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IS THERE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE CHILDREN UNDER THREE IN ECEC?

Important themes in research on and education of young children in day care centres: Finnish viewpoints

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to outline important themes, according to Finnish early childhood education researchers, that need to be addressed in researching and educating children under three years of age in Finland. To achieve this aim, the article divides into two parts. First, we present and discuss the results of a small-scale survey, conducted in Finland, on the views of key informants in the early childhood education units of Finnish universities. Second, the views presented in the survey are used as a starting point to introduce two ongoing qualitative case studies on the everyday life of toddlers in Finnish day care centres. In line with the survey findings, these case studies emphasize in particular the importance of the relational, social nature of children, the educational community, and the sensitivity of the adult for children's wellbeing in day care groups.

Keywords: Children under three; Day care centre; Early childhood education and care; Case study, Small-scale qualitative study; Research-based knowledge

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In December 2011, 17 researchers interested in care and education for children under three years of age gathered together at the Oslo University College, Norway, for an international conference '*Children under Three in Early Childhood Education and Care: Nordic and International Perspectives*'. The leading question for the conference, 'Is there any knowledge about how to handle children under three in ECEC?', has been the starting point for the research conducted in this article. In this article, we focus on the available knowledge from a

Finnish perspective, proposing this question to Finnish researchers and conducting case analysis of particularly selected, available research.

During recent years in Finland, early childhood education and care for children under three years of age has gained visibility, particularly in the public arena, including debates in the media. The public discussion has shown a tendency to turn the complex phenomena of young children's education and care into clear-cut suggestions for the home care or day care attendance of children at a certain age. Certain ideals, such as 'the ideal

age for starting day care' are referred to without reference to the historical construction of these age categories and/or the 'best interests of the child' in relation to specific ages.

However, regardless of publically expressed opinions, the role of multidisciplinary critical research on a variety of issues relating to children under three is of fundamental importance in both developing understanding of children in this age group and the institutional context of education and care (cf. Johansson & White, 2011). It is also fundamental in seeking to develop the scientific basis and quality of early childhood education and teacher training programs. With the aim of elucidating the current state of this research field in Finland, in this two-part article we first report the results of a data gathering survey, and second we describe two ongoing case studies. The survey investigated *existing and/or much-needed knowledge* concerning children under three and knowledge deemed to be important regarding the education and care of these younger children. A small-scale questionnaire with two items was sent to selected key informants from Finnish universities. The second part of the article introduces two ongoing qualitative case studies that focus on the everyday life of toddlers in Finnish day care centres. The frameworks, research questions, and preliminary observations of these case studies are described and analyzed in light of the survey findings.

In Finland, the scientific production of knowledge about everyday life in toddler groups has been largely overshadowed by the interest in three- to five-year-olds in day care or six-year-olds at preschool. The few existing studies that have focused on children under three years of age during the last 15 years have mainly been observational studies on various topics such as sleep-wake rhythms, play, mathematics and music (Hännikäinen, 2010). The 'Kangaroo' project (Kalliala, 2011) is an exception, as it applies a larger-scale quantitative analytical approach to the role of the adult and the involvement of the child in diverse activities. In this project, the discourse of the 'competent child' is scrutinized critically, and an emphasis on the sensitivity of the adult is brought onto the research agenda.

Internationally, young children's early sociability and agency have been widely addressed in the recent literature (Johansson & White, 2011; Rayna & Laevers, 2011; Selby & Bradley, 2003;

Trevarthen, 2011a; 2011b). For instance, many recent socio-constructivist and socio-cultural studies on interaction among toddlers and young children have illustrated the dynamics of peer interaction and emergence of early 'peer culture', highlighting such themes as togetherness (Hännikäinen, 2001), the role of metacommunication in interaction (Branco et al., 2004), the construction of communicative codes (Pedrosa & Carvalho, 2006), interactional strategies and participatory frameworks within small group (Monaco & Pontecorvo, 2010) and friendship relations (Shin, 2010).

