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**Author(s):** Peltoperä, Kaisu; Ukkonen-Mikkola, Tuulikki

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# Relational expertise among Finnish educators working in extended hours ECEC

Kaisu Peltoperä  and Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola 

University of Jyväskylä, Department of education, Jyväskylä, Finland

## ABSTRACT

This study examined discourses and positions produced by educators ( $n = 31$ ) on the topics of teamwork and professional expertise in extended hours early childhood education and care (ECEC). Theoretically, we follow the ideas of relational expertise and common knowledge. Previous research provides that relational expertise and creating common knowledge are useful in ECEC contexts, especially in teamwork. The data were collected by interviewing educators, and discursive psychology was applied in the analysis of the data. As results, we found two discursive tensions. In relation to teamwork the tension was working alone versus working in a team. In the topic of professional expertise, the tension was independent work orientation versus following instructions. The special features of extended hours ECEC, in particular time, frame the possibilities of building expertise relationally.

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expertise; teamwork in ECEC

## Introduction

A diverse working life requires flexibly organised services in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In Finland, the right to ECEC for every child is provided for in the Act of Early Childhood Education (540/2018) including for children whose parents work or study in the early morning or late evening, on the weekend or overnight, hereafter referred to as non-standard working hours (Li et al., 2014; Presser, 2003). Children whose parents work non-standard hours require extended hours ECEC services, with several educators being needed to cover a centre's extended opening hours. As educators work in varying rhythms, extended hours ECEC offers an interesting context to study educators' work, which is traditionally built upon multi-professional teams working closely together.

In this study we are interested in what kinds of possibilities for relational expertise and creating common knowledge can be identified in the context of extended hours ECEC services. We aim to analyse what kinds of discourses and positions educators (re)produce about teamwork and professional expertise in extended hours ECEC during their interviews. More specifically, we contemplate teamwork and professional expertise through the theoretical framework of relational expertise and common knowledge (see Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2011, 2017). Relational expertise can be defined as identifying and appreciating professionals' own expertise and that of other professionals and bringing such expertise into collective use (Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017). Professionals can arrive at common knowledge through relational expertise (Edwards, 2011, 2017).

In Finland, multi-professional teamwork is a key feature of pedagogical work in ECEC (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). One team consists of at least one ECEC teacher and two ECEC

**CONTACT** Kaisu Peltoperä  kaisu.peltopera@jyu.fi

nurses (hereafter referred to as teachers and nurses) (Karila, 2012). The special feature of extended hours ECEC is that children attend according to their parents' working hours, and educators' schedules are planned around the children's schedules. Thus, there is non-synchronicity in schedules between educators as the members of the team do not have the same working times (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016). In extended hours ECEC, more educators are needed to cover the longer opening hours, which can be challenging from the viewpoint of teamwork (De Schipper et al., 2003; Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Peltoperä et al., 2020). The expertise and daily duties of educators are shared differently than in regular ECEC, as nurses typically work extended hours, and ECEC teachers, special teachers, and heads of centre work standard hours (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Peltoperä, 2021).

The data consist of interviews with 31 educators working in ECEC centres with extended opening hours, meaning early mornings, late evenings, and, in some of the centres, nights and weekends as well. The educators worked in different-sized municipalities in public and private ECEC settings. In the data analysis we utilised the principles of discursive analysis as we analysed two main concepts in relation to teamwork and professional expertise: discourses and positions (Davies & Harré, 2001). The nature of discourse and position is viewed as an act of maintaining, creating, or changing social reality in extended hours ECEC (Korobov, 2010).

## Relational expertise and common knowledge as the ideals of co-operation

Educators in Finnish ECEC centres cooperate in multi-professional teams where the expertise is shared (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). In this study, we aim to understand ECEC educators' discourses and positions in teams working extended opening hours conceptualised with relational expertise and common knowledge (see Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2011, 2017). Relational expertise means the capacity to negotiate and make shared decisions about different issues and challenges concerning the object of activity<sup>1</sup> (Edwards, 2011). Relational expertise can be defined as identifying and appreciating professionals' own and others' expertise and bringing their own expertise into shared and collective use (Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017). When professionals work relationally and recognise what is important for other professionals, they have the opportunity to broaden interpretations and understandings of the common object of activity. This developing relational process needs time and space in multi-professional teams. The ability to understand others' opinions and values is required when perspectives of the common, shared object of activity are negotiated (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014).

