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## **Privilege or tragedy? Educators' accounts of flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care**

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**Abstract**

This article explores accounts given by Finnish educators (n=31) on flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care (ECEC) (e.g. childcare provided also during non-standard hours). Previous research has shown this to be a sensitive topic because of the contradiction between prerequisites (what is good for children) and actions (provision of childcare during non-standard hours). The research is following the principles of discursive psychology. Educators' accounts were labelled as excusing, compensating, normalising and justifying. The excusing and compensating accounts shared a concern about the effects of non-standard hour's childcare on children's well-being. Similar risks were not expressed in the normalising and the justifying accounts. Accounts differed as to who was held responsible for providing this type of childcare. When responsibility was attributed to society, the educators' position was weaker than when educators constructed themselves as active participants. Both educators and children were positioned uniquely in each type of account. As accounts have consequences on action it is important to make them visible in order to both understand and to develop practices in flexibly scheduled ECEC.

**Keywords**

ECEC, flexibly scheduled childcare, day and night care, non-standard working hours, social-emotional well-being, position, educators' account, discourse

## **Introduction**

The provision of flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care (ECEC), i.e., institutional childcare given outside as well as during normal office hours, such as early mornings, evenings, nights and weekends is a contentious topic in social policy. The reason for the need of flexibly scheduled ECEC services is the 24/7 economy, where a significant number of employees work non-standard hours (La Valle et al., 2002).

Beside traditional shift work, such as in health care, digitalization and other factors influencing the present-day economy have brought about a need to extend working hours across the day in, for example, trade and different areas of expertise. The flexibility, affordability and quality of childcare impact, especially, on decisions by mothers whether or not to enter and/or remain in the labour market (Janta, 2014: 5–6).

However, this type of childcare is variously organised across countries. Offering institutional childcare outside office hours is costly and ethical attitudes regarding the provision of out-of-home childcare, especially during non-standard hours, vary widely. When institutional childcare is not easily available for parents with non-standard work schedules, unofficial social networks of friends, neighbours and relatives assume an important supportive role (La Valle et al., 2002).

Internationally, ECEC in Finland is unique, since the provision of care during non-standard working hours is a municipal obligation that is nationally organized and controlled. The revised Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2015) requires

municipalities to offer childcare according to parental work- and study-related needs while also taking the child's best interest into account. Therefore, ECEC services have two main goals: one is to support parents' employment possibilities, including during non-standard hours (employment policy task), and thus meet their needs for childcare, and the other is to provide early childhood education and care (pedagogical task).

Despite the institutional status of flexibly scheduled ECEC, public attitudes to this type of childcare are conflicting. Children and educators do not share synchronized daily and weekly rhythms, but arrive and leave the childcare centre almost around the clock. This has given rise to debate on whether unpredictable rhythms and routines weaken children's sense of continuity, predictability and belonging to a peer group. This study examined educators' attitudes to and justifications for flexibly scheduled ECEC, also known as day and night care (Verhoef et al., 2016) or flexible childcare (DeSchipper et al., 2003), that consists of education, care and teaching.

#### *Debate on childcare during non-standard hours*

From a wider perspective, the debate on flexibly scheduled ECEC is closely linked to the more general debate on institutional childcare. For many parents, participation in the labour market requires giving up some of their core activities, such as raising children, and shifting these – at least in part – to other bodies (Ostner, 2007: 55).

Therefore, in the developed countries the responsibility for childcare has increasingly been incorporated into public services (Onnismaa and Kalliala, 2010: 23). The debate

on childcare policy and on the possible benefits and risks of home-based vs. institutional childcare has been lively, with advocates for home care and institutional care arguing strongly for the superiority of the one over the other (Repo, 2013).

In family policy discourse, those defending home care argue that children need both intimacy and protection (Ifland, 2013: 237). These aspects of childcare are especially important during evenings and weekends, which have traditionally been defined as family time. Hence, institutional childcare during nonstandard hours can be regarded as a double-deficit for child wellbeing. Institutional care, in turn, can be defended as a social investment, as the child benefits from education, teaching and care by qualified childcare educators (Ifland, 2013: 237). This argument entails a shift from a childcare discourse to a pedagogical discourse (Moss 2006).