SMALL-SCALE SURVEY FOR FINNISH KEY INFORMANTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

A small-scale qualitative survey was conducted to gain knowledge about what are current topics of interest and what is considered to be important knowledge regarding children under three and their education and care in Finland. Ten key informants (professors, researchers and lecturers) were selected from seven early childhood education units in Finnish universities. The selected informants either answered a two-item questionnaire by email themselves or forwarded the questionnaire to other respondents in their units. Finally, ten answers were received, of which two were personal communications. The two questions were both open questions that had been posed by the organizers of the conference 'Children under Three in Early Childhood Education and Care: Nordic and International Perspectives' (Oslo, 8th December, 2011):

1) *What is the most important knowledge about young children in ECEC (early childhood education and care)?* and

2) *What is the most important knowledge about how to work with young children in ECEC?*

Three of the informants responded by linking the two questions together and emphasizing that they closely overlap. These answers will be discussed in relation to both questions in the results section. The other respondents built their answers to the second question on the basis of the ideas developed in response to the first one. The answers yielded a number of important themes, many of which were shared by the respondents, although some topics received only a brief mention by individual respondents. Some topics that might have been expected but were not men-

tioned are discussed in the concluding section of this paper.

As the answers were mostly general, short statements, a qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on categorizing and mapping their content was applied (see, e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the purpose of this article, the analysis was descriptive. The findings are contextualized in relation to the existing knowledge by connecting them to the themes and findings of previous studies in Finland and internationally. From the international literature we refer both to recent studies and to some well-known and widely applied theoretical perspectives. The main themes are also discussed in more detail in relation to the cases presented in the second part of the article.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN

Some of the answers clearly concerned *existing knowledge*, whereas some of the respondents stressed that while knowledge exists on particular issues, more scientific knowledge is nevertheless needed in those areas. The choice of words such as ‘should be’ (studied), ‘would be’ (beneficial) allowed us to interpret these slight differences in the answers.

Social environment

Among the key informants participating in the survey, there was a generally agreed understanding that children are *social beings from birth*. Answers described *the readiness of the baby to orient to the social world, the importance of emotional relationships, and the importance of a warm, loving, safe (learning) environment for a child’s wellbeing and development*, such as day care should offer (cf. Brennan, 2007; Trevarthen, 2011a, 2011b; Zlatev et al., 2008). Some of the answers provided an explicit ‘counter-narrative’ to the attachment theory and the simplified interpretation of the attachment relation as the child’s relation to his or her primary caregiver (cf. Bowlby, 1969, 1973). The answers underlined the new understanding that a baby has the capacity for *multiple significant relationships* (cf. Ahnert, 2006; Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Selby & Bradley, 2003). Some of the informants referred to this multiplicity in terms of relations with various adults (parents and teachers), while others referred to a variety of relations with both peers and adults. Knowledge gained from contempo-

rary studies on babies and infants emerged in answers mentioning *intersubjectivity, intentionality and initiative* in relation to babies and infants (cf. Parker-Rees, 2007; Rakoczy, 2008a, 2008b; Tomasello & Rakoczy, 2003).

Knowledge about child development

Many of the answers were clearly developmentally oriented. The previous category ‘Social environment’, includes answers that refer to child development in general. However, there were also answers with a more traditional developmental emphasis, such as *knowledge about stages, transitions and critical periods* (cf. Vygotsky, 1998) and the role of the educator in these transitions. Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky (1978, 1987) was mentioned as an example of the concepts to be applied. Knowledge about *children’s experiences, their ‘feelings, thinking and understanding of themselves and the world’* was called for (cf. Stern, 1985). *Development of play, imagination and communication* was mentioned as a particular field in which new knowledge has been gained but further research is needed (cf. Göncü, Abel & Boshans, 2010).