Professionals can arrive at common knowledge through relational expertise (Edwards, 2011, 2012, 2017). Common knowledge is realised through reciprocal and regular collaboration with other professionals and in a way facilitates collaboration. When creating common knowledge, it is important to understand the professionals' practices, language, and conceptions (Carlile, 2004; Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2010). Personal engagement and motivation in practices is an essential aspect of expert work and reaching the common knowledge (Edwards, 2012). Additionally, Dreyfus (2004) points out that the emotional engagement of professionals during activities is a sign of expertise. Finally, the challenging aspect of the relational nature of common knowledge is to understand what matters for others and learn to construct the knowledge with other professionals (Carlile, 2004).

Relational expertise and common knowledge have been examined within the various boundary spaces of institutions (Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2010; Rantavuori, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2021) and in multi-professional teamwork (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). These studies have demonstrated that relational expertise enables the creation of a new understanding of the object of action, structures organisations, and solves different problems related to the cooperation of professionals. Challenges for relational expertise and creating common knowledge can include different values, divergent interpretations of the object of action, uncertainty about expertise, and lack of

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<sup>1</sup>The Act on Early childhood education and care (2018) defines the objective of activity as the learning and well-being of children.

time for negotiating (Edwards, 2010; Rantavuori, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2021).

## The Finnish ECEC context

Finland is fully integrated in terms of combining education and care in ECEC services, the so-called 'educare' model, as such services consist of education, teaching, and care with a particular emphasis on pedagogy (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Finnish ECEC services are publicly regulated and supported yet provided in both public and private centres. Normally, ECEC centres in Finland are open from 7 am to 5 pm, whereas the extended hours ECEC centres are open either 24/7 or from early morning until late evening (Malinen et al., 2016). Extended hours ECEC is provided according to parents' working hours, so it can be seen as a service for parents to respond to their childcare needs (Peltoperä et al., 2017, 2021). However, as a part of national ECEC services, it is also early education provided for the child (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Around 7 per cent of Finnish children attending ECEC need extended hours ECEC (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2017). Fees for extended hours ECEC do not differ from regular ECEC as they are both heavily subsidised by the state (Plantenga & Remery, 2009).

In Finnish ECEC the child–adult ratio is 4:1 when children are under three years old and 7:1 when children are three to seven years old. The Law of Early Childhood Education (540/2018) directs the composition of the child group, so that in one group of under three-year-olds there is a maximum of 12 children with three educators, while the figures for a group of three to seven-year-olds are three educators and 21 children. One third of the educators must have a teaching qualification (bachelor's degree from a university or university of applied sciences) while the others are nurses with secondary-level education in social welfare and healthcare (Karila, 2012). Most educators are assigned to work in certain child groups, while others might be named 'evening workers' or 'shift workers' and are not appointed to a specific child group or team. During evenings, nights, and weekends educators may work alone if only a few children attend the extended hours ECEC (De Schipper et al., 2003; Peltoperä, 2021; Siippainen, 2018).

## Multi-professional teamwork in ECEC

Multi-professional teamwork is an important factor in the quality of ECEC and implementing pedagogy. In multi-professional teams, the goal is to share expertise, knowledge, and power, with the aim of achieving something more than what one professional alone can achieve (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Additionally, teamwork can create a good team spirit and increase the well-being of professionals (Aubé et al., 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). Emotions are associated with teamwork, and positive emotions can lead to stronger agency in teams (Hökkä et al., 2017). Paakkanen et al. (2021) highlight the meaning of interpersonal skills, such as how professionals express and share their emotions at the workplace. According to Ranta et al. (2022), in a functional ECEC team professionals share many positive emotions connected to communality and success and operate in a solution-oriented manner. Ukkonen-Mikkola et al. (2020) add that in functional teams the expertise is shared relationally, and the goals of the team's pedagogical activities are the best interests of the child.

In contrast, Ranta et al. (2022) found that a non-functional team can suffer depression, conflict of values, lack of appreciation among professions, or unclear descriptions of work tasks. In the case studied, there were differences among the group of ECEC professionals; the nurses felt quite alone with the children when the teachers were in pedagogical meetings with other teachers, while teachers experienced that they had too much responsibility for planning and implementing the pedagogical activities. Ukkonen-Mikkola et al. (2020) describe the feeling among non-functional teams as 'powerlessness'. A feeling of this kind limits the well-being and professional agency of ECEC professionals.