The currently dominant discourse which opposes flexibly scheduled ECEC, has its roots in attachment theory. This familistic discourse emphasizes the primary nature of parental childcare and voices concerns about children's well-being when in institutional out-of-home care. A strong emotional and physical bond and a belief in familial reciprocity in times of need are two components of familyism (see Colander 2016) that are important in the ECEC context. They easily provoke parental guilt and ambivalence regarding their childcare practices. For instance, despite the comprehensiveness of Finland's institutional, flexibly scheduled ECEC, Finnish parents working non-standard hours report childcare-related concerns as often as their

counterparts in countries where publicly subsidized care during non-standard hours is not available (Moilanen et al., 2016). Parents worry about their children spending long periods in childcare and about transporting a tired child to care very early in the morning or home from care late in the evening (Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al., 2016). Sometimes the centre for evening or weekend care is a different facility, and thus less familiar, than the child's regular day care centre, since municipalities typically concentrate non-standard hours of care in certain centres.

The timing of parental work has become a critical factor in the debate on child well-being, particularly when parents work non-standard schedules (Strazdins et al., 2004). According to earlier research, childcare arrangements can jeopardize children's well-being and increase behavioural problems, if too many changes during the day make daily life difficult to predict or adjust to (Morrissey, 2009). In addition, non-standard working hours can impair parents' physical and mental well-being and through this weaken parents' interaction with their family members (Strazdins et al., 2004). For couples, where one or both spouses work non-standard hours, there is a constant need to adjust their respective schedules, while for lone parents organising childcare during non-standard hours can be especially challenging (Murtorinne-Lahtinen, et al. 2016). Finally, the debate on timing is related to where and by whom children are best cared for (Repo, 2013): these questions concern the rights and wrongs of children spending

non-standard hours, like early mornings, late evenings, nights or weekends, which are traditionally viewed as family time, in institutional care.

Working non-standard hours does not necessarily mean poor working conditions for parents, and it offers possibilities as well as challenges for the reconciliation of work and family. Couples can share childcare duties among themselves to minimize the amount of out-of-home care, while some parents consider that work non-standard hours gives them more time to spend with their children (Murtoirinne-Lahtinen et al. 2016). In addition, De Schipper et al. (2003) reported that non-standard hours of care do not harm children's well-being as such. Providing childcare in a stable setting (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and enabling parents to organize childcare in the way that best suits their family (Claessens and Chen, 2013; La Valle et al., 2002) can lessen the negative consequences of the challenging timetables faced by families when parents are working non-standard hours. Providing institutional flexibly scheduled ECEC in stable settings with educated personnel can also be regarded as safe and supportive for children. In contrast, informal non-parental childcare arrangements are often negotiated on a daily basis and may therefore be more unstable and unpredictable than institutional care (Janta, 2014).

Belief in childcare as a positive experience for their children may also function as a cushion for parents, attenuating the stress incurred by reconciling work and family (Claessens and Chen, 2013; La Valle et al., 2002). The successful

consolidation of non-standard work hours and family duties seems to have to do with families' ability to maintain regularity and togetherness (Murtoirinne-Lahtinen, et al. 2016). Further, good cooperation between educators and parents seems to support children's well-being in the 24/7 context (Turja et al., 2013).

In sum, the debate focuses heavily on how childcare is organized during non-standard hours, i.e., time traditionally spent at home with family members. In light of this debate, this study explores these conflicting notions via the accounts of educators in childcare centres offering flexibly scheduled ECEC. The focus on educators can be justified, although the debate about childcare has mainly concerned mothers' decisions, as they experience the need to justify their engagement in full-time employment (see Vincent and Ball, 2006: 75). Also, educators actively implement rights and duties in relation to children, parents and society. Educators can be thus described as "institutional agents" who may support or challenge the dominant discourses (Battilana et al., 2009) striving meanwhile to justify their work. This perspective on flexibly scheduled childcare has not been studied earlier.

#### *Educators' accounts as a focus of study*

When educators defend institutional care during nonstandard hours, they produce what are known in discourse analysis as accounts. The pioneers of the research on accounts,

Scott and Lyman (1968), define an account as a linguistic device or statement applied by the social actor to explain unexpected behaviour and achieve shared understanding of it (e.g. untypical timing of childcare). Accounts are thus standardized and culturally available tools that are expected to be used in social interaction to prevent conflicts when there is a gap between action and expectation (Scott and Lyman, 1968). By providing accounts, participants in interaction display their awareness of this gap and aim to protect their self-image (Raevaara, 2011).