Internationally, studies on young children in day care centres have been influenced by new research findings in the neuro-sciences (cf. Panksepp, 2007; Shonkoff & Levitt, 2010). This was observed among the Finnish respondents, who emphasized the connection between *brain development and interaction*, and also the significance of *activating nervous systems*. These answers, bringing up issues of brain development and social environment, are closely related to the issues discussed under ‘Social environment’ (above), but are considered from form a slightly different perspective. Here, the role of environmental factors on children’s wellbeing were evaluated in light of neuro-biological and developmental evidence. Similarly, some respondents mentioned new knowledge about the effect of *psychic loading and stress on children’s wellbeing* (cf. Groeneveld et al., 2010). With respect to both lines of thought the emphasis was posed on individual differences and the development of children’s daily rhythm.

Contextual contemporary issues

Gender issues appeared in only one answer, which underlined the importance of understanding the cultural construction of gender and gender-related expectations already in relation to

children under three. In Finland, this topic has not as yet received much research interest, despite the large number of studies on older children in day care and schools (cf. Berg, 2010; La helma, 2005; Lappalainen, 2006).

The effects of day care was a topic that was mentioned as absent in the Finnish debate. The importance of the interrelation between home and day care for children's wellbeing was underlined, along with quality of care, in terms of both structure quality and process quality in day care. So far, these themes have hardly been studied in Finland. There is a clear need for evidence-based knowledge on both topics, also in the context of the ongoing debate on the 'ideal age for starting day care' and the benefits or disadvantages for children of institutional day care.

From the analysis conducted in this article, it can be concluded that the existing knowledge on children in day care in Finland is strongly based on developmental psychological approaches. Socio-constructive and socio-cultural theories provide a strong starting point, as also does the traditional attachment theory that was either agreed with or strongly criticized in many of the answers. New ideas were mentioned in light of the evidence from recent neuropsychological research. Multidisciplinary research and social studies on childhood with a focus on children's rights and citizenship appear to be less visible in the field of early childhood education and care. The child, child development and wellbeing remain central research objectives.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO WORK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Similarly to the question about what knowledge about children is important, the answers in relation to the development of educational practices also showed variations of emphasis. Some of the respondents referred to existing good practices, whereas some mentioned that in certain areas knowledge was lacking.

Routines and environment

One of the main themes in the answers on the existing knowledge about how to work with young children referred to specific routines and the restructuring of the (learning) environment that has been implemented in day care. Some of the informants underlined the *beginning of day care* as a sensitive period for the child (cf. Andersen, 2011). A 'soft start' referring to various

benefits for both children and parents in building the educational partnership with the educators, was seen as important. A 'soft start' was given as an example of a permanent and consistent practice that would enhance children's wellbeing and feeling of security. The importance of the role of the key person in this process (teacher/educator/primary caregiver) was underlined (cf. Elfer et al., 2003).

Another answer that referred to specific routines was a wish to see a shift in focus from the present strong emphasis on safety and control to freer possibilities and greater flexibility in everyday activities. This observation is supported by the international research on children's 'risk-taking' and 'risky' play (cf. Hansen Sandseter & Ottesen Kennair, 2011) as well as on the emphasis on preventive surveillance and risk-management discussed in the literature (cf. Kernan & Devine, 2010). Also, the importance of knowledge about the material, physical environment in providing interest and possibilities for a variety of activities was emphasized (cf. Musatti & Mayer, 2011).

Shift in emphasis from the role of the educator to the educational community

The role of the educator was not only discussed in terms of secure attachment relationships, but in a more varied way. *Adults' sensitivity* to children's interests and initiatives was seen as fundamental in all activities (cf. Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2007; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Kalliala, 2011). The role of adults in listening and looking at children, working from children's perspectives and promoting children's cultural experiences and various ways of expression was stressed, as also was their role in supporting children's imagination and play (cf. Rogoff, 2008; Rogoff et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1998) In addition, their *role in promoting peer interaction* was mentioned (cf. Musatti & Mayer, 2011; Shin, 2010; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002).