## Professional expertise and pedagogy in ECEC

The expertise of all professionals in a team consists of education, teamwork, and cooperation with parents. Earlier studies have explored teamwork in regular hours ECEC through positions (see Bamberg et al., 2011; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). ECEC teachers positioned themselves as having the duty of the team's pedagogical activities and promoting the children's learning. They highlighted their role as pedagogical leaders in teams, which means the duties of planning, implementing, assessing, and developing the pedagogical activities (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Teachers in Finland also stress the holistic responsibility of the child group and team work more than their counterparts in, for example, Estonia (Niikko & Ugaste, 2012). Nurses positioned themselves through participation in the team, with various childcare duties and taking responsibility for the children's well-being. In practice, the division of work in ECEC teams is flexible, and expertise is shared relationally according to the situation at hand (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

The Finnish ECEC system has been criticised for not highlighting the teaching aspects of ECEC and the position of teachers (Karila et al., 2012). It has also been criticised for a work culture in which the roles of different professionals are not clear, and the daily organisation of work is not built around occupation and educational background but technically organised according to work shifts (Karila et al., 2012). There is a strong desire to clarify the roles of different occupations in ECEC, and therefore research interest in this topic is increasing (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

ECEC teachers are responsible for implementing pedagogy in Finnish ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). In Finland, we have many different interpretations of ECEC pedagogy, which presents a challenge to the field of research, policy documents, teacher education, and pedagogical practices (Husa & Kinos, 2005). A literature review by Kangas et al. (2021) identified five approaches to ECEC pedagogy, which are: interaction, scaffolding, didactics, expertise, and future orientation. These different approaches are all present in daily activities in ECEC centres. In all these approaches the shared elements are the child, teacher, content, and learning. What is missing from this literature review of theorisations of the concept of pedagogy is the caring approach, which is important in the Nordic 'educare' model (see Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013).

Providing pedagogy is one key question in extended hours ECEC, where teachers are not always there due to the long opening hours of the centre and variety in the educators' working times (De Schipper et al., 2003; Peltoperä et al., 2020). Earlier research (Peltoperä et al., 2020) shows that there is debate whether pedagogy only belongs to the oldest children in ECEC, to teachers' work tasks, and to daytime. According to the national curriculum of ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022), teachers are responsible for pedagogical planning and implementation in their child group. However, in extended hours ECEC, the teachers are not always there to implement pedagogy, as typically the nurses work during the extended hours. Children's right to pedagogy is, however, not limited to certain hours: all activities in ECEC should be pedagogically planned, whatever time they occur (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022 ; Peltoperä et al., 2020). This raises the question of the roles different professionals play in providing pedagogy in extended hours ECEC. Earlier research shows that educators are constructing their professionalism not only through their educational background and professional title, but also through their personal characteristics and interests (Peltoperä et al., 2020).

## Research questions

Our study will contribute to the field focusing on a less studied area, namely teamwork and professional expertise in extended hours ECEC, through theories of relational expertise and creating common knowledge (Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017). To render visible the relational expertise and common knowledge discussed in educators' interviews, the following research questions were set:

- (1) What kinds of discourses do ECEC teachers and nurses produce when talking about teamwork and professional expertise in extended hours ECEC?
- (2) How are ECEC teachers and nurses positioned in these discourses?

## Methods

### Data

Data were collected by interviewing educators ( $n = 31$ ) working in ECEC centres with extended opening hours. Participants were from different-sized municipalities from all over Finland and from both public and private ECEC settings. Twelve interviewees had an ECEC teaching qualification (either a university bachelor's degree or a degree in social pedagogy from a university of applied sciences), while 19 were ECEC nurses with secondary-level education. One participant was male, and the rest were female. These demographics are in line with the situation in Finnish ECEC centres: about 30 per cent of staff have a teaching qualification, and are overwhelmingly female. The ECEC teachers typically worked standard hours, whereas the nurses worked both standard and non-standard hours.

Participants were recruited as part of the research project 'Children's socio-emotional well-being and daily family life in a 24-h economy' funded by the Academy of Finland. The educators were approached via their workplaces and first invited to respond to a web-based survey, where they could also express their willingness to be interviewed. After that, researchers called the ECEC centres to arrange the interviews, which were carried out in the educators' workplaces. The interview questions were organised around the topics of extended hours ECEC as a societal service, child well-being, pedagogical practices, daily activities, work schedules, and communication among educators, children, and parents.

