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Individual Plans for Children in Transition to Pre-School. A Case Study in one Finnish Day-Care Centre
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This paper outlines a case study on teachers’ and parents’ perspectives on children’s individual plans in transition from early childhood education to pre-school in Finland. The study was based on the importance of continuity as a part of positive educational transition experiences. The national curricula, educators’ interpretations and parents’ perspectives in one day-care centre were investigated. Individual planning is mandatory in early childhood, but there is little information about using the plans in transition to pre-school. At the local level, individual planning occurred in discussions with parents and various planning forms. Familiarity and good relationships between the educators and the parents were important. The educators’ and the parents’ had different perceptions of the usefulness and use of individual planning. Individual planning can be recommended as an appropriate tool to strengthen continuity in transition, but more discussion between parents and educators is needed to build up a shared understanding about it.

Keywords: individual planning, continuity, educational transitions, case study

Introduction
In Finland pre-school education† is a transition year to primary school for six-year-old children, a year before they start primary school. Since 2001, local authorities have provided free pre-school education for all children, but participation is voluntary for families (Basic Education Act 1288/1999). Most families choose pre-school education for their children; in 2007, 99% of six-year-olds participated in pre-school (Eurydice, 2009). Pre-school education is mostly provided in day-care centres and many children continue with their pre-school education in the same day-care centre they have previously attended (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2004; Siniharju, 2007). Although pre-school education in Finland is play-based, starting pre-school is a transition from play-oriented early childhood education to more structured and target-oriented pre-school which is often provided in separate pre-school groups (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2004). In

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† Pre-school education is part of early childhood education and care in Finland, but has its own Core Curriculum and legislation. In this paper early childhood education is used to describe the services for children before they start pre-school education.
other sectors of early childhood education the children are usually in mixed age groups of three to five-year-olds.

Individual planning based on child’s strengths and needs is an important part of Finnish early childhood education. Educators and parents together draw up an individual plan for each child (The Act on the status and rights of social welfare clients 812/2000; National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland, 2004). Alasuutari and Karila (Alasuutari, 2007; Alasuutari & Karila, 2010; Karila, 2005) have previously studied children’s individual planning and co-operation between parents and educators in Finnish early childhood education. Alasuutari and Karila (2010) analyzed individual planning forms at the municipal level, Alasuutari (2007) studied partnerships in early childhood education from the educator’s point of view and Karila (2005) analyzed the discussions between parents and educators. In this paper I continue the research on individual planning processes in Finnish early childhood education and consider them in the context of transition from early childhood education to preschool. The study was conducted in a public Finnish day-care centre and individual planning was studied from three perspectives: national curriculum, educators’ interpretations and parents’ experiences.

**Educational transitions in early childhood**

Rogoff (2003) describes developmental transitions in early childhood as phases of changing relationships and roles in community. Elder and Shanahan (2006) define transitions as substantial times of changes in one’s life course. Dockett and Perry (2007, p. 5) talk about starting school as a turning point which marks “a significant change in the ways a child participates in the family and community”. Transition experiences across the life course are cumulative: the experiences of earlier transitions impact on later life transitions and transitions in early childhood can impact on how future transitions are experienced (Elder, 1998). The importance of positive transition experiences in early childhood is evident in many studies (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2010; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Such positive experiences help build children’s ‘transition capital’ (Dunlop, 2007). With that capital children draw on the success of earlier transitions as they approach, engage and then move on into future transitions.
Educational transitions in early childhood, including starting pre-school, mean changes in culture, roles, identity and daily experiences of everyone involved (Dunlop, 2007; Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011). Changes are characteristic elements of transitions, but they are also a potential source of stress, tension and anxiety (Brostrom, 2002; Griebel & Niesel, 2003). Changes can be marked as discontinuities between settings. To smooth the transition the changes should be understood, and minimalized if possible (Griebel & Niesel, 2003). One way to decrease discontinuities is to build on a child’s existing knowledge and strengths and listen to and respect parents and other educators. This requires interaction and the development of respectful relationships (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011). As Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000, p. 492) say “These relationships either support or challenge children’s adjustment into day-care centre and predict children’s subsequent relationships in school”.

