

# Resources in Finnish ECEC Centers - Confirming a Solid Ground for Future Readers

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## Abstract

In this article, we investigate the literature resources in Finnish Early Childhood and Care (ECEC) groups. The results indicate that the quality and the number of books vary between groups and ECEC centres. In general, it seems that the personnel and administration of ECEC centres value children's literature differently: at best, there are high-quality and age-appropriate books for children. The literature in the daycare centres mostly concentrates on the most popular authors and book series in the timeline of decades as well as books aimed at socioemotional learning, which is one of the main aims in the Finnish Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018). Shortly, the books are broadly quite old and do not meet with the diversity of children and their needs in ECEC groups.

**Keywords:** literature resources; quality of the children's literature; age-appropriate books for children

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## Introduction

International evidence indicates that those young people who choose to read and do so frequently, are likely to benefit academically, personally, and socially. In general, reading is strongly associated with enhanced vocabulary, reading comprehension and psychological wellbeing (McQuillan et al., 2019; Bergen, Torppa, 2020; Clark, Teräväinen-Goff, 2017). Through reading and discussing personally relevant literature, young people can get resources to explore their identities and others' life experiences (Ivey, Johnston, 2013). Furthermore, in the groups which successfully nurture volitional reading, children develop a sense of belonging and community (Cremin et al., 2014; Ng, 2018). In the PISA assessments, significant impairment in the trend of literacy competences has been seen in Finland. However, the level of literacy among Finns (490 points) is still higher than the OECD average (476). Compared to the 2018 PISA assessment's result, Finland's point average has fallen by as much as 30 points. (PISA 2022 First Results Report, 2023)

ECEC libraries are integral to building up a love for reading. Literature has long been regarded as a cornerstone of childhood education, offering a pathway to literacy development, cultural awareness, and social-emotional growth. For young children, exposure to stories, poetry, and nonfiction opens up new worlds and fosters imagination, empathy, and a love for learning. (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2021) ECEC settings are uniquely positioned to provide these rich literary experiences, laying the foundation for lifelong literacy and learning. However, ensuring that all children benefit from such experiences requires intentional strategies, inclusive resources, and committed educators (Cremin et al., 2024). Accessible and well-organized libraries are also central to fostering a reading culture. When books are prominently displayed and easily accessible, children are more likely to engage in spontaneous reading and share their experiences with peers (Merga, Mason, 2019). Additionally, discussions about books, whether in small groups or as part of a larger class activity, enhance children's comprehension and motivation to read (Nevo, Vaknik-Nusbaum, 2020).

In Finland, the Stories Make Readers (StoRe) model developed by Aerila and Kauppinen (2021) exemplifies a research-based approach to integrating literature into ECEC. According to StoRe, reading and listening literature is not only beneficial for academic and literacy skills but also fosters children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. By encouraging children to engage with text and interpret them creatively, StoRe aligns with the Finnish national curricula's (2014, 2018, 2022) focus on multidisciplinary learning and transversal skills, such as problem-solving, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. Its principles, however, extend far beyond Finland, offering a framework that is adaptable to diverse educational contexts. Central to StoRe is the belief that students are inspired by books when they have the freedom to interpret and respond creatively. These responses,



whether through visual arts, drama, or music, deepen students' emotional engagement with texts and encourage imaginative thinking. Importantly, StoRe aligns with new brain research, which underscores the importance of early reading experiences in fostering balanced cognitive and emotional development (Huotilainen, 2022).

This article explores the critical role of literature in ECEC, drawing on the StoRe model and related research. It examines the quality and amount of literature in Finnish ECEC groups. Further, it highlights the challenges educators face, particularly in ensuring children an access to diverse and high-quality literary resources, and underscores the need for systemic investments to support language-sensitive and inclusive literacy education.

### *The Role of Literature in ECEC*

The importance of literature in ECEC cannot be overstated. Early exposure to books shapes not only children's literacy skills but also their emotional and social development. (Aerila et al., 2021) Research shows that young readers benefit academically, socially, and psychologically from engaging with literature. Recreational reading is associated with improved vocabulary, reading comprehension, and psychological well-being (McQuillan et al., 2019; Bergen, Torppa, 2020). Furthermore, literature offers children opportunities to explore their identities and understand diverse perspectives, fostering empathy and social connectedness (Ivey, Johnston, 2013).