Half of the semi-structured thematic interviews (Patton, 2002) were conducted by the first author and the rest by the other research team members. The interview themes and questions were designed together with the broader research team to ensure the consistency of the interviews. Most of the interviews took about one hour; the longest took almost two hours. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the data extracts used for this paper were translated by the first author and proofread by a professional language reviser.

### Analysis

In the data analysis we followed the principles of discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) as we analysed two main concepts, namely discourses and positions. Using this approach, we were able to analyse the variety of culturally shared discourses found in educators' language use. Even though the educators were interviewed one by one, we adhere to discursive psychology in considering their talk as culturally shared norms and ideologies that are not attributed to an individual interviewee (Taylor, 2006). The nature of discourse and position is here viewed as an act of maintaining, creating, or changing social reality (Korobov, 2010).

The data-based analysis started by the first author familiarising themselves with the data and systematically coding the data extracts related to teamwork and professional expertise. The researchers then discussed and reflected on the findings together. Firstly, we were interested in the discourses, meaning the (re)production of distinctive yet internally coherent versions of social reality in various discourses that are used to make the world (here, teamwork and professional expertise in extended hours ECEC) understandable (Potter, 2003). As our analysis proceeded, we found that the discursive ways of producing these topics were tensional. Therefore, as results, we provide two discursive tensions, by which we refer to discourses and their counter-discourses produced by the educators in the interviews (see Burr, 2003). Throughout the writing process we went back to the data to ensure our interpretations corresponded to the original data.

The discourses and counter-discourses position educators differently; secondly, therefore, we applied positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 2001; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positions are relational responsibilities: rights and duties constructed socially in different contexts for different purposes (Korobov, 2010; Nikander, 2012; Potter, 2003; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). In the positioning analysis, we focused on what kinds of duties and (un)desirable meanings were attributed to the educators in the analysed discourses and counter-discourses (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Zelle, 2009).

### **Ethical considerations**

The proper handling of ethical issues was ensured in this study by following the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2013). Participants were provided in advance with an information sheet and a consent form. Voluntary participation, the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time, and assurance of anonymity in all phases of the research project were re-emphasised at the beginning of the interviews. One participant was familiar with the interviewer, as they had been colleagues earlier. This might have affected the (power) relationship between them, as it may be easier to talk in an interview when the interviewer is unfamiliar (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Authentic quotations from the interviews have been used to confirm the trustworthiness of the findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). We use pseudonyms (N = nurse, T = teacher, plus running number in the order participants' reference appear in the text) when referring to the interviewees to protect their anonymity.

### **Findings**

Educators (re)produced two discursive tensions when describing their work in extended hours ECEC in relation to teamwork and professional expertise. Both teamwork and professional expertise were constructed in relation to non-synchronicity between educators' schedules but also in relation to specific times, such as evenings and weekends. The discourses positioned educators in a certain way. The discursive tensions and positions educators reproduced in their talk as well as their relation to the theory of relational expertise and common knowledge are summarised in Table 1.

### **Working in a team vs. alone**

When talking about teamwork, the main tension was working in a team as opposed to alone. The talk about working in a team was reflected by the fact that, in extended hours ECEC, the educators are not always working at the same time. Especially evenings, nights and weekends educators are more likely to work alone. This means that the meaning of a 'team' is constructed differently

**Table 1.** Summary of the main findings of the study.

Topic	Discursive tensions	Positions	Relation to relational expertise and common knowledge
Teamwork	Working in a team vs. working alone	Educators are positioned as team workers or solo workers	Teamwork as a source of wellbeing Longing for shared understanding and practices and sharing knowledge and emotions Lack of shared time
Professional expertise	Independent work orientation vs. following instructions	Educators are positioned as independent workers or following instructions	Identifying and appreciating the knowledge and practical knowhow of themselves and others Sharing knowledge Lack of professional negotiations



than in regular hours ECEC. The unique features of teamwork in extended hours ECEC are described in the following data extract:

When you've been in a day care centre somewhere, you're almost always there, with the colleagues and the kids. In this house [extended hours ECEC centre] again you sort of must master the whole, know all child groups so that it is perhaps a wider package. (N1)

This data extract shows that, in extended hours ECEC, the teams and child groups are wider and looser than in regular ECEC because there are many educators working in unique schedules and rhythms. However, the operational team was constructed as the '*base of working*' (N2) in the statement that it is '*impossible to do the work without the team*' (N3, N4, T1). Mutual trust and respect, humour, and a good atmosphere were constructed as important elements in teamwork. Getting along with team members and accepting mistakes and unique ways of working were constructed as important in educators' talk.