Educational transitions in early childhood occur in a context of developing interactions between individuals, groups and institutions (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In his ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (1986) describes different contexts as systems which influence on families as context of a child’s development. Microsystems are the places where a child is personally involved, like home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In transition to pre-school, early childhood education, pre-school and home encounter and form a mesosystem in which different contexts are intertwined in a child’s life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this mesosystem the continuity between the Microsystems is built on shared responsibility for a child’s development and well being (Parke & Buriel, 2006). Interaction between the Microsystems links them and enables educators and parents possibilities to provide the child with the care and education which meets his/her individual needs. Based on the ecological framework, respectful relationships between educators and parents in early childhood education are regarded as important supporting elements in a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

**Methodology**

In this paper I consider how children’s individual plans were used in transition from early childhood education to pre-school in one day-care centre. I argue that the individual plans can be a valuable tool in building continuity in the transition process and thus promote a positive
transition experience and the first steps in building transition capital. Individual planning was studied in three levels: national curricula, educators’ interpretations and parents’ experiences. The research questions were:

1. National curricula:
   a. What is the content of individual plans?
   b. What is the process of individual planning?
   c. How is the transition taken into account in the documents?

2. Educators’ interpretations of individual planning:
   a. What is the content and process of individual planning in the setting?
   b. How is the continuity of a child’s wellbeing, development and learning supported by the individual planning during the transition?

3. Parents’ experiences of individual planning:
   a. How parents see their role in individual planning for their child?
   b. How individual planning helps parents to see the continuity of their child’s well being, learning and development during the transition?

The study was a descriptive, qualitative case study in one Finnish day-care centre. The data were gathered in May and June 2006, when starting pre-school in the following August was topical in the setting. The day-care centre consisted of four groups: two for three to five-year-olds and two pre-school groups for six-year-olds. Altogether about fifty children and ten staff members attended the centre. The day-care centre was located in a suburb of a middle-size town in Finland. The children lived in the nearby, mostly middle class, neighborhoods. The day-care centre was located in a home-like building with shared areas, separated rooms for each group, a gym and a big out-door area with a small forest. The out-door area was used in turns during the day and shared in the afternoons. When the children started pre-school they moved to another room in the familiar premises.

I aimed to gain a holistic and in-depth picture of individual planning in one setting and the case study approach allowed me to study individual planning in a context of one setting at the time when the educators and parents had started to plan the transition (Gerring, 2006; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2003, 2009). To do that, I gathered various datasets. The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland and the Core Curriculum for
Pre-School education in Finland 2000 represented the official curriculum and were analyzed to the extent that was related to individual planning and continuity between early childhood education and pre-school. To capture the local perspective I looked at six individual planning forms used in the setting and interviewed six educators. Three educators were early childhood teachers with university degrees. Two teachers worked with pre-school groups and one with younger children. Three other educators were nurses with secondary-level education; one of them worked with pre-schoolers and two with younger children. Parents’ experiences were pursued in interviews with eleven parents (nine mothers alone and one interview with mother and father) in ten interviews.

The quality of this study can be considered as construct and internal validity (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Yin, 2009). To ensure the validity I based the study on the previous research on transitions in early childhood and the importance of continuity during the transitions. The data were gathered from multiple sources and was a representative sample inside the case. Nearly all the parents of five-year olds and nearly all staff members participated in the interviews. The curricula and forms related to individual planning processes were gathered extensively. The results of one case cannot be generalized as such, but they can help to gain a better understanding of the processes, benefits and challenges of individual planning in the transition to pre-school in similar settings (Gerring, 2006; Yin, 2009).

The interviews followed an interview guide, with themes about which I wanted the interviewees to talk. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) this kind of semi-structured interview can produce comparable data from the participants. The educators were interviewed in a group because I wanted to promote discussion and gain diverse opinions and perspectives. Following Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996, p. 16) the goal was to “conduct an interactive discussion that can elicit a greater, more in-depth understanding of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from multiple points of view.” The educators’ interview lasted about an hour and was audio and video recorded. The video recording was only used to identify the speaker which, in a group interview, can otherwise be complicated. Parents were interviewed individually at a time and place convenient for them. Some parents wanted to be interviewed in the day-care centre, some invited me to their homes and one mother came to university. The interviews lasted from twenty to fifty minutes and were audio recorded.
The data were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis with the emphasis on abductive inference (Krippendorff, 2004). Following Peirce’s (Peirce & Lånè, 2001) thinking about the role of concepts in human thinking and interpretations, the analysis was led by theory-based concepts outlining the phenomenon (Bertilsson & Christiansen, 2001; Josephson & Josephson, 1996). This approach assisted in delimiting the analysis and focusing on essential issues in the theoretical framework. The data were analyzed by using the following codes: the content of individual plans, how the individual planning was drawn up, who participated in it, and continuity in transition to pre-school.