A central goal of ECEC is to cultivate a love for reading, which begins with positive early experiences. Research highlights the significance of shared reading, both in one-on-one and group settings, as a means of fostering joy and connection around books (Morrow, 2013). Cremin et al. (2014) emphasise that when children develop a sense of belonging within a reading community, they are more likely to engage in volitional reading, further enhancing their literacy skills. The StoRe model supports this by emphasizing meaningful shared reading experiences, encouraging discussions, and integrating arts-based responses to literature together with suitable reading materials and inspiring reading environments (Kauppinen, Aerila, 2022). The following figure illustrates how physical reading environments form the basement of meaningful experiences in reading.



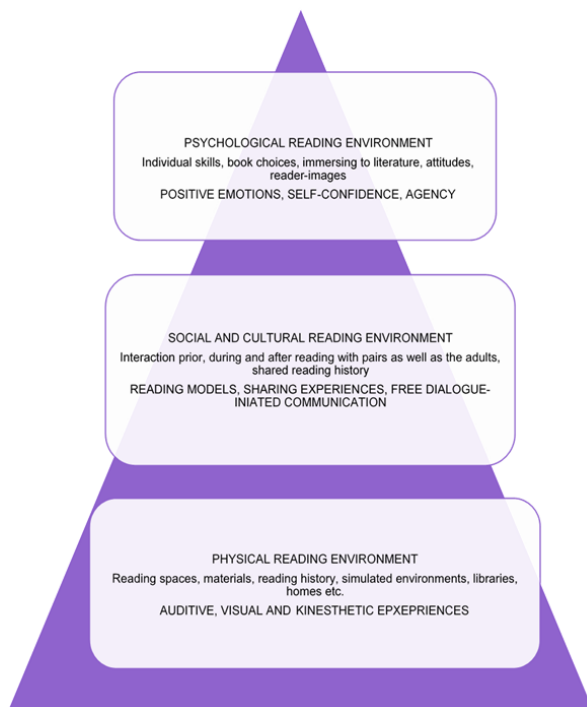


FIGURE 1. *The pyramid of meaningful reading environments.*

Teachers are central to creating rich literary environments in ECEC. Research underscores the importance of educators as knowledgeable and enthusiastic reading partners who guide children in selecting books, facilitate discussions, and model a love for reading (Cremin, 2009; Merga, 2017). Despite the known benefits of literature and reading, access to books remains a significant challenge in many ECEC settings. Research highlights disparities in access to high-quality, diverse, and culturally relevant literature, particularly for children from low socio-economic and multilingual backgrounds. (Cremin et al., 2024) ECE and school libraries play a vital role in bridging these gaps. Studies show that when children have access to well-stocked libraries, they are more likely to develop a love for reading and engage with books (Tonne, Pihl, 2012; Kajander, 2020). In Finland, however, many schools and ECEC centres struggle with outdated and limited book collections, which fail to meet the needs of diverse student populations (Grünthal et al., 2019).

The literature resources in ECEC are not widely investigated in Finland. However, the studies focusing on school-age children indicate that multilingual literature is especially scarce, with only a minority of Finnish schools offering books in students' home languages. This gap is significant, as access to literature in one's



first language supports language development, identity formation, and cultural inclusion (Krashen, 2013; Saarinen et al., 2019). Teachers often address these gaps by borrowing books from public libraries or purchasing materials themselves, but systematic investment is needed to ensure equitable access to literary resources of all kinds of young readers (Lähteelä et al., 2022). Additionally, schools and ECEC centres must prioritize funding for book collections and provide educators with the tools and resources necessary to create inclusive and engaging reading environments.

### *Literature resources*

The quality and diversity of literary resources are critical factors in fostering reading (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2019). Research emphasises the importance of offering books that reflect a range of cultures, languages, and experiences, ensuring that all children see themselves represented in literature (Adam, Harper, 2016; Nemeth, 2015). Diverse literature not only supports cultural inclusion but also broadens children's horizons, helping them understand and appreciate different perspectives. In practice, this means regularly updating school and classroom libraries to include contemporary and relevant texts. (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2021) Diversity should be reflected in authorship, themes, illustrations, and languages. As Morrow (2013) suggests, an early childhood library should include a mix of plot-driven picture books, nonfiction, poetry, biographies, and culturally significant stories. Such a variety ensures that all children, regardless of background, can find books that resonate with them.

School and ECEC centres' libraries work by bridging the socio-economic gap between students (Tonne, Pihl, 2012), as they bring books to all students in the place they visit every day. Indeed, in international studies (e.g. Leino et al., 2017; Leino et al., 2019), family socio-economic status has been identified as a key determinant of literacy gaps. In this context, a learning environment that encourages communal reading is important, especially for students who do not have access to literary resources at home or in other leisure environments. The goal of community literacy education is to make books seem meaningful to both the students themselves and those around them (Allington, Gabriel, 2012; Alsup, 2015).

