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Child–educator disagreements in Finnish early childhood education and care: young children’s possibilities for influence

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ABSTRACT

This study explores young children’s possibilities for influence in situations of child–educator disagreement in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). Data were gathered from observations conducted in four ECEC groups of under three year-olds. A total of 112 child–educator disagreements were analysed qualitatively using reflexive thematic analysis. Children’s influence was rather limited in most disagreements, as these involved the established institutional order as manifested in the rules and norms of daily activities and educators’ control over children’s bodies and material resources. However, disagreements over social rules and the ongoing social situation often allowed children to negotiate and contribute to the outcomes. By identifying the difficulties young children may face in resisting the institutional order, the study highlights the importance of developing practices that enable discussion of the settled rules of ECEC and thus regard young children’s right to have their views heard and considered in matters affecting them.

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Introduction

How disagreements between young children and adults are understood has changed over the past few decades; the traditional interpretation of these situations as a sign of noncompliance and disobedience is being increasingly challenged by the conception of children as competent agents and rights-holders (Kjørholt 2008; Kuczynski, Pitman, and Twigger 2018; Sevón 2015). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, UNICEF 1989, Articles 12 and 13), children have the right to express their views and have them considered in matters affecting them – even when they contradict the views of adults. Although this right is widely acknowledged, we continue to know very little about how it is implemented in everyday ECEC. Our study contributes to filling this gap in research by exploring young children’s possibilities for influencing situations of child–educator disagreement in the institutional context of Finnish ECEC.

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Tension between children's participation and protection in ECEC

In the Finnish national ECEC core curriculum, children are described as active agents whose viewpoints should be respected so as to strengthen their abilities for participation and involvement (Finnish National Agency of Education 2018, 22, 27). This policy is based on the UNCRC (UNICEF 1989, Articles 12 and 13), according to which children who are able to form views on matters affecting them have a right to express those views and have them considered. In other words, individual children have a right to participate in and influence the daily interactions and decisions concerning them (Alderson 2010; Lundy 2018). Such participation is thought to build children's trust in their possibilities to make a difference and thus support their gradual development into democratic citizens (Finnish National Agency of Education 2018, 27).

In everyday life in ECEC, however, young children's participation continues to confront many barriers. When interacting with young children, professionals are more likely to emphasise children's protection and care, which are also children's rights highlighted in the UNCRC (UNICEF 1989, Article 3; Alderson 2010). Despite their vital importance, protection and care can sometimes turn into control and suppression that hamper children's possibilities for influence (Alderson 2010; see also Emilson 2007; Millei 2011; Weckström et al. 2021). For example, while daily routines related to children's basic needs, such as routines pertaining to meals and nap time, are important for their physical wellbeing, adult control over children's bodily functions and movements may undermine needs expressed by children themselves (Kuukka 2015, 103, 136; see also Blaisdell 2019; Åmot and Ytterhus 2014).

The tendency to emphasise protection and care stems from the perception of young children as vulnerable and incapable of understanding their own best interests (Alderson 2010; Ivashkevich 2012; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2013). Clearly, the relationship between young children and educators is asymmetrical insofar as the latter possess knowledge and maturity that the former lack (Alanen 2009; Ivashkevich 2012; Konstantoni and Emejulu 2017). Consequently, protection and care are typically taken as primary concerns in childhood institutions and child–professional relationships (Alderson 2010; Åmot and Ytterhus 2014). Even when educators make conscious efforts to blur hierarchies between children and adults, young children's participation in care practices may remain problematic (Blaisdell 2019). However, even the youngest of children have knowledge of relevance to their everyday lives and multiple means for communicating their views (Colliver 2017). Therefore, their young age should not eclipse their right to agency and influence (Alderson 2010; Colliver 2017).