Even though teamwork was constructed as the basis of working in ECEC, working alone was described as a unique feature of evenings and weekends in extended hours ECEC due to the non-synchronicity in schedules with colleagues. A typical way to describe evening work in the data was the lack of sharing knowledge and emotions with colleagues. As N5 says: '*sometimes I feel like I'm left outside. I miss some things when I'm working different schedules from most of my colleagues.*' At the same time, educators did not discuss their colleagues' emotions. The non-synchronicity between educators means that they do not share experiences together. Therefore, the educators need various ways of communicating, such as short talks at the doorway and sharing notes, to mention a few. More time for organised meetings is also called for. Educators described having asked their leader for time together for pedagogical discussions. All this effort to make contact with colleagues despite the lack of synchronicity in their work schedules is proof that participants longed for common knowledge built relationally (see Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017). However, because of the non-synchronicity and lack of common time, it seemed that educators also easily gave up on their attempt to get together and build common knowledge of their work (see Rantavuori, 2019).

### **Positioning educators as team workers or solo workers**

The tension between working in a team as opposed to alone positioned educators as team workers or solo workers. When positioned as team workers, educators mentioned that evening work does not suit them as they do not feel comfortable working alone. Evenings were also described as '*sensitive time*' when '*the educator's own mind is also more susceptible*' (N6). As one educator described the sensitivity of evening times, '*I started to feel tired, and the feelings are quite strong in the evenings. And there I was working alone and couldn't unburden myself to anyone*' (N7). Evening work was also described as '*boring without having colleagues around*' (N3). Feeling sensitive yet being the only responsible adult and not having anyone to share their emotions with may make the evening shifts hard. It seems that sharing emotions with co-workers is important for educators (see Paakkanen et al., 2021; Ranta et al., 2022). However, referring to these situations, one of the nurses stated that '*it is important to be the adult for the child. You can't work in extended hours ECEC if you fear working alone in the evenings*' (N2).

The evenings were described as rendering it possible to concentrate on care (see also Peltoperä et al., 2017), as one nurse (N8) expressed when positioning herself as '*a caregiver rather than an educator*'. When positioned as solo workers, educators described being able to enjoy the features of working alone during the extended hours. Working alone during evenings or weekends was constructed as responsible, as it may require independent decision making, which is less common in regular hours ECEC when there is a team to give support and make decisions with. When working alone, the common responsibility of shared decision making, which is typical of relational expertise, is not possible (see Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017). Sometimes educators constructed

working alone as stressful because they *'bear all the responsibilities themselves'* (N9). Educators also brought up concrete worries about potential risks of what might happen when they are working alone.

We identified a tension in teamwork between the team being the source of well-being for educators and the best interest of children. Educators described working in a team as an important part of their job, some even talking negatively about working alone in the evenings. In contrast, the evenings and weekends, when educators sometimes worked alone, were constructed as peaceful and home-alike and providing better possibilities to engage in warm and close communication with children *'but there you are like 100% for the child'* (N8). Moreover, working alone in the evenings gave educators the freedom to undertake a more individualised and child-centred pedagogy: *'there is a better chance to do what they [the children] want to do'* (N10, T2). Here, we interpret that there might be a tension between the best interest of the child and of the educator.

To sum up, we interpreted that educators are longing for the possibility to work relationally, sharing and discussing their knowledge of the children and daily practices as well as their emotions (see Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2017; Paakkanen et al., 2021). The willingness to share knowledge and emotions underlines the commitment of educators to their professional work (see Dreyfus, 2004; Edwards, 2012). Educators constructed discussions and meetings with colleagues as important for their coping at work (see Paakkanen et al., 2021). On the other hand, working alone guaranteed concentration on the children's initiatives and needs.

### ***Independent work orientation vs. following the instructions***

The main tension when talking about professional expertise was independent work orientation versus following instructions. Due to the non-synchronicity in schedules with colleagues, two types of expertise were discussed as needed in extended hours ECEC: on the one hand, educators need to work independently, for example in situations where they are working alone in the evenings or weekends and need to make decisions; on the other, since educators attend the ECEC centre at various times, the daily programme might be running when they start their work shift and, thus, they need to be instructed about the current situation and even about what they are expected to do next.