ECEC book collections can be the only gateway to the world of books and reading for low-reading students (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2021; Bland, 2013). Indeed, previous international research highlights the importance of these libraries. According to a study in the US (Hughes-Hassell, Rodge, 2007), the majority of secondary school-age students acquired reading material from the school library. In China, classroom libraries have been found to increase students' liking and interest in literature, literary discussions between students and the likelihood of reading for at least half an hour a day (Yi et al., 2019). According to a study in Finland



(Kajander, 2020), school libraries have opened the way to reading for many Finns. According to Tonnen and Pihl (2012), school book selections increase reading and interest in books among students from low socioeconomic status as well as multilingual students. In general, enthusiasm for reading accelerates the learning of a new language and makes it more autonomous (Bland, 2018; Krashen, 2013).

The presence and accessibility of books reminds people to read and enables both spontaneous reading and returning to familiar texts. Familiar selections also make it easier to find what to read and generate natural conversations about book choices and reading experiences. Both spending time with literature and discussing it are important in supporting reading (Allington, Gabriel, 2012) For example, literature discussions significantly develop students' motivation to read and improve their reading skills (Nevo, Vaknik-Nusbaum, 2020). In literature discussions, books come to life in the readers' interactions, as it were, and students' interest and pleasure in reading spreads through their own activity (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2019; Cremin, 2014).

ECEC book selections should be examined not only from the perspective of topics of interest, language variation and accuracy (Morrow, 2020), but also from the perspective of interculturalism. The goal is that every student in the classroom finds points of identification in literature, including from their cultural background, and further that literature does not stereotype, insult or misrepresent any cultural perspective (Adam, Harper, 2016; Nemeth, 2015). In practice, this means that ECECs' book collections need to be constantly updated, both by removing old reading material and by acquiring new material. Diversity should be reflected in the authors whose works are available in schools, as well as in their themes, illustrations, characters, chronology, language and attention to students' needs (Harper, Trostle-Brand, 2010). A diverse range of books that are accessible to all, genuinely used and kept up to date in the school is a visible sign that the school supports language-sensitive teaching and linguistic and cultural diversity (Aerila, Kauppinen, 2021; Nemeth, 2015).

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In our survey (Lähteelä et al., 2022), those teachers who felt that the school and classroom library was good felt that reading and literature were valued in their school. This result is important from the point of view of a reading community: the formation of a reading community is a question of values and requires tangibility. It is also important to have a selection of books in the ECEC that makes the importance of reading and literature visible in a concrete way to both teachers and children. A reading community in a school or ECEC is made up of a teacher committed to reading, children who are positively inclined towards reading, and their immediate community and environment, which reflects the joy and activity of reading (Cremin, 2019). If literature does not match children's language skills or interests, there is a risk that children will be excluded from the reading community. The physical reading environment is illustrated by the way books appear in the daily work of schools, and schools' literary resources are therefore an integral part of the reading community (Merga, Mason, 2019). Previous Finnish research suggests that Finnish teachers use school and ECEC libraries far more often than public libraries, partly because of a lack of time for library visits outside of school (Grünthal et al., 2019). School libraries in primary education in Finland have been found to increase teacher collaboration with pupils, teachers and public libraries (Kurttila-Matero et al., 2011), and it would be interesting to study this issue further.

## Research Context

In this study, we investigated the literature resources of 10 ECEC centres in Western Finland. In Finland, the subjective right to early childhood education and care means that every child under school age has an equal right to participate in early childhood education and care. This means that most children attend daycares between the ages of 1 and 5, partly because of the high number of working mothers. In addition, every child must (from 2015) participate in a year of pre-primary education or other activities that achieve the objectives of pre-primary



education before starting school. This means that most Finnish children also participate in pre-primary education. This pre-primary education is organized in schools or in daycares. In this study, there were also pre-primary groups in the ECEC centres,

The aim of the study was to analyse the quality of the literature resources in daycare centres from the perspective of diverse child-readers. The total data 58 groups of 10 ECE centres participated (group division: 1-3 years, 3-5 years, pre-school) 42 ECE teachers. In Finland, the size of the ECEC-groups and the number of staff depends on the age of the children in the group. In groups where most children are under three years old, the maximum group size is 12 and there must be one adult for every four children. For children aged 3 to 6 years, the maximum number of children in the group is 21 and there must be one adult for every seven children. Groups of maximum size must have two adults with a university degree in early childhood education.