Another obstacle to children's participation lies in a misguided assumption concerning children's rights to participation and protection. These two rights are often understood as conflicting (Alderson 2010; Lundy 2018). However, the right of young children to protection does not eliminate their right to have their views heard and considered in matters concerning them (Alderson 2010; Lundy 2018). According to the UNCRC (UNICEF 1989, Article 3), 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' in all actions affecting children; and to know what their best interests are, one also

needs to consult children themselves (Lundy 2018). Protection and care can therefore only serve children's best interests if their views are also heard and taken into account (Lundy 2018).

Child–educator disagreements as a context for children's participation

In this study, we focus on child–educator disagreements, situations that can be regarded as the most critical and challenging for young children's participation and influence in ECEC. These situations evolve from children's active attempts to influence matters affecting them. Given their right to participate (UNCRC, UNICEF 1989, Articles 12 and 13), individual children should be able to contest their ECEC educators and participate in settling disagreements. Importantly, children's right to participate applies not only to formal decision-making but also to diverse everyday activities and routines that adults often take for granted but which young children may question (Alderson 2010).

Previous research, however, shows a different kind of reality: a child's resistance is often interpreted by adults as noncompliance instead of seeing it as an attempt to exert some control over the situation and to negotiate (Kuczynski, Pitman, and Twigger 2018; Sevón 2015). These situations also occur in the ECEC context. For example, in a study conducted in a Swedish preschool (Markström 2010), educators' descriptions of children's resistance to the institutional order included implicit criticism based on a normative ideal of a well-functioning preschool child. In another study, conducted in Norway (Åmot and Ytterhus 2014), similar notions were observed in daily life in ECEC, where, for example, a young child's bodily resistance towards the rules in force was unfavourably described by one educator instead being interpreted as the child's struggle for recognition.

These findings suggest that ECEC professionals may override young children's views when these conflict with the prevailing institutional order (see also Alasuutari 2014). To contribute to dismantling these obstacles to young children's participation in ECEC, this study takes a closer look at minor everyday disagreements between individual young children and their ECEC educators and the fleeting moments of young children's influence on their resolution.

The study

Our aim was to deepen current understanding of young children's participation in ECEC in Finland and the possible barriers and facilitators to it by exploring children's possibilities for influence in situations of child–educator disagreement. Our interest here is on the least studied age-group, the under three year-olds, whose views are the most prone to suppression due to their very young age (Alderson 2010). Specifically, we sought answers to the following research questions:

- (1) Are young children able to influence the outcomes of child–educator disagreements, and if so, how?
- (2) Are young children's possibilities for influence related to the topic of a disagreement, and if so, how?

Method

Data collection

The study forms part of the research project ‘Conflicts and power in children and young people’s close relationships – Narrated emotions and agency as facets’, which studies conflicts and power in diverse contexts involving children, such as the home, ECEC, school, and leisure. In this study, we focus on the daily lives of the youngest children in ECEC, i.e., those under age three.

Our methodological choices are informed by focused ethnography. In this ethnographic approach, the data collection is directed by an interest in a specific topic or research question formulated prior to entering the field (Higginbottom, Pillay, and Boadu 2013; Knoblauch 2005; Stahlke Wall 2014). Unlike more conventional ethnography, the data are typically collected during short-term field visits (Knoblauch 2005; Stahlke Wall 2014). Owing to a well-defined focus and use of audio-visual technologies, these visits, although of short duration, can yield rich data for intensive analysis (Knoblauch 2005; Stahlke Wall 2014).

We collected data from November 2020 to April 2021, when two of the researchers in our team made a total of 18 visits to the under-threes in two municipal ECEC centres. Each of these groups comprised eight children and two educators (one with ECEC teacher training and the other with nurse training), and some members of each participated in the study (for more details, see Table 1). The observations were directed by our initial interest in conflicts and power in young children’s close relationships in ECEC. In their visits, the researchers observed young children’s interactions with their educators and peers during diverse activities and routines. Special attention was paid to the children’s non-verbal communication, such as their vocalisations, facial expressions, gestures, and actions. To capture the small details of interaction, attention was focused on one or two child participants at a time.