When talking about professional expertise, educators described that they can *'gather knowledge from other people'* (T3). The expertise in relation to colleagues was described as follows: *'we work with our personalities, and our personalities meet each other pretty well ... we balance each other, and we give others the space to do their own work as they do it best'* (N4). Another educator expressed relational expertise in the following words: *'it is not expected that everyone can do everything, but we can respect everyone's strengths'* (T4). The knowledge and knowhow of other professionals is highly appreciated in this type of talk, and there is a direct reference to sharing common knowledge when talking about the educators completing each other in terms of personalities and professional strengths (see Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017).

Educators described many concrete ways to communicate daily practices and build common knowledge. They used notebooks and quick meetings in doorways to share important information. One participant even referred to the notebook as *'our treasure'* (N4), which can be interpreted as describing an important tool to share everyday practices and knowledge. Educators considered carefully what information is important for others. Reading the notes and finding out what is going on when arriving at work was described as an important part of educators' professionalism. These examples show that professional expertise in daily practices is built by sharing information and knowledge. The ability to start working their shift depends on how well the educators know what has been going on in the child group and what they are expected to do in that situation. However, typically this type of sharing is not a two-way dialogue, which would be needed for relational expertise (Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2017).

### **Positioning educators as team workers and solo workers**

In the discourse of professional expertise, the nurses were positioned as experts on daily routines and chores and teachers as professionals and leaders of pedagogy. These positions are familiar from earlier research (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020) as they are typical ways to describe the different occupations in the field of ECEC. However, the positioning was not so straightforward in these data, and the different occupations were not so clearly separated from each other.

In line with the traditional and official way of positioning nurses, nurses often positioned themselves as *'observers of children's moods and individual needs'* (N11). Nurses were also positioned as *'supporting teachers' pedagogical work'*, as *'caregivers'*, and as *'substitute mums'* (N12), which one educator positioned herself as, especially in relation to the sensitive and "home-alike" evening shifts. She continued later that *'I don't even feel as if I am doing wrong'* (N12) when concentrating on care instead of other aspects of pedagogy. Teachers, then, were positioned as *'competent in handling the child group'* (N11).

The data show that teachers' role in ECEC is tensional. On the one hand, teachers do not want to highlight their position by walking *'around with signs about their professional expertise'* (T3); rather, they want to work in a more dialogue-oriented way by *'talking and negotiating, everyone doing their best, so the result is the sum of its parts'* (T3). These extracts show that teachers do not want to be hierarchically positioned above the nurses; however, they also long for a clearer share of duties. As one teacher explained, *'the setup has been that everyone is doing everything, but it's not like this. We have different salaries. What is a teacher's role and professional expertise?'* (T5). This type of talk is familiar from earlier research and discussion about the different occupations working in ECEC (Karila, 2012; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

There was variation in the data in regard to how nurses and teachers were positioned in relation to pedagogical work, especially during evenings, when it was mostly the nurses who worked. On the one hand, nurses were positioned as active participants and support in planning and complementing pedagogy without the teachers during evenings and weekends. On the other hand, nurses were also positioned as receiving instructions from the teachers and not being so active themselves. As one teacher put it: *'it depends on the nurse who is on duty, how active they are in implementing [pedagogy] according to their own or our plans'* (T6). The following example represents the nurses' position as receiving instructions and the teacher as the pedagogical leader:

Well, our teachers are very much in charge of the pedagogical side, but we will be there for them. ... Clear instructions that we follow very much. ... We have such good teachers (laughs) that they have been good at giving US instructions, so I do not find it challenging in any way. I do what they give US, we pretty much follow the instructions. (N13)