**Results**

**Individual planning in national curricula**


> The early education and care of an individual child is based on the individual ECEC [early childhood education and care] plan drawn up jointly by the staff and the child’s parents at the start of the care relationship. The plan aims to take account of the child’s individuality and parent’s views in arranging the child’s care. (p. 29)

In the curriculum, a child and his/her family’s individual needs formed the base of the early childhood education provided. Individual plans were to be made for every child and parents were to play an important role in their development. The relationship between parents and educators was referred to as a partnership requiring mutual, continuous and committed interaction (*National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland*, 2004).

Individual planning continued in pre-school, but it was not compulsory.

> In the initial phase of pre-school education, the teacher may draw up the child’s pre-school education plan in co-operation with parents. (*Core curriculum for pre-school education in Finland* 2000, emphasis added)

Although not compulsory, an individual pre-school education plan is widely used in pre-school education. According to a review on pre-school education in Finland, 69 % of pre-school
teachers used children’s individual plans a lot when planning everyday activities (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2004)

In the *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland*, the content of the individual plan was described as follows:

The individual ECEC plan takes into consideration the child’s experiences, current needs and future perspectives, interests and strengths, and individual needs for support and guidance. In discussions with the parents, attention should be drawn to positive aspects that foster the child’s development. (p.29)

In the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000* the content of a child’s pre-school education plan was defined as follows:

The plans shall focus on factors essential to individual development, such as the objectives to be set for the child’s growth and development and the assessment of the child’s strengths and weaknesses. (p. 16)

Officially, pre-school education was not as strength-based and family-oriented as early childhood education. The processes and the contents of individual plans also differed at each level. Despite these discontinuities the *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland* instructed educators to build continuity in individual planning between early childhood education and pre-school education:

The staff should ensure that the individual ECEC [early childhood education and care] plan and the individual pre-school education plan form a functioning whole. (p. 30)

The continuity between early childhood education, pre-school and primary school education was addressed also in the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000*. The curriculum instructed that education should form an entity that allows consistency and continuity of a child’s development and education.

**Educators’ perspective: Interpretations at the local level**

In the day-care centre the national documentation was interpreted at the local level and translated into practice and became an actual curriculum, a reality of the setting (Alasuutari & Karila, 2010;
Kelly, 2004). The educators and the context of the setting influenced on interpretations and translation processes and curriculum became a lived experience situated in a real-life context (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004; Turunen, 2008). In the group interview, the educators explained how individual planning was interpreted and carried out.

In the day-care centre individual planning happened during the discussions between an educator and parents. The educator met families, mostly mothers, at least twice during the year. The first meeting was in September or October.

Educator 4 (nurse, 3-5 year-olds): For me it is like, with the kids I already know, I can talk with their parents even in the beginning of September. But with a child who is new, I need to work for a while with him/her before I am ready to talk with the parents about the targets for the coming year. I need some basis for the discussion.

Educator 3 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): In the pre-school group we have had the discussions in September.

In May the educators met the parents again. If parents wanted, there were more discussions during the year. The intensity of co-operation depended on a child’s individual needs and parents’ wishes. If a child had special needs, the special education early childhood teacher, therapists working with the child and the family, and the pre-school teacher were involved in individual planning.

The individual planning required various forms which the parents and educators completed either beforehand or during the discussions. When their child started in the day-care centre the parents filled a form called ‘Information about the Child’. The child’s perspective was captured in ‘My Own Plan’. For example, the My Own Plan form included the statement:

The child participates in his/her individual planning in accordance to his/her capabilities.

There was also a form for parents to complete: ’My Family Tells’.

At the day-care centre, the care and education is planned together with the parents according to individual needs and personal characteristics of every child. The information from the parents is very important to the child’s immediate educators. To
complete this form, the parents are asked to write down some information about their child, when he/she starts in the day-care centre or proceeds from a group to another.

The educators told that using these forms, the individual plans were drawn up by the educators and the parents at the beginning of the year. The parents were always involved in completing the individual plan.

Educator 4 (nurse, 3-5 year-olds): And there is this individual ECEC plan which is done with the parents. Here it is also asked how it will be evaluated and what kind of co-operation the parents would like to have.

Educator 3 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): Do you give the form to the parents beforehand?