The researchers mainly took written notes from the above-mentioned foci of observation. They also made video recordings. The use of video was limited to situations where all the children and educators present were participating in the study (see Rutanen et al. 2018). After each visit, the written notes were anonymised and expanded into fuller narratives. The video recordings (the sections relevant for the study) were transcribed verbatim and anonymised, and observations on the material and social context were included in the transcripts to obtain narratives similar to those contained in the written field notes.

Table 1. Participants and data collection.

ECEC centre	Groups of under three year-olds (N)	Participating educators (N)	Participating children (N)	Visits (N)	Time frame of visits	Hours observed (N)
Centre 1	2*	4	7	10	8 am – 4 pm	28
Centre 2	2**	3	6	8	9 am – 12 pm	17
Total	4	7	13	18		45

*Both groups for under three year-olds. The groups were combined during outings, at meals and in the afternoons. **One group for one year-olds, the other for two year-olds. The groups were often combined during outings and at lunchtime.

Ethics

Before the data collection, the study was ethically approved by the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Informed consents were obtained from the participating ECEC centres and educators as well as the parents of the participating children, who were aged from one to two years at the start of the study.

We used ethical listening to determine whether the young children were personally willing to participate in the study (Smith and Koady 2020). Ethical listening refers to a continuous process of observing, listening, seeing, hearing and responding to children's reactions to the researcher, research equipment and being observed during fieldwork. We paid attention to the diverse modalities of expression and were careful to notice facial and bodily signs of discomfort (see Sumsion et al. 2011; White 2011). Sometimes, educators, who were more familiar with the participating children and their individual ways of expressing themselves, helped us to understand how they felt about participating (see Smith and Koady 2020). The wishes of some of the young children not to be observed were respected, and their consent was renegotiated after the interactional situation had changed (see Smith and Koady 2020).

Another ethical challenge of relevance to this study is that it is associated with research on a sensitive topic, in this case disagreements, which may involve emotions and actions participants do not wish others to see. In our study, this required balancing between two ethical goals: one of producing new findings that contribute to furthering young children's participation and influence and the other of respecting their privacy. To resolve this issue, we adhered to a feminist approach founded on care and concern for research participants (see Sörensson and Kalman 2018). During the fieldwork, we aimed at building a trusting relationship with our participants, both the children and the educators, by responding sensitively to their expressed needs and wishes. In the later phases of the study, we took care to ensure the anonymity of all participants.

Data analysis

The results of our fieldwork indicated that the best starting point for examining young children's possibilities to influence ECEC was child–educator disagreements, as it is during these situations that the most intense negotiation and suppression of young children's participation and influence occur. We identified a total of 112 episodes of child–educator disagreement in our data. Here, an episode refers to a data segment that includes at least the first three of the following four phases: 1) behaviours that start the disagreement; 2) behaviours that continue the disagreement; 3) behaviours that end the disagreement and 4) the final result of the disagreement (see Laursen and Adams 2018). Phase one always took place between a child and an educator, either of whom made an initiative that the other opposed. Occasionally, where a peer of the child in question was also involved in the interaction, our focus remained exclusively on the child–educator interaction.

In identifying the episodes in the data, attention was paid to both verbal and non-verbal expression by the parties to the disagreement, including talk, vocalisations, crying, facial expressions and physical actions. In addition to pronounced

resistance, minor manifestations of dislike towards the actions or expressions of the initiating party were also seen as opposition starting a disagreement episode, and thus the interaction did not necessarily include the intense expression of emotions. When noticed by the opposing party, ignoring an initiative was also interpreted as an opposition.

Sometimes the events immediately preceding the behaviours starting the disagreement (phase one) were included in the episode when this was necessary for understanding the disagreement. For example, this was done when the child–educator disagreement evolved from peer conflict. The final result of the disagreement (phase four) was interpreted to include events immediately following the behaviours that ended the disagreement (phase three).

A qualitative reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019; Clarke and Braun 2017), driven by our research questions, was used to analyse the episodes. To answer our first research question, we focused on phases two to three/four of each episode and looked for possible changes attributable to the influence of the young children. Attention was paid to the actions and expressions of both the children and educators. Children's influence on the events, varying from non-existent to substantial, was coded into six categories (see Table 2).