This example of following the instructions given by the teachers can be understood as strong appreciation of the teachers' expertise and their role as pedagogical leaders (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). However, receiving instructions and being dependent on colleagues can also be constructed as hard: *'It's hard for me [to follow the instructions] when I've always been the one who makes plans, who knows what I'm doing, and I like that some things have a continuum'* (N14). In this example, the nurse positions herself as an independent worker, a characteristic she cannot make use of due to the non-synchronicity and variety in her work tasks, such as moving among different child groups. Due to the non-synchronicity in work schedules, not only nurses but also teachers ask for clear instructions on the activities that are going on in the ECEC centre when they arrive at work: *'Clear instructions are needed ... it may feel stupid ... but when I come to work at 11, I have to know where my place is and what I need to do'* (T8). The professional hierarchies disappear, as seen in this extract, where an experienced nurse explains how *'it seems funny to ask, I have been working for 'a hundred years', and I even ask the students about what is going on now ...'* (N14). Sometimes teachers' professionalism in relation to knowing the children *'depends on your colleagues'* (T4) as teachers typically work during the day and children may attend ECEC at various times when the nurses spend more time with them than the teacher. These given examples can be

interpreted as fading the professional roles of educators and expertise being built in a concrete way in relation to the situation at hand. Here, too, teachers were willing to share their expertise with nurses, which is the core of relational expertise (Edwards, 2011).

Pedagogical plans can here be interpreted as professional tools that can be loaned from teachers to nurses. However, not all the pedagogical planning can be given to the nurses in these ready-made plans and instructions. As one teacher mentions: *'of course, there are some things [pedagogical plans] that are only in my head, so I cannot transfer them forward'* (T7). Professional expertise in relation to pedagogy also depends on the constructions and interpretations of pedagogy in extended hours ECEC (Peltoperä et al., 2020).

To sum up, when educators position themselves as working independently, we interpret this type of discourse as educators appreciating their own practical knowledge. In contrast, nurses particularly appreciated the expertise of the teachers in giving instructions or even ready-made plans for evenings and weekends. This can be linked to a strong feeling of identifying and appreciating teachers' practical knowledge and competence (Edwards, 2011), which are loaned to the nurses together with the instructions and plans. Educators' trust in their own ability to work in different situations and to receive colleagues' expertise are the main features of relational expertise (Edwards, 2011).

## Discussion

In this paper we were interested in the possibilities for relational expertise and creating common knowledge in the context of extended hours ECEC services. More concretely, we studied educators' discourses of teamwork and professional expertise. The interview talk of the educators was tensional, and as a result we found two discursive tensions that educators used as a tool to discuss these topics: working in a team versus alone. Tensions in relation to professional expertise were independent work orientation versus following instructions. Further, the educators were positioned in the discursive tensions either as team members or solo workers and either as independent workers or those following instructions.

Our findings indicate that the composition of a team differs in extended hours ECEC compared to regular ECEC due to the non-synchronicity between educators. Since more educators are needed to provide care and education, including during extended hours (De Schipper et al., 2003; Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Peltoperä et al., 2020), non-synchronicity with colleagues requires special expertise, such as the ability to work alone, for example during evenings and weekends, in a field that is commonly characterised by teamwork (Ranta et al., 2022; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Nonetheless, educators longed for opportunities to share knowledge and emotions relationally in teams. This notion demonstrates the commitment of educators to their professional work and their desire to create common knowledge (see Dreyfus, 2004; Edwards, 2012). However, the educators did not express interest about other's emotions, which is part of relational expertise and common knowledge.

According to our findings related to professional expertise, nurses relied on their ability to work independently (see Edwards, 2010; 2011). In turn, nurses also appreciated the pedagogical expertise and leadership of teachers and were willing to follow the teachers' instructions (see Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Besides the traditional role task of teachers and nurses, professional expertise was also discussed in relation to certain situations, such as the time educators attend the workplace. Educators called for instructions on what is going on and what they are supposed to do as the action is already 'on the go'. This type of call for instructions was not limited to nurses; teachers were also positioned as in need of instructions in certain daily situations. Here, too, teachers called for knowledge to be shared relationally with their colleagues (see Edwards, 2010; 2011). Therefore, it can be said that hierarchy between different occupations might not be as relevant a question in extended hours ECEC as in regular ECEC, where the teacher leads the group throughout the day (see also Peltoperä et al., 2020; Ranta et al., 2022; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

When educators constructed their work in relation to the team and to professional expertise, the notion of time became evident. This is not surprising, since the whole service form of extended hours ECEC is built around the fact that parents work non-standard hours and need extended hours childcare. Relational expertise is built in relation to colleagues (Edwards, 2011). However, the special features of extended hours ECEC, particularly time, frame the possibilities of building expertise and common knowledge relationally.