A few answers openly criticized the attachment studies and proposed a new orientation towards the role of the *educational community* (adults, children) instead of emphasizing the relation with the primary caregiver. These answers acknowledge the role of community as source of security for children. Similarly, the role of a *professional team and collaboration among educators* were discussed in terms of a wider community of learners (cf. Rogoff, 2003).

The child as a biological-physiological being

Some of the answers raised the developmental perspective mentioned above together with knowledge about the child. For developing practices, these views underlined the importance of knowledge of the *rapid psycho-physiological changes that occur in a child* and of the new evidence from *neuro-biological research* on children's wellbeing in day care (Groeneveld et al., 2010; Panksepp, 2007; Shonkoff & Levitt, 2010).

Challenges identified

Many of the respondents were clear about the challenges that currently face Finnish day care practices for children under three. Practical and structural challenges included the lack of regulations specifying group size in the case of the younger children. One informant proposed a return to specific groups for one-year-olds. Instead of pressure to follow established routines, more time and 'peace' was required to guarantee wellbeing by attending to developmental continuity in day care practices. The importance of *the development of pedagogy* with respect to children under three was underlined along with the transfer and application of research knowledge to local practices. Together with the development of practices in day care centres, there should also be a research focus on teacher training. Improvement in the quality of training was required as well as the transfer and application of research knowledge to the content of teacher training programs.

THE SOCIAL CHILD IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE WIDER EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY –
TWO CASES

In recent years, the research needs that have presented in the survey have been addressed both internationally and partially also in Finland. The second part of this article focuses on *two on-going research projects addressing some of the needs expressed in the survey*. These two cases are discussed in light of the survey findings: In what respect do these cases answer the needs, as determined by the survey of ECEC in Finland, for children under three? What is being addressed and in what terms? The materials for discussion are the research proposals, manuscripts and already published material on the projects. One should remember, however, that

both cases are limited in their scope and are discussed here as *examples of studies* that address partially the challenges underlined in the survey. The intention is to illustrate with these cases some of the theoretical-methodological challenges in studies with the youngest children, and some possible frameworks for addressing the issues highlighted in the survey.

The two cases presented here have been selected on the basis of their different emphasis and problem setting. Both however, are very recent studies that have focused on the issues underlined in the survey. While they are not designed as a joint project, they *share a number of similarities*: they are both based on or make use of relational approaches; they involve empirical data collected by observations and video recordings (as well as discussions with the educators) in day care groups for children under three; they were ongoing in 2011–2012; and they are funded by the Academy of Finland. The cases also share similarities in relation to the second aim of this article, viz. to introduce cases that can be discussed in light of the survey results. When compared to the topics presented by the key informants in the survey, both of the cases emphasize, in particular, the importance of the *relational, social nature of the child, multiple social relations and the educational community, and the sensitivity of the adult for child's wellbeing* in the everyday life of a day care group.

Spaces for toddlers and toddler's places

The '(In)visible toddlerhood? Global and local constructions of toddlers' places in institutions' -project focuses on *multiple social relations and the educational community, and on the role of the educator* in creating and mediating the practices in ECEC (<https://invisibletoddlerhood.wordpress.com>). The theoretical approach, applying *space and place* from childhood geographies (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Olwig & Gulløv, 2003), shares similarities with the socio-cultural approaches advocated by the informants in the survey. The common denominator is to address the multiple relations and contextual understanding of the actions taking place. In this particular study, the focus, toddlers in institutions, is approached both from the perspective of the *space offered for toddlers* as well as from the perspective of toddlers' personal experiences in relation to *the lived space (place) of day care* (Rutanen, 2011, 2012). In other words, the interest is in how children develop new places,

reconfiguring the spaces designated to them (Olwig & Gulløv, 2003). Henri Lefebvre's (2004) work on social space is used as a theoretical and heuristic tool to address the dynamic interplay among 1) the culturally constructed meanings (ideals and expectations of (good) toddlerhood), 2) the local level of practices, and 3) the toddlers' construction of places (lived-through-experiences).

