you see as an ideal upbringing and how could you execute it in practice? What things do you feel are important in the caregiver's work that would satisfy the needs of the children?

From emotional support to professional ECE in the USA

When asking about teachers' conceptions of an ideal early childhood education in 1991, American teachers highlighted the importance of emotional education. A loving and respectful relationship with the child, as well as the teacher's emotional commitment to children, was seen to be meaningful and significant. Attention to individual needs and the teacher's sensitivity in defining the developmental stages of children rose to the heart of the debate. The focus of professional ECE was on the aspects of care in which the teacher's own sensitive personality was emphasized. According to the respondents, children should *"be provided with a safe, secure, loving environment in which they can grow and learn at their own pace"* (American teachers, 1991).

In the discussions in 2011, although emotional care was still a concern, the spotlight had shifted. The professional emphasis was now more focused on educational aspects rather than care. The teachers' opinions seemed to reflect the discussion targeted on curricular professionalism (Wortham, 2002). In this general discussion, which began in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the choice was between a developmental, constructivist approach to curriculum development and an emphasis on learning math and literacy content-area knowledge that would lead to success on standardized achievement tests in elementary school. In 2011, teachers also called for professional support and strong leadership. Teachers in the US-discussions still stressed their belief in child-centred pedagogy and the individual needs of children as they did in 1991. However, in 2011, they were more aware of their professional teachership in demanding *"proper training and enough staff to be able to meet children's needs efficiently"* (American teachers, 2011). In addition, the respondents focused on their needs outside of teaching hours, e.g. in-service training and more time for pedagogical planning. Other studies suggest that the development of child care programmes added the need for quality evaluation in early childhood education, leadership, and staff training, and thus for teacher education in general (Barnett, 2011; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009).

From teacher-centeredness to parent-teacher partnerships in Russia

In the Russian discussions in 1991, the importance of taking children's individuality into account in care and education was seen as a major focal point of teachers' professional work, as was the teachers' competence in observing child's developmental needs and responding to them. Teachers emphasized early education that promotes the development of the child's abilities in a diverse way: *"harmoniously taking child's needs into account. Bringing up a child by taking his/her individuality into account."* (Russian teachers, 1991). The cornerstones of professional work were seen as the teachers' warm attitude towards children, their fair and caring role, and their ability to listen to children.

The findings suggest that Russian teachers' professional opinions have remained rather stable over the last two decades. As discussed in 2011, early education was seen as a process based on the child's needs. This situated the teachers' role as that of an enabler who may enhance the individual development of a child. Teachers were expected to *"take each child's mental abilities and individualism into account and guide the child in the right direction while acknowledging his/her interests and abilities."* (Russian teachers, 2011). Changes in the teachers' thinking in this study can be understood in light of Ispa's (2002) investigation, which examines the changes in the goals of Russian early childhood education from the perestroika era to the beginning of the 2000s. Russia opened up to the West during perestroika, and Western education and care had a strong influence on Russian education; a consciousness of child-centred pedagogy and individuality reached the teachers. The independent individualism of the child was now approved of and encouraged, contrary to Soviet-era ideas, where collectivist values were stressed. However, the daily practices in child care centres could not change as quickly as the new philosophical ideals were adopted. Zagvozdkin (2013) has shown that almost half of the centres still use only slightly updated programmes that were originally developed in Soviet times. Such programmes provide very little room for independent individualism.

In the discussions in 2011, the focus of Russian ECE had broadened to the parent-teacher partnership. Previously, the parents' involvement in ECE had been slight. Nowadays, parent-teacher partnerships are stressed and encouraged by teachers, and *"comprehensive upbringing of individuals and individual upbringing jointly with parents"* (Russian teachers, 2011) is called for. Russian parents were seen to be more self-confident today than they were during the Soviet era. They want to be active partners in their child's child care and are not afraid to ask and question childcare practices. Nonetheless, Elo (2012) found that although parent-teacher partnerships are now the focus in Russian early childhood education, parents still generally believe their potential to affect the child care practices is limited.