To address the second research question, we turned our attention to phase one of each episode and explored the topics of the disagreements, coding them into four categories (see Table 2). We then looked for what might link the children's possibilities for influence and the topics of disagreement. We generated two themes that captured children's possibilities for influence in different kinds of disagreements (see Table 2).

Findings

The findings of the study are presented and discussed below in relation to the two research questions under each theme, separately (see Table 2). Thus, we first describe the ways children were able to influence the outcomes during child–educator disagreements and then the topics of disagreement that were related to children's possibilities for influence.

Opposing but finally conforming to the institutional order

During most of the child–educator disagreements in our data, the young children had only minor, if any, possibilities to exert influence (83 episodes). First, in these disagreements, the child opposed the educator's actions and verbal requests. Although the educators noticed the children's opposition, their perspectives were seldom considered. In most cases, the child ultimately yielded to the educator's demands – either without challenging them further, or reluctantly, after continued resistance. In cases where the child was able to influence events, this was limited to delaying and/or complicating the educator's actions or producing minor changes that were suited to the ongoing activity.

Table 2. Disagreements between young children and their educators: themes, children's influence, and topics of disagreement.

Theme	Children's influence	Topics of disagreement
1. Opposing but finally conforming to the institutional order	1. Opposing but unable to influence educators' actions 2. Delaying and/or complicating educators' actions 3. Inducing minor changes that suit the ongoing activity	1. Rules and norms of daily activities: routines, learning activities and play 2. Educators' control over children's bodies and material resources: spaces, toys, games and clothes
2. Negotiating one's position in the ongoing social situation	4. Receiving educators' explanations for their actions 5. Contributing to compromises that suit the social situation 6. Achieving their goals through persistent requests	3. Social rules of peer interaction: taking turns, sharing and refraining from using physical force in interaction with peers 4. Lack of educators' attention: company, help and physical closeness

Commonly in these disagreements, the child's possibilities for exerting an influence were limited by the institutional order, i.e., the established ways of conducting diverse daily activities and using the material environment in ECEC groups (see Åmot and Ytterhus 2014). Specifically, the disagreements arose over rules and norms governing routines (e.g., meals, toileting, and afternoon nap routines), learning activities (e.g., painting and solving jigsaw puzzles) and even free play. In many disagreements, the rules of the ongoing activity entailed controlling children's bodies and material resources, such as spaces, toys, games, and clothes. This was the case in the following disagreement featuring Mila and her educator, Hanna.

Mila runs along the corridor. Hanna goes to Mila and says, 'Mila, go to the toilet, the little seat is free.' Mila hides behind the chair in the corridor. Hanna says, 'Mila, you can't hide now, we're going out. Let's play hide-and-seek some other time.' As Mila continues hiding behind the chair, Hanna carries her to the toilet, where another educator performs this daily routine with Mila.

In this situation, the activities permitted and spaces available for Mila were severely limited by the routine that preceded outdoor activities. Furthermore, this routine entailed controlling Mila's movements and bodily functions. Mila was not supposed to run along the corridor or hide behind the chair. Instead, she was to go to the toilet, whether or not she wanted to. Mila opposed Hanna's initiating instruction (telling Mila to go to the toilet) by hiding behind a chair. In this way, she was briefly able to delay and complicate Hanna's actions. However, she had no possibility to influence the final result of the disagreement, as Hanna performed the routine using her greater physical strength.

Similar disagreements, arising from the rules and norms of daily activities, took place during meals. The following disagreement between Ava and her educator Olivia was observed at lunch time.

Ava stands up from the table and heads towards the door. Olivia, too, stands up, catches Ava's hand and guides her back to the table to empty her mouth of soup first. Ava resists by squealing and squirming as Olivia places her back on her chair. Olivia stands behind Ava's

chair, bends down over the chair and holds the armrests. When Ava has swallowed, Olivia straightens her back, releases her grip on the chair and says to Ava, 'Now you can go.' Ava stands up and heads towards the door.