Following this emphasis on different inter-linked levels, although not in precisely the same way as the survey results, this study addresses the question of *national curricular guidance* with respect to day care practices for under-threes. The national and local level curricula for ECEC (e.g. National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2004) leaves space for local practices to interpret the 'needs' of the 'younger' and 'older' children on the basis of local values and aims. At the local level, the space offered for the youngest children is linked to the emphasis on the day care group as a community of social actors. The youngest ones are seen as inexperienced newcomers, faced with adaptation to the group and its rules (Rutanen, 2011).

The project also focuses on the educators' role in structuring, defining, and implementing spatial practices and how the educators use age as a category for differentiating the practices (Rutanen, 2012). The educators' socio-spatial practices were accessed through ethnographic fieldwork (Atkinson et al., 2001), including observations, video recordings, educators' video-elicited interviews, and audio-recorded educators' team meeting discussions in one day-care group for under threes in Finland. The results show that these socio-spatial practices displayed various tensions. One of the tensions included, on the one hand, attention to children's individual interests and needs and, on the other hand, the quest for stability of routines and order in day care (Rutanen, 2012; see also Markström & Halldén, 2009). Another tension was related to the offering of opportunities for 'explorative learning' and the requirement of preventive surveillance and risk-management that is deeply ingrained in this institutional setting (also Kernan & Devine, 2010). However, promoting children's learning in new and challenging situations was valued as a preparation for future adaptation to the group of over-threes, where the adult-child ratio is different (Rutanen, 2012).

The focus on toddlers' *lived spaces* has shown that children's co-construction of meanings and peer relations are interlinked to this complex, institutionally embedded context of power relations and dynamics. Children participate in defining their positions in the local context and negotiate their own uses of space, as well as engage in alternative meaning-making processes with the objects provided (see also Monaco & Pontecorvo, 2010). This observation is in line with the findings of the survey: many of the respondents alluded to the importance of understanding children's experiences in ECEC. If children are seen as capable of multiple relations and as active learners, the challenge seems to be for educators to understand the importance of structuring the day care setting and providing good quality care for the children (see also Musatti & Mayer, 2008). The project described here indicates that a key issue concerns the role of the educator, who needs to engage in reflection on his/her assumptions about toddlers, in reflexive learning from observing children's actions, and, further, in mediating and scaffolding the early peer relations and collaborative play of children (see also Shin, 2010; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002). On the basis of educators' interpretations of children and their skills, needs, and their own role, the children are given diverse opportunities for actions. The role of the educator is central in 'translating' children's actions: interpreting the intentions, emotions, goal orientations and collaborative efforts of children, verbalizing nonverbal efforts and supporting children's viewpoints.

Emotional wellbeing of the younger children in day care groups

The project 'Emotional wellbeing of the younger children in day care groups: social relationships, participation and teachers' role in joint activities' is designed to clarify and deepen theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge on the emotional wellbeing of young children. More specifically, its aim is to investigate emotional wellbeing in terms of the participation and social relationships of one- to three-year-old children in day care groups, and the ways in which teachers contribute to the children's wellbeing. The link between the theoretical frame of the project and the survey is that the project is grounded in the application of knowledge synthesised from a variety of theories on learning and development, particular the *activity-theo-*

retical and socio-cultural approaches. As is well-known, these approaches posit that it is through the child's activity that he or she develops relationships with other people, and that participation in social practices, interaction and collaboration are key factors in children's social and cultural learning, meaning-making process and wellbeing (e.g., Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; and more recently, see e.g. Hedegaard & Fler, 2008; Rogoff, 2003, 2008).