Educator 6 (early childhood teacher, 3-5 year-olds): I have not given it automatically. Some parents want it and then I have given it, but not automatically.

Educator 4: And in addition to that, there is an observation form for overall development for the kids who will go a child health clinic for 5-year-olds health check. We fill it in here at day-care centre. It is usually given to parents so that they can have a look and then we have filled it in here. The parents then take it with them to the clinic.

Educator 2 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): It is done for all five-year-olds.

Educator 5 (nurse, 3-5 year-olds): And the three-year-olds have a similar thing.

There were different forms for the plans in early childhood education and pre-school. Early childhood education plans included the areas of basic care and daily routines; conception of self and emotional life; social, motor and cognitive skills; linguistic development; perception of environment; working habits; self-expression; music/rhythm; and play. It also had a section for co-operation and partnership between home and the day-care centre. The individual plan in pre-school education started with a personal section, where information about family, friends, child’s favourite activities, personal characteristics and strengths, hobbies, and the needs for support and guidance were recorded. That was followed by a section on the pre-school content areas from the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000*. The last section was about parents’
wishes and expectations of the pre-school year, co-operation with the day-care centre, and ways of assessing their child’s progress in pre-school.

The individual planning forms encouraged the educators and the parents to record their shared targets and to monitor and evaluate them. The educators aimed to write down concrete targets and evaluation in consultation with the parents.

Tuija: So, what do you write down in those plans?

Educator 3 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): It does, you know, very much depend on the child, and what kind of person the child is. What are the targets for the child. And those targets that we are aiming for, they are not so utopian, but everyday things we are aiming for with the child; concrete things we think are achievable and helpful for the child.

Educator 2 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): That was a good word, the concrete things

Educator 5 (nurse, 3-5 year-olds): At least I, when we fill it together, we have talked, section by section, and I have asked [the parents], what in this section is the thing that we can write down as a target. I have thrown the ball to the parents. Or if there is a concern which we have already talked about, and if the parents do not, then I can put it forward that maybe this is something we can write down as a target. So that we can look at it, for example, in the middle or at the end of the year. Parents are really good at it [with the targets], and they are concrete.

Educator 3: Yes, the parents know their child.

The forms did not contain anything about continuity between early childhood education and pre-school and according to the group interview the practices of individual planning differed in early childhood education and pre-school and depended also on the educator working with the family. In the discussions in May, the parents of five-year-olds could ask questions about pre-school:

Educator 6 (early childhood teacher, 3-5 year-olds): I have with the parents’ of five-year-olds, in the evaluation discussions, I have told them a little about pre-school, and that it is not such a peculiar thing. I told them that it is quite a bit like this daycare, but they do more pre-school things. It is very much about learning social
skills and being with other kids and they don’t have to be nervous about the pre-school.

Educator 2 (early childhood teacher, pre-school): But there were some parents, I remember, who asked if the children need a backpack and a pencil case, books and pens and…

Educator 4 (nurse, 3-5 year-olds): And can the children be absent from pre-school and Educator 2: And what pre-school activities you have during the absence. For example if a child spends a week with his/her grandparents, is he/she left behind or …

Educator 4: And is there a written form to apply a leave of absence in pre-school.

Alasuutari’s and Karila’s (2010) study indicated that individual plans in Finland are dominated by developmental psychology, constructing a child as a minor who needs care, and positioning parents more as objects than subjects in their child’s education. As Alasuutari and Karila point out, planning forms do not explain how individual planning works in day-care centres. This study broadens the view of individual planning and how the limited guidance at the national level is translated into practice. From the educators’ group interview, individual planning appeared in familiarity, in discussions with the parents and in the various forms they completed with the parents. The forms guided the discussion in many ways. They tuned the parents and framed the topics of the discussions. They also tuned the educators; not only in the discussion with the parents but also in their daily activities with the child.

Transition and continuity were not part of the forms, but were part of the practices: the educators reported that, in addition to the individual plan, some drawings and other artefacts were collected for a child’s portfolio, which was then given to the pre-school teacher. The pre-school teacher then looked at the entire portfolio, not just the individual plan. Because continuity was a non-visible item in the written documents it was also a variable, which could change yearly and depended on the educator working with the child and family. Familiarity with the premises, staff and other children, and shared activities with the other groups were considered as an important part of continuity. It was also important that the educators knew the parents. For all these reasons, the transition was not regarded by the educators as a big issue for the children or the families.
Parents’ experiences

The parents experienced the educators’ interpretations of individual planning in the discussions and through the forms. The interview with the parents started with a question “Does your child have an individual plan?” Based on the legislation, curricula and discussions with the headmistress, I assumed that this would be an easy opening for the interview; more rhetoric than a real interview question. In four of the ten interviews, the answer to this question was no.