During this disagreement, Ava's movements, bodily functions and use of space, like Mila's, were controlled by Olivia based on the settled rules governing mealtimes. The rule, according to which children have to sit while eating, was most probably set to protect children from possible harm. However, when implemented without any explanation, it left Ava little choice but to comply. As in the previous example, the only effect of Ava's resistance was to momentarily disrupt the ongoing activity.

Although children lacked possibilities to influence the established institutional order, in a few cases the rules on carrying out an activity were more flexible, giving the child more leeway. For example, the educator sometimes complied with a child's wish not to participate in a structured activity. Educators could also make small adjustments to their instructions after repeated requests by a child. A crucial factor in these cases was that deviating from the rule did not hamper the ongoing activity, expose the child to any risk of being physically hurt or risk damage to toys. In the following example, Leevi was able to negotiate over the instructions given by his educator, Sofia. The disagreement took place during a structured group activity in which the children had been told to put their pictures on the board and then sit on the bench.

Leevi puts his picture on the board and walks towards Sofia. Sofia points to Leevi's place on the bench. Leevi, however, comes over to Sofia and sits on her lap. Sofia says, 'Ok then,' and lets Leevi sit in her lap while the activity continues.

In going to sit in Sofia's lap instead of on the bench, Leevi ignores Sofia's instructions and the usual practice related to the ongoing activity. Sofia, however, acceded to Leevi's wish, allowing him to decide on this matter. Although the bench was the recommended place for the children, the activity allowed for case-by-case consideration and minor changes.

Although the educators did not commonly explain the reasons behind the rules governing daily activities, they did so in a few cases. In this way, they noted the child's opposition even when the rule was not changed. The following disagreement between Henry and his educator Anna exemplifies this kind of interaction.

Anna spreads a soft mattress on the floor and takes up a tunnel for the children to crawl through. Henry runs over to the tunnel. Anna encourages him: 'Yes, you can go through the tunnel.' Henry, however, plumps down on the tunnel, and Anna forbids him, saying, 'No, no, the tunnel will get damaged.' Henry climbs onto a big pillow and kicks the tunnel with his feet. Anna calls out, 'Careful with the tunnel. Henry, Henry, my friend, our tunnel will get damaged. The tunnel is meant for crawling in.' Henry stops kicking and tries to climb on the tunnel. Anna again forbids him, saying, 'No climbing.' Finally, Henry crawls inside the tunnel, this time lying on his back. Anna praises him: 'Wow, Henry's come up with a new style, how nice.'

Anna's respectful and sensitive style of maintaining order is important in this episode. Although she disallowed Henry's actions, she created equality by using such words as 'my friend' and 'our tunnel'. She also gave a reason for her prohibition: the tunnel may be damaged if misused. When Henry finally conformed to the rule by coming up with a new way of crawling into the tunnel, Anna praised him. The example shows that even institutional rules designed to protect children from physical harm or to prevent damage to toys could be upheld while also respecting children's agency and influence.

Negotiating one's position in the ongoing social situation

The study data also included child–educator disagreements during which young children had adequate possibilities to negotiate and contribute to the outcomes (29 episodes). These disagreements were characterised by persistent requests and negotiation through which the children, after some delay, achieved their goals or contributed to compromises that were appropriate in the social situation. Also, children's opposition sometimes led educators to justify their actions by explaining the reasons behind them. This was much more characteristic of this second theme, although in a few cases, institutional rules were also explained. Importantly, children's perspectives were noticed and considered within the limits of the prevailing social situation in the ECEC group.

In contrast to child–educator disagreements that concerned the institutional order, these disagreements had to do with a child's position in the ongoing social situation. Some arose over the social rules of peer interaction, such as taking turns, sharing, and refraining from using physical force in interaction with peers. The interaction in these disagreements also involved other children. Furthermore, material objects, such as toys or books, played an important role. Our focus here, however, was on child–educator disagreement, at the core of which was not the use of material objects per se (this was generally well in line with the ongoing activity) but regard for the other children involved. This was the case in the following disagreement featuring Leo and his educator Maria.