Moreover, the socio-cultural and activity theoretical approaches state that relationships between individuals and between individuals and objects are mediated through object-oriented activities. An activity always has an object and there can be no activity without a motive (e.g. Leont'ev, 1978). The object, in turn, can be viewed from the perspective of the motive and content of the activity. In day care groups, the questions arise: *what do children actually do and why do they do it?* Emotional wellbeing is related to whether the object of the activity (in the sense of both content and motive) of an individual child is understood by others, and in particular by adults. The importance of sensitivity on the part of educators to children's interests and initiatives was also stressed in the survey.

Further, emotional wellbeing is related to participation and social relationships (e.g., Hännikäinen et al. 1997). Social relationships have to do with the issue of whether the individual is a subject, an active agent in the social life processes of which he or she is a part, or whether he or she is merely an object in processes determined by others. In line with the topics emphasized in the survey, *this project explores in what ways the relationships between very young children appear in joint activities as well as what the relationships between children and their educators are like and in what ways educators treat children as subjects* in different activities. Moreover, children's emotional wellbeing is connected with educational practices, as studies focusing on older children and teachers have explicitly shown (see, e.g., Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This project examines *how this connection manifests itself in day care groups of children aged one to three years.* The focus of the project is on *best practices.*

The project is being carried out as a short-term case study in two day care groups; one comprising 12 children and three educators, and the other a subgroup of eight children and two educators drawn from a larger group. In both

groups the educators work as a team. The data have been collected by ethnographic methods such as reactive observations (Hännikäinen, 2005) and stimulated recalls and informal discussions with the educators. As the data analysis is still underway, only preliminary findings or remarks can be presented here.

It has also become apparent in this project that the emotional wellbeing of younger children can be assessed or interpreted mainly through non-verbal, observable signals. These signals include 'ways of being', such as happiness (smile and laughter), friendliness, self-confidence and interest in the social and material world, as well as 'ways of doing', such as (toddler-like) enthusiasm, fascination and persistence in activities. The observations offer clear examples, in relation to e.g. the power of singing and music, for inclusion in good educational practices. In addition, consistent with the answers given in the survey and the findings of earlier studies (e.g., Brennan, 2007), it is essential that the children's educators have a professional but warm and respectful relationship and attitude to the children.

CONCLUDING WORDS

In the small-scale survey described in this article, a number of important issues were mentioned in relation both to existing and required knowledge on 1) children under three years of age in ECEC and 2) ECEC practices with these younger children in Finland. International studies on young children are widely available and also acknowledged in Finland. However, some topics that have been widely discussed internationally were not mentioned in the data, such as early learning in relation to academic subjects (e.g., literacy, early mathematics, science), esthetics, music and other content areas of early childhood education, curriculum development, planning and evaluation, educational partnerships, role of siblings and sibling groups, education in bi- or multilingual or multicultural contexts, and wider political and structural developments in services for children. Also, topics related to educational history and philosophy or to action or practice-based research with educators were not mentioned as an important basis for future research.

Some of the challenges facing the present early childhood education and service structure were emphasised by several informants. These chal-

lenges were related to the application of knowledge to both local practices and to the content of teacher training programs. As the research basis is already broad, clear action-plans and a political will for a more centralized regulation in relation to group sizes were called for. Regardless of the theoretical approaches and questions emphasized, many respondents underlined the importance of small group sizes for the wellbeing of young children. A highly qualified educator was also seen as an important factor for the quality of care.

Despite the limited scope of this article, both the results of the survey and preliminary findings of the two case studies emphasize the importance of applying new as well as existing knowledge in the development of day care practices. In a wide and heterogeneous field such as early childhood education and care, the studies address many, often diverse, aspects of the everyday life of toddlers, and thus complicate the discussion of the results in a unified form. Nevertheless, the two studies described here offer different perspectives for critical discussions in teacher training programs that are sensitive to local conditions and contexts.

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