

Losing sight of the child? Human capital theory and its role for early childhood education and care policies in Finland and England since the mid-1990s ^[1]

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Abstract

The international interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) by supranational organisations, including the European Union, has grown considerably due to its dual function of sustaining parental employment and fostering child development. Focussing primarily on child development debates around ECEC, this article argues that human capital theory is the dominant rationale for investing in ECEC. The article discusses the development of ECEC in Finland and England, countries that are considered members of different family policy regimes. It explores the pattern of ECEC developments over time, the extent to which these developments have been framed as human capital investments, the extent that there are references to supranational policy imperatives, and whether there is a growing convergence between the countries around ECEC. Whilst we argue there is some merging in ideas around the function of ECEC in supporting parental employment, there are still differing interpretations when looking at child development that can be related to the cultural and historical origins of ECEC in the respective countries. We voice our concerns that the growing dominance of human capital theory in interpretations of ECEC is resulting in a very narrow view of children and ECEC services.

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