Leo shows interest in a book that another child is browsing. He takes hold of the book and tries to wrest it from the other child's grasp. Maria forbids this, saying, 'Leo, Leo, you can't take that book!' When Leo refuses to yield, Maria takes him into her lap, away from the other child and the book. Leo struggles and moans in Maria's lap. Maria says, 'We'll have to find another book for you.' She lets go of Leo and walks off to find him a book. Meanwhile, Leo crawls towards the other child and the book he previously wanted. Maria, however, comes back with an audiobook and gives it to Leo. Leo shows interest in this new book. He starts browsing it and points to the pictures with his finger.

In this situation, Maria forbade Leo to take a book away from another child and prevented him from using physical force for this purpose. To help Leo to conform to the social rule and wait his turn, Maria found another book that captured his attention. Although Leo had to conform and learn a social rule governing peer interaction, he was able to influence the outcome and, with the help of his educator, contribute to a compromise that satisfied both of them.

Child–educator disagreements also arose over getting attention from educators, such as company, help and physical closeness, when the educator was momentarily occupied with helping or interacting with another child. The following interaction between Emil and his educator Mia exemplifies events of this kind.

Emil runs to Mia and throws himself into her lap. He stays there, sitting in Mia's lap, while Mia helps Emma to solve a jigsaw puzzle. Mia then gets up and goes into another room to help another child and fix a broken game with tape. Emil follows Mia and starts crying. Mia says to Emil, 'Mia will come over and help you soon.' Emil quiets down, monitors Mia's actions for a while, then starts to cry again and pulls on her arm. Mia responds by saying, 'Yes, I'm coming, I just need to fix this first.' She then returns to the group room, Emil following her ... and lifts him into her lap.

In this episode, the disagreement began when Emil expressed his dissatisfaction with Mia's actions (leaving him to go into another room) by following her and crying. This reaction is understandable as only a short time earlier Emil had been taken into Mia's lap and remained there until Mia got up. Although it took a little while before Emil regained the physical closeness he wanted, he was able to influence the outcome. First, Mia appeased him verbally and explained her actions. A little later, after Emil's persistent requests, she took him back into her lap.

Discussion

Disagreements between young children and their educators provide a meaningful context for young children to negotiate their participation and exert influence in ECEC. In these situations, children should be able to express their views and have them considered, as stated in the UNCRC (UNICEF 1989, Article 12) and the Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency of Education 2018, 27). However, we know little about the everyday reality of the youngest children in ECEC when they challenge their educators and the local rules and regulations, attempt to negotiate settled practices and struggle to be recognised and participate in the implementation of their ECEC.

In this study, we contributed to filling this research gap by exploring under three year-old children's possibilities to exert influence during child-educator disagreements in Finnish ECEC. Our observational data showed that these situations were important for understanding the possible factors hindering and facilitating young children's participation in the everyday decisions that affect them in ECEC. We first explored the ways young children were able to influence the outcomes of child-educator disagreements and then focused on the topics of disagreement that limited or opened up children's possibilities for influence.

During child-educator disagreements, the young children participating in the study made bodily and vocal attempts to challenge their educators and influence the outcomes. Similar attempts by very young children have also been reported in other studies (Katsiada et al. 2018). The present educators, however, often disregarded these attempts because of their established ways of implementing ECEC, referred to here as the institutional order. During child-educator disagreements over matters such as the rules governing daily activities, the use of material resources and even control over children's own bodies, the children had few possibilities to negotiate on, and thereby influence, these matters. This finding is well in line with earlier research on the difficulties young children may face when resisting and seeking to change the established order in educational institutions managed by adults (Danby and Theobald 2012, 16; Johansson et al. 2014; Salonen, Sevón, and Laakso 2020; Åmot and Ytterhus 2014).