This paper focuses on interview talk by Finnish educators on the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC. The analysis of accounts is applied in this study, since flexibly scheduled ECEC provision is a sensitive and contradictory topic in terms of both ethics and actions. Although research has supported the ideal of long-term relationships between children and familiar educators and the importance of rhythms and routines, reality in flexibly scheduled ECEC, as educators describe it, does not fulfil those ideals. The need to offer accounts arises from a rupture in moral order, i.e. the habits and routines that are taken for granted in everyday life (e.g. the timing of childcare) (Garfinkel, 1967). To disentangle the educators' accounts and render them visible, the following research questions were set:

1. What accounts do educators produce when seeking to validate flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care as a societal service?
2. How do educators position themselves and the children in these accounts?

## **Methodology**

### *Study context*

Flexibly scheduled ECEC was started in Finland over 30 years ago to provide parents with equal opportunities to work and children with stable settings in accordance with their parents' working hours. In Finland, around seven percent of children attending institutional ECEC need flexibly scheduled childcare (Säkkinen, 2014). Care for children whose parents work non-standard hours is affordable, as it is heavily subsidized by the state (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). In practice, flexibly scheduled childcare is offered either from early morning to late evening 5 days a week or 24/7. Parents who are eligible for flexibly scheduled childcare inform the childcare centre each week of their childcare needs, based on their working hours, and childcare is then arranged for them accordingly.

### *Data collection and participants*

Data were collected by interviewing educators (N=31) working in childcare centres with non-standard opening hours. Participants were from different-sized municipalities and from both public and private ECEC settings. Twelve of the interviewees had a teacher qualification (either a university bachelor's degree or a degree in social pedagogy from a university of applied sciences) while the remaining 19 were childcare nurses with secondary level education. Mean length of work experience in flexibly scheduled ECEC was 9 years, ranging from 6 months to 35 years. One participant was male and the rest female. These demographics are in line with the reality in day care centres: about 30% of staff have a teacher qualification and only a few are men.

Participants were recruited as a part of a research project, "*Children's socio-emotional well-being and daily family life in a 24-h economy*", funded by the Academy of Finland, by asking educators who had responded to the web-based survey if they would also be willing to be interviewed. Participants were provided in advance with an information sheet and a consent form. Voluntary participation, the possibility to drop out of the study at any time and assurance of anonymity in all phases of the research project were re-emphasized at the beginning of the interviews.

Half of the interviews were conducted by the first author and half by other members of the research group. The interviews were conducted in the childcare centres during the children's nap-time on the educators' working days. Most of the interviews took about one hour; the longest took almost two hours. The interviewers were given a

written guide on how to conduct a semi-structured interview. Briefly, the interviewer had the freedom to enable conversation but at the same time had to pursue all the basic lines of inquiry with every interviewee (Patton, 2002: 343). The interviews started with an open question asking what the educator thought about flexibly scheduled ECEC as a way of taking care of children, thereby inviting personal narratives on the issue. This open question produced most of the accounts analysed. The other questions were organized around the topics of child well-being, pedagogical practices, daily activities, working schedules and communication between educators, children and parents.

### *Analysis*

Data were analysed following the principles of discursive psychology (Potter, 1996). The focus of the discursive psychology approach is on the action orientation of talk, i.e., how people produce versions of external reality and psychological states indirectly in different kinds of descriptions (Potter 2007). The aim of the analysis in this study was to detect variation in the accounts given by educators about flexibly scheduled ECEC. Scott and Lyman (1968) have theorised two basic types of accounts, excuses and justifications, each of which presents a slightly different view of the responsibility of the actor (for the negotiation of responsibility, see Sterponi, 2003). First, in excuses “one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong or inappropriate but denies full responsibility”, for example one “is ‘under orders’ and must obey”. Second, in

justifications “one accepts responsibility for the act in question but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