  Tuija: Does your child have an individual plan in the day-care centre?
  Mother 5: No he doesn’t.
  Tuija: Have you had a discussion about your child with the staff?
  Mother 5: Yes, in the autumn we had the beginning discussion and now in the spring was the final discussion
  Tuija: Did someone write down the things?
  Mother 5: Yes

  Tuija: Does your child have an individual plan?
  Mother 1: No I don’t think so, the only thing is, these discussions and other things.

All parents recalled the discussion sessions with the educator, but they had not always interpreted it as an individual planning session with an individual plan as an outcome. According to Karila (2005) the partnership between the parents and educators means open communication, shared decision making and expertise, and clearly with some parents this had not happened. The intent of the discussion had not been explicitly explained to these parents. Despite this, the discussions were mainly positive experiences for the parents and they felt that they had had an influence on setting the targets for their child. Most of the parents agreed that the discussions formed the basis of the individual support for their child.

  Mother 1: It [the discussion] is good so that we know how things are. My son, I think that he is different than he is at home. Because of the more unfamiliar people. It is nice to know, for example about putting on his clothes and other things. Because at home, it is always mother.
Mother 8: The parents are listened to very well and things are written down. And I have the feeling that the things have been put into practice too. So that the staff has clearly shared the things among themselves and everyone knows about our wishes and where we think the support is needed.

The parents had great confidence in the educators. They felt that the educators always had time for parents and the family’s wishes and needs to be taken into account.

Mother 5: [after talking about her son’s special needs] And it was nice too, I wondered if this can be possible, but yes it can because he needs if. I thought that it is great how individual this can be. She [the educator] said that some other kids might have something else ... So this kind of thing, there are plenty of them. [explains how a special requirement of her son was taken into account during the outdoor activities] So, I always notice that. They have paid attention and took it into account. They [the educators] are so good at it.

One parent expressed a critical comment:

Father 6: Actually the paper was filled mechanically, and if I think about it afterwards, I just wonder, what was the purpose of it and the outcome. It remained blurry, at least for me, if I think backwards. So we just filled the paper but I don’t know what kind of strengths he has, what should be increased and supported. That remained unclear.

In addition to the discussions, the portfolio was important to the parents. It was a folder or a box that contained their child’s drawings and other artifacts the child had made, and the individual planning forms. The parents thought that the portfolio could be a good tool for the educators to gain a more comprehensive picture about their child, especially in transition. However, they did not know how the information in the portfolio was used in the day-care centre. Eight parents talked about the portfolio, two parents did not know what was in it, and one parent did not think there was one for her child.

Mother 8: Yes, there is, it is not a folder but a box where the artifacts are collected. It is a kind of a box of growth.
Tuija: Have you seen it, what does it contain?
Mother 8: No I haven’t, I don’t know what’s in it.

Mother 6: I think it [the portfolio] was there [in the discussion], but we didn’t look at it.
I think that the idea is that it will be given to us now in the spring.

The parents had no or weak knowledge about the usage of the individual planning procedures during the transition. They thought that the individual information about their child could be a good starting point for the pre-school teacher. It could give a basis for individual support for their child also in pre-school, and the parents hoped the educators had time to read their child’s papers and look at the portfolio.

Tuija: Your daughter has this individual plan that has been written down. Do you know how it is used in the transition to pre-school?
Mother 3: No, actually I don’t know.
Tuija: How would you like it to be used?
Mother 3: So that the educators from the pre-school group could talk about it and the educators from this present group could tell what we have talked about. So it might be useful.

Tuija: How are the discussions and other things used in this transition to pre-school? Do you know?
Mother 4: I don’t know, but I think that the information should go there automatically.
So that they [educators in pre-school group] can read it. I think that the folder [portfolio] goes with the child here in the day-care centre.

As for the educators, familiarity was an important element of continuity for the parents. It helped that the building and other children were familiar, and the educators knew the child and the family.

Mother 10: You know, the day-care centre teacher who is in pre-school, she is familiar. She certainly has been with my son already, not very much though, but she knows. …She has the basic information and she knows my son.
Mother 2: But it is so great because it [pre-school] is in the same premises. They [the children] have played with pre-schoolers. So it is familiar.