It can be seen that a significant change in perceptions of child care and upbringing took place during perestroika. In the Soviet Union, there was a rhetoric of children being highly valued as future citizens (Graves & Gargiulo, 1994). In practice, however, children's voices were rarely heard because adults knew what was best for them and activities were planned and carried out by adults (Gradskova, 2010). According to the teachers in 2011, it was now important to *"see the individual in the child and to take child's opinions, needs, and abilities into account"* (Russian teachers, 2011).

Emphasising child-centred professionalism in Finland

In the discussions in 1991, Finnish teachers' emphasized child-centeredness and children's individualism as an ideal upbringing. Teachers stressed that *"practice should be based on interaction between children and adults. It should also be enabling and take the child's ideas, wishes, and individualism into account."* (Finnish teachers, 1991) In addition to these ideals, safe and open communication and interaction between the teacher and children was a major focus. Trained teachers and adequate resources were seen as prerequisites for high-quality child care practices.

Finnish teachers' views on professional ECE have remained rather similar over the past two decades. In 2011, teachers still emphasized that each child's individualism and active agency should be taken into account in education and care. Teachers stressed the need to offer children choice and a creative learning atmosphere in child care. Education and care took place in interaction. In addition, structural features, such as adequate staff and material resources, smaller group sizes, and appropriate facilities were strongly regarded as a prerequisite for high-quality education. Teachers suggest that ECE should be *"child-centred and goal-oriented, based on individual needs. When working in a group, children learn to listen to each other and respect others. Children should be offered possibilities to work in small groups, allowing the child the possibilities to do things he/she wants without disturbance."* (Finnish teachers, 2011)

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate changes in teachers' views considering children's needs and teachers' professional work in ECE in the USA, Russia, and Finland during the past two decades. Theoretical underpinnings of the study derived from the contextual paradigm (Hujala 1996) with an aim to understand the studied phenomena in the interconnected environments and in interaction with the surrounding socio-cultural context.

In analysing teachers' pedagogical thinking in this study, the individual needs of children were strongly emphasized. Children's individual encounters were idealized in each society, but the respective economy defined the resources available to implement them. The investment of societies in early childhood education and care seem to be minor compared to the goals demanded of ECE by society, which suggests a low valuation of the field (Strategy 2020; 2013; Abankina, 2011). Teachers wished to work according to their educational ideologies, however, results suggest that inadequate resources prevented them from achieving their most desired goals. According to the teachers in Finland, the basic physical needs of the majority of children could be met in child care. However, the lack of resources to meet individual needs was seen as problematic. It was suggested that a reduction of group sizes was needed in order to put more effort into emotional education and individuality. On the contrary, the current government has made decisions to increase the adult-child ratios, which will inevitably lead to enlargement of the group sizes.

In each studied societal context, teachers expressed a need for more government support to develop the ECE system and guarantee quality child care. American teachers' demands for the development of child care programmes are, in part, due to the reality that federal government-supported preschool education (e.g. Head Start), for children from low-income families, has been developed more efficiently than other typical alternative private all-day programmes. Also, half-day programmes have traditionally been developed to offer activities for children cared for by their stay-at-home mothers. Now, as women enter the work force more than ever, there is a need to develop an efficient, universal, early childhood education system. In addition, the increase in the number of single mothers has added pressure to the need for all-day care, because most single parents work full-time (Halfon et al., 2009; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007; Scarr, 1998). According to Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel (2007), there are even strong socio-cultural "myths" to motherhood: poor single mothers are expected to work outside the home even when they have infants. On the other hand, middle-class mothers should remain at home.