The concerns educators expressed over children’s well-being guided our formulation of the research questions and our analytical focus. Accounts were identified by clustering explanations that either mitigated or affirmed earlier talk by the interviewer or the interviewee her/himself. The interviewees typically introduced a single point of view on the topic and then continued with additional talk (e.g. subordinate clause starting with “but” or comparison to regular day care or home care), labelled accounts here, explicating their ideas about flexibly scheduled ECEC. The open question about providing childcare in ECEC centres during non-standard hours generated most of the accounts. In the analysis, we identified the two different views on responsibility proposed by Scott and Lyman (1968). The accounts differed in how the challenges of flexibly scheduled ECEC were presented, e.g., whether arranging childcare during non-standard hours was constructed as harmful for the child’s well-being and whether responsibility for a child having a good life was in the educator’s own hands. A more precise analysis of syntax (e.g., passive/active voice, moral expressions) and word choice yielded four types of accounts in the data.

After identifying the four types of accounts on the basis of their content and linguistic features, we further analysed how both the children and the educators themselves were positioned in the four different accounts. Positions are interactively

constructed for people in particular contexts for particular purposes in the way language is used (Edwards and Potter 1992). Finally, we reflected on the discourses informing the accounts. Accounts are one way to construct, renew or resist discourses that are situated and action-orientated versions of the world that are constructed in language use (Potter 2007). The educators typically used the different types of accounts flexibly, no educator producing only one type of account. We include authentic examples from the data to help the reader evaluate the credibility of the interpretations.

## **Results**

The accounts produced by the educators arose from conflicts between their ideals (what is good for a child) and their actions (arranging childcare during non-standard hours). This tension was particularly noticeable when the educators were asked to reflect on flexibly scheduled ECEC as a childcare setting or on its relation to children's socio-emotional well-being. The accounts that the educators used in the interviews were categorized into four types. The accounts, together with their content, linguistic features and the subject positions constructed for both the educators and children, and the discourses informing the accounts, are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Accounts of flexibly scheduled ECEC provision.

<b>Educators' accounts</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Linguistic feature</b>	<b>Educator subject position</b>	<b>Child subject position</b>	<b>Discourse</b>
<i>Excusing account</i>	Foregrounds the role of competing interests (e.g. parents, working life) in relation to the best interests of the child	Passive voice, Use of negations Moral expressions (e.g. auxiliary "can")	Prisoner of the 24/7 society	Victim	Labour policy discourse
<i>Compensating account</i>	Foregrounds the role of professional practices in balancing the challenges faced	Active, personal voice	Counter-balance to the 24/7 society	Object of protection	Professional discourse
<i>Normalising account</i>	Foregrounds the normality of flexibly scheduled ECEC	Counter expressions, negations, use of descriptive adjectives	Ordinary worker	Like any other child	Caring discourse
<i>Justifying account</i>	Foregrounds the superior features of flexibly scheduled ECEC compared to regular day care	Use of comparatives	Advocate of flexibly scheduled ECEC provision	Privileged	Familistic discourse

*Excuse through externalising responsibility*

In the excusing accounts, the contradiction between the ideal (what is good for a child) and the action taken (providing childcare during non-standard hours ) was produced and justified by societal needs and the right of parents to work non-standard hours. These accounts were preceded by the use of negative affective expressions, through which the educators regretted that children have to receive flexibly scheduled ECEC. Working in a service that is constructed as posing a potential risk for children's well-being was excused by reference to parental choices or to society, and not as having to do with either the ECEC setting or educators themselves. The following examples illustrate this type of account.

Extract 1

1. **Mari:** ... on the one hand, are parents willing to change to another type
2. of work.... I have a gut feeling that sometimes parents actually want to
3. work shifts and bring the children here even though it feels bad... so if
4. overall in day and night care I would like that kind of general
5. discussion even more about those who are working shifts, small
6. children's parents so is it really so that the society doesn't have anything
7. to offer to some ((sigh)) lone mother, anything other than apprenticeship
8. training in some restaurant field and practical training in McDonalds so I
9. don't get it that the society kind of does not carry the responsibility
10. (is to guide) it is like on the other hand McDonalds is using that and
11. then the child is there like they are mostly during the night. I think it is
12. not very responsible of society... it is anyway [so] that this is not going
13. to change anymore. There's no return back to that other kind of time.
14. This is how it goes now

## Extract 2

1. **Liisa:** Nothing can be done about the issue itself. Society can't expect
2. parents to change their jobs to get better working schedules. So there are
3. these kinds of societal dimensions as well. Then there are of course all
4. these support services, special teacher, and all the other municipal
5. support services that there are. But worst of all, nothing can be done
6. about these things.