A personal contact and relationship with the educators strengthened the parents’ experience of continuity. They had a feeling of respectful and mutual relationships with the educators (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). From the parents’ perspective personal, face-to-face contacts and familiarity gave good foundations for their child’s education. They could count on that. Other individual planning procedures and how they were used in transition were either blurry or unclear for the parents. In particular, the individual plan seemed to remain remote. One parent said:

Mother 6: Actually, we don’t have that form. It could be good thing to copy it to the parents.

Discussion
According to this study individual planning was important in the national curricula, at the local level in the educators’ talk and in the forms used in the day-dare centre. How their child’s individual needs and personal characteristic were taken into account was important to the parents. At national and local levels, parents’ involvement in individual planning was emphasized and was reflected in the parents’ positive experiences of the discussions. The active participation of the parents is an important factor for continuity and support in transitions. Family involvement benefits the child in many ways (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In this study, the parents felt that they had been listened to and their perspectives and wishes had been taken seriously and put into action with their child. This reflects Alasuutari’s (2003) results which show that Finnish parents trust early years educators and their professional skills. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002) the continuity of family involvement provides protection for children. The results of this study indicated that the parents were involved and felt that they had been listened in the early childhood education, but not so much in the transition to pre-school.

In this setting, familiarity and trust were important parts of continuity. Both parents and educators emphasized the value of knowing each other and having personal relationships. The importance of strong, positive relationships between educators and parents in early childhood
education has been documented in previous studies (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Shpancer, 2002). Instead, the individual planning had little to do with the transition to pre-school. National curricula instructed the educators to ensure consistency and continuity, but this aspect was not present in the forms or the discussions. Consequently, the parents’ knowledge about the usage of the individual plan in transition to pre-school was minimal. Griebel and Niesel (2002) suggest that the preparation for transition is not only needed for the children but for the parents as well. In this study the familiar setting and personal relationships seemed to serve an important role in the preparation for pre-school education, but the meaning of the individual planning remained blurry.

Although the parents were generally satisfied with how their voice was listened to, there were some issues. This study showed how the national documentation on individual planning was first translated into practices of one day-care centre, and then experienced by the parents. In this process the curriculum changed. The experienced curriculum differed from the official curriculum and the educators interpretation of it (Kelly, 2004; Turunen, 2008). The distinction between the educators’ interpretations and the parents’ experiences was evident in some areas. The educators and the parents had different perceptions of the usefulness and use of individual planning. Some parents were not aware that there actually was an individual plan for their child and none of the parents knew how the plans were used in transition to pre-school. This reflects parallel results with Johansson’s (2002) study in which the majority of the parents were satisfied with the information they had received, but one third would have liked to receive more information. It might be that the information is available in early years settings, but for some reason it does not reach all families.

In her study Karila (2005) found that the discussions between educators and parents are often built on educators’ professional perspectives. Educators define the themes and use more time in the discussions. Power is with the educator. It might mean that parents do not have space to ask information. In this study, the discussions were based on the forms, with readymade themes, and parents’ voice was limited. To clarify the individual planning and transition processes to the parents, more open and mutual discussion between educators and parents is needed. The educators should reflect on the positioning of themselves and the parents. They should actively endeavor to build respectful relationships, where the parents have time and space to bring their interests to the discussion and ask the questions they might have. The other
important issue is the taken-for-granted nature of many practicalities in day-care centres: they are so self-evident to the educators that they do not remember that the parents may not know them. I agree with Alasuutari (2007) that the idea of partnership in early childhood education challenges the traditional ways of doing things.

This study revealed transition practices in a setting which is typical in Finland (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2004; Siniharju, 2007), but it does not discuss these processes in other situations like transition to pre-school from home or when pre-school is a part of primary school. More research is needed to build up more comprehensive picture about individual planning processes in the various contexts of transition pre-school. Since the study was conducted new core curriculum for pre-school education has been introduced. As its precursor, it contains the idea of building continuity between early childhood education, pre-school and primary school. In the curriculum individual planning is an important part of pre-school education, especially with children with special needs, but there is no advice how these individual plans should support the continuity in transitions (*Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2010*). Based on this study I suggest that the continuity in individual planning should be more explicit in national and local levels, and in practices with families. It can be recommended as an appropriate tool in transition to pre-school, but more discussion between parents and educators is needed to build up a shared understanding of it.

References

*Basic Education Act 1288/1999*. Finland.