According to Katz (2010, p. 52), "*Welfare is the most despised institution in America and public education is the most iconic.*" There appears to be a dichotomy in ECE in the USA (Morrissey & Warner, 2007). Education is perceived to be the cornerstone of democracy, and therefore citizens are entitled to public education from the ages of five or six until high school graduation, while care for very young children has been considered the responsibility of individual families. The funding of governmental ECE programmes is not considered a priority on the government level. Indeed, the funding is often deficient and marginal, and it is operated through the local, state, and national funding streams (Halfon et al., 2009). Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel (2007) argue that government

involvement in the upbringing of young children is still viewed by some as trespassing into the private lives of families.

When investigating the changes in Russian teachers' responses, it is apparent that a significant change in Soviet thinking had already taken place in the late 1980s during the perestroika era, when "Soviet pedagogy" ended. The Russian teachers' opinions from 1991 suggest that the Russian government defined the goals of ECE and the guidelines of the implementation of child care. This may have contributed to the definition of the parents' subordinate role. In 2011, however, the focus in the responses shifted from seeing the state as superior to the family, but the parents' subordinate role has nonetheless remained. During the Soviet era, early childhood education was seen as part of the governmental apparatus; ECE was pursued to raise proper Soviet citizens (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina et al., 2006). Moreover, during perestroika, the changes in the societal position of parents and the economic circumstances of the families evoked concerns for the well-being of children.

Even though the role of the mother was traditionally strong in the Soviet Union and she has been seen as the primary care-giver in the family (Gradskova, 2010), motherhood was not emphasized in the Soviet Union. The aims of society were collective: mothers had a responsibility to work outside the home, and children were to be brought up in public preschools. The state had a strong role as the primary practitioner in the upbringing of children. Preschools and nurseries, which were meant for the children of working mothers' and for poor families, were considered welfare institutions, and one of their missions was to educate parents in child-rearing (Gradskova, 2010; Taratukhina, et al., 2006).

In Finland, ECE has developed extensively over the past twenty years. Every child has been granted the statutory right to child care programmes. In addition, national goals have emphasized that the quality of child care should not be compromised. For example, the child-adult ratio, which is one the lowest in the world, had not been questioned by policy-makers until recently. On the contrary, the respondents raised critiques towards the universal right of children to ECE, as they were concerned about the parents' position in their children's lives. The decline in the Finnish economy has now led to the government decision to limit the subjective right to ECE.

Since the 1990s, the volume of ECE services in Finland has grown remarkably (Strandell, 2011). In 1990, the role of child care was perceived to support parents in their task of bringing up the child. Twenty years later, however, the Finnish ECE paradigm has shifted from day care to early education to meet the developmental and educational needs of children (Kangas, 2016; Roos, 2015; Hujala, Valpas, Roos & Elo, 2016). In 2000,

the quality of ECE became an integral part of public discourse (Alila, 2013), and enhancing quality practices and emphasizing the importance of ECE pedagogy were seen as fundamental leadership tasks in the development of early childhood education. These themes have since become the foci of recent research (Hujala, 2013; Fonsén, 2014; Heikka, 2014).

In conclusion, our findings suggest that in all of the societal contexts in this study frame, the professional work of teachers and the manner in which teachers view children's needs have changed greatly. The status of ECE professional work has remained low compared to the expressed value of children in the three societies. In addition, participants throughout the investigation suggested that the professional status, such as the level of the salaries, is still low in ECE. When childhood development is not understood and/or appreciated on the macro level of society, investments in ECE will struggle to meet the required levels to fulfil the goals set for ECE by professionals.

Conducting cross-cultural research with an international authorship presented many challenging, yet fruitful outcomes. Complications occur because there are a variety of different research cultures between us co-authors. For example, choosing clear conceptions puzzled us from time to time, but the process exposed us to the emic-reality of our informants – instead of finding one truth, we found many. Moreover, this article aimed to bring out the multilayered voice of the informants, previous investigations, and the interpretations of us researchers. In today's world, international research may help us overcome cross-cultural barriers and enhance our understanding of different levels of society as well as academia.

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