These difficulties are related to the idea that young children are both vulnerable and incapable of recognising their own best interests, and thus above all in need of protection and care (Alderson 2010; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2013). Such thinking also accords with the present findings. In our data, many of the rules that the children attempted to challenge were intended to advance their physical health and wellbeing. Nonetheless, when carried out routinely, without explanation or negotiation, such rules limited the children's possibilities for influence and thereby eclipsed their possibility to participate in matters directly affecting them (see Alderson 2010).

Some of the episodes in our data, however, showed that even institutional rules that have to be upheld in the interests of, e.g., children's safety, can be followed while also respecting children's perspectives. In some situations, educators made an effort to listening to a child's views and discuss the reasons behind the rule with them. As noted in earlier studies (Emilson 2007; Salonen, Sevón, and Laakso 2020), this required that the educators came close to the children's life-worlds and respected their opposition, even when upholding the rule.

Our data also included child–educator disagreements pertaining to an ongoing social situation in an ECEC group. In these situations, the children needed to postpone the achievement of their aims or compromise in the interests of the other people in their group. As noted earlier (Busch 2012; Choi 2020), such situations were prone to disagreement. Interestingly, however, these disagreements presented the young children with more possibilities to influence events and thus actively negotiate their social position in the group (see Bateman 2012; Choi 2020). Although the children had to submit to such social rules as taking turns, they were also able to influence outcomes and, in many cases, attain their goal. In fact, many of these situations evolved from initial child–educator disagreement to child–educator cooperation in achieving a shared goal without, however, discounting the interests of the other children in the group.

In light of this finding, it is worth asking why the educators' reactions were often different when the young children attempted to challenge the settled rules of ECEC. This might be explained by the structural power hierarchy between adults and children – the former having control and power over the latter – that is embedded in the institutional order of ECEC (Alanen 2009; Konstantoni and Emejulu 2017; Åmot and Ytterhus 2014). When aiming to enhance children's participation in ECEC, it would, therefore, be necessary to look not only at individual educators' choices but also, beyond them, at the culture of the ECEC setting and the larger society.

Limitations

It should be noted that rigid and inflexible adult-led practices that are prone to child–educator disagreements were probably overrepresented in the data and practices that entail more flexibility and freedom underrepresented. The study does not, therefore, provide a full picture of the institutional culture of Finnish ECEC. Moreover, the observations were only conducted in two Finnish ECEC centres and thus cannot be generalized to all ECEC centres. Even practices that can be regarded as typical of Finnish ECEC may be implemented somewhat differently in different ECEC centres and groups. This limitation does not, however, discredit the study, as its purpose was to add to understanding of the diverse ways in which very young children may influence outcomes in situations of child–educator disagreement and the possible barriers to their influence that need to be overcome for their rights to participation to be realised.

Unfortunately, the background to the child–educator disagreements, such as the events and atmosphere preceding the disagreement and the quality of the relationship between the focus child and educator, which may have had an important role in these situations, was beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusions

The study shed light on young children's possibilities for influence in situations of child–educator disagreement in Finnish ECEC. On the one hand, it highlighted the power of the established institutional order in determining what is deemed as appropriate behaviour and limiting children's influence (see Åmot and Yttenhus 2014). On the other hand, it disclosed practices that contribute to children's participation and influence, the importance of which has been acknowledged both nationally and internationally (Finnish National Agency of Education 2018, 27; UNCRC; UNICEF 1989, Article 12).

Such practices require combining pedagogical responsibilities for protecting and taking care of young children with those for supporting their participation (Alderson 2010). Based on our findings, these responsibilities can be understood as complementary: even practices that are essential for young children's wellbeing can be discussed with them and implemented with sensitivity to their perspectives. To support this kind of child–educator interaction, the culture of the whole institution needs to be developed to make young children's participation a transparent and binding principle of everyday life (Lansdown 2014). Such an institutional culture would offer room for negotiation, even in situations of child–educator disagreement, and thereby strengthen children's sense of participation and belonging in ECEC (Salonen, Sevón, and Laakso 2020, 2021).

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