The data of the study were collected during the year 2023 by a research assistant who visited the ECEC centres and counted as well as photographed all the books present in the ECEC groups and other spaces like daycare libraries.

The data consists of documentations of ECE centres' reading material, and an online questionnaire for the personnel of the ECE centres. The questionnaire was used to investigate personnel's perceptions of the meaning and quality of reading materials they have available. Both Likert-scale and open questions of reading practises in ECE groups were used in the questionnaire for assessment of the adequacy and quality of the material. The sources for getting more reading materials. All the reading materials aimed at children (in groups, in libraries, in teacher's lounge and in common spaces) as well as reading environments (storages for books as well as reading corners) were documented by photographs and written notes (authors, titles, publication years, front and back cover) by a research assistant. Further they were counted and organized by genres. The data were analysed via quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019).

## Results

### *Overview of Reading Frequency and Practices in ECEC*

- Daily Reading: 42.9% of groups read to children daily.
- Weekly Reading: 47.6% of groups engaged in weekly reading.
- Rest-Break Only Reading: 9.5% of groups read to children exclusively during rest periods.
- Occasional Reading: No groups reported occasional reading as a primary practice.





Personnel highly value books and reading but face challenges in fostering equitable access to quality materials due to financial and resource constraints.

### *Availability and Condition of Reading Materials in ECEC*

- Quantity of Books: A total of 13,028 books were surveyed, with an average of 1,085 books per daycare center (range: 601–1,498 books).
- Distribution of Books:
  - Daycare Libraries: 56% of the total book collections.
  - Group Spaces: 43.5% of the total book collections.
- Book Age: A significant portion of the literature dates from the 1960s to 1990s, with limited representation of 21st-century literature.
- Digital Resources: Digital reading materials are minimally used, contrary to the goals of the Finnish National Curriculum for ECEC (2022).

### *Variation in Book Access by Group and Age in ECEC*

The availability of books varies widely among groups and age categories:

1. Small Children Groups (1–3 years):
  - Average: 76 books per group (range: 10–146 books).
2. Toddler Groups (3–5 years):
  - Average: 96 books per group (range: 36–166 books).
3. Preschool Groups (6 years):
  - Average: 129 books per group (range: 79–407 books).

These disparities highlight inequities in access to reading materials, especially for younger children.

### *Sources and Accessibility of Reading Materials in ECEC*

- Primary Sources:
  - Public libraries (92.9%) and personnel-provided books (92.9%) were the most common sources.
  - Family contributions (26.2%) and books in communal spaces (81%) supplement resources.
  - Digital platforms, including Lukulumo, were used in only 9.5% of cases, while audio books and other digital tools accounted for 14.3% each.
- Linguistic and Cultural Accessibility: Materials are often insufficiently tailored to linguistically and culturally diverse families, which is a source of creating gaps in inclusivity.



## *Challenges Identified in ECEC*

1. Outdated Materials: Many books reflect the childhood era of the personnel, limiting exposure to contemporary themes and diverse perspectives.
2. Insufficient Budget: Personnel frequently purchase

## Discussion

By investing in inclusive book collections, supporting professional development, and fostering a reading culture, ECEC settings can ensure that all children benefit from the joys and benefits of literature. In doing so, they lay the foundation for lifelong learning, empathy, and community building. As Aerila and Kauppinen (2021) emphasise, early positive experiences with literature shape children's relationships with reading, making it essential to prioritise literature as a core element of early education.

The study highlights that the children are not in equal position in regard to the access of reading materials. There is a need for a wider discussion (community and administrative level) on the reading resources available at ECEC centers. There is a need for in-service training for teachers in regard to digital resources and the importance of reading offered in ECE groups.

Next steps to closer analysis of the data: 1) reading materials: diversity of cultural, social and gender themes in the books, linguistic diversity and age-level appropriateness of the books, the reading environments; 2) questionnaire: the conceptions and attitudes of the personnel towards literature use and the pedagogy they implement.

## Conclusion

Literature is a powerful tool for learning, growth, and social and emotional connection, particularly in early childhood education and care. The Finnish StoRe model highlights the transformative potential of integrating literature with arts-based activities, fostering not only literacy skills but also emotional and social development. However, realising the full potential of literature in ECEC requires addressing systemic challenges, such as disparities in access to diverse and high-quality resources and gaps in teacher training.

Building a reading culture in ECEC involves more than just providing books; it requires learning environments where literature is valued and celebrated. Teachers, children, and families all play a role in this process. A reading community is characterised by shared values, collaborative activities, and visible engagement with books. For example, classroom displays of student-created artwork



inspired by literature or regular family reading events can reinforce the importance of reading.

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