Based on the analysis of this study, we argue that extended hours ECEC is a special ECEC context for teamwork and professional expertise. Educators need a strong professional identity as they must be able to work in a team that is wider and looser than that in regular ECEC, since it involves a larger group of educators whose working hours vary. Furthermore, their work orientation should not be attached to the team, as they must be able to work independently as well. Working alone means higher responsibility of educators' own professionalism and professional ethics. Therefore, a common understanding of the object of action, meaning the growth, education, and well-being of children and the goals of pedagogy, was described as important in educators' interviews (see Edwards, 2010; 2011).

### ***Theoretical implications***

When working alone, there was a lack of sharing of responsibility, knowledge, and emotions. This can be challenging for creating relational expertise and common knowledge because development of these needs time and space (Edwards, 2010; Rantavuori, 2019). Additionally, sharing emotions is a remarkable character of teamwork and the well-being of professionals (see Paakkanen et al., 2021; Ranta et al., 2022). The longing to share emotions indicates a high level of engagement in their work (Dreyfus, 2004; Edwards, 2012). Emotional work is a highly important yet neglected topic in the field of ECEC (see Ranta et al., 2022). Based on our results and other recent educational studies (Hökkä et al., 2017; Ranta et al., 2022), we suggest that sharing emotions could gain more attention alongside sharing knowledge in teamwork.

### ***Practical implications and policy practices***

Educators in extended hours ECEC need time and space to build shared knowledge and common expertise because they lack shared time due to the non-synchronicity of their work schedules. This finding is in line with earlier studies that prove that organisational structures can prevent the building of relational expertise (Edwards, 2011; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Sharing power, knowledge, and competence aims to achieve more than one person can achieve alone (Karila & Kupila, 2010). It seems that the meaning of shared time needs to be recalled again and again, and structural measures are requested to enable the sharing of knowledge and emotions. When there is a lack of common time for discussions and negotiations, notebooks and other types of written communication provide a space for creating common knowledge, yet without two-way negotiations.

As pedagogy is carried out in interaction between the educator and child, we must be reserved when talking about pedagogy as transferring instructions and materials from teachers to nurses. As Edwards (2011) explains, common knowledge is built by sharing knowledge, typically by discussing and negotiating instead of giving one-way instructions. According to the Finnish ECEC curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022), teachers are responsible for the pedagogy in their child group. This has raised questions about the role of the nurses in conducting pedagogy (Pelto-perä et al., 2020). A key question is whether teachers' pedagogical responsibility does and should carry over into extended hours.

These findings have implications for the need to clarify the tasks and roles of different ECEC educators to build their relational expertise and professional identity. However, the special features of extended hours ECEC must be kept in mind. For example, providing pedagogy cannot be only teachers' responsibility or many more teachers will be needed to cover the extended hours.

Our national curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022) does not separate extended hours, but children have the right to pedagogy whatever the timing of care. Therefore, more discussion of ECEC pedagogy and who can provide it is needed (see also Peltoperä et al., 2020).

### **Evaluation of the study**

According to socio-constructionism, discourses are culturally shared tools used in talk, and they do not represent only personal views or opinions but larger societal and cultural contexts (Burr, 2003). Since discourses and positions are situationally negotiated in social interaction (Davies & Harré, 2001; Potter, 2003; Wetherell, 2003), we must be careful in regard to the transferability of results.

Some limitations resulted from the data collection. Many interviewers had unique ways of conducting interviews, and some of the interviewers and interviewees knew each other. According to Atkins and Wallace (2012), social relationships between informants and researchers can affect the objectivity of research. However, the data were transcribed and anonymised by an external assistant to safeguard against the familiarity between participants and researchers. The data were collected in only one service form of ECEC. Therefore, we do not know if or how these results are applicable to other ECEC contexts.

The data were gathered by interviewing educators. In future research, it would be valuable to utilise the ethnographic method, where researchers observe daily work in ECEC centres to gain more detailed information about the development of relational expertise and common knowledge in extended hours ECEC. More detailed, relational agency could also be examined especially focusing on our findings concerning how educators experience following other's instructions (Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2011). In addition, future research should focus on the professional agency of educators, as they develop their work and negotiate their professional identities. Sharing emotions as part of professional identities could also be a valuable research topic. (see Hökkä et al., 2017.) Furthermore, questions of how leadership supports educators in the work of extended hours ECEC are worth investigating.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **ORCID**

Kaisu Peltoperä  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8565-5991>

Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1826-1714>

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