As extracts 1 and 2 show, the societal context and concern about children's well-being loomed large in this account. In extract 1, the educator levels accusations against both parents (who "actually want to work on shifts - - even though it feels bad" Extract 1, lines 2–3) and society (which "doesn't take responsibility" by offering work during office hours for a "lone mother" instead of shift work (Extract 1, lines 7–9). Although this undesirable system is constructed as permanent, responsibility for changing the system is nevertheless demanded through the deontic modal expression "should".

In extract 2, the educator shares the same concern over children's well-being in flexibly scheduled ECEC and externalizes the responsibility to society. "Nothing can be done" (Extract 2, line 1) is a strong claim that flexibly scheduled ECEC serves working life without taking the consequences for children's well-being into account. This so called zero-person (or missing person) expression is used to index people in general, including the speaker her/himself: no one is taking responsibility, each actor is positioned as weak. The zero-person construction can therefore serve as a face-saving strategy when talking about difficult topics, since responsibility is not attributed to a specific individual (Halonen, 2008).

This type of account is to renew the discourse of employment policy in the context of ECEC, which means that this type of service exists mainly to enable parents to work nonstandard hours. Similarly, the issue of child well-being is raised, and the educator's

expressions of concern can thus be interpreted as a manifestation and reinforcement of the well-being discourse, which seems to be central in talk about institutional childcare during non-standard hours. (Li, et al. 2012; Strazdins et al.2004). The potential threat of flexibly scheduled ECEC to the psychological wellbeing of children is discussed as something educators are powerless to deal with. The educators thus construct the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC as somehow against their better moral judgement and their idea of what constitutes good quality childcare. They position themselves as prisoners of the 24/7 society, who do not have power to influence this aspect of their work. At the same time, this account positions children as victims of the 24/7 society.

### *Compensating for the challenges*

In the compensating accounts, in turn, educators' expressions of concern about children's well-being were constructed as a premise for planning and implementing good quality childcare. Thus, while foregrounding the problems of flexibly scheduled ECEC, the educators sought to surmount these by talking about their active professional role in the provision of ECEC.

#### Extract 3

1. **Interviewer:** Then, if we think about the feeling of safety and socio-
2. emotional well-being, how do you think flexibly scheduled ECEC
3. affects that?
4. **Sanna:** Well like I probably have already mentioned, there are pros and
5. cons, but that is why we have a very important task here, so that we can
6. create a safe atmosphere that includes definitely clear rules and frames
7. within which children must act. And of course the cooperation with
8. parents. It is essential that we really know everything relevant, so that
9. we can make the child feel good. But certainly children miss their
10. parents. Certainly these things often happen and then in the evening

11. when we are going to bed there will be that homesickness and crying.
12. Yet it's... it's also normal. Then every now and then there are children
13. who will go into anyone's lap - - - On this point we need to reflect more,
14. like ahaa, how is this....

In extract 3, compensation is preceded by concern about the potential risk to children in the 24/7 economy. The account itself is constructed in subordinate clauses, typically starting with “but” and reporting compensatory actions by educators for children. The main focus in these sentences is on the acts of the educators, which are described in the active voice, in utterances such as “we can create” (Extract 3, Lines 5–6) and “we can make” (Extract 3, lines 8–9) something. The educators thus position themselves as competent and able professionals who act as a counterbalance to the 24/7 society, actively working to minimize the disadvantages of implementing flexibly scheduled ECEC.

The compensatory actions reported by the educators reveal certain ideals about what constitutes good quality childcare. The compensatory means mentioned by the educator in extract 3 are creating a safe atmosphere with clear rules and frames (lines 6–7) and good cooperation with parents (lines 7–8). In the other extracts, a permanent educator working evening shifts, organising work schedules according to children's rhythms, sensitive interaction between educators and children, calm daily rhythms and long-term relationships between children and educators are mentioned as important contributions to children's well-being in flexibly scheduled ECEC.

Despite the good intentions and efforts of educators, children are reported as sometimes longing for their parents (“But certainly children miss their parents. Certainly these things often happen and then in the evening when we are going to bed there will be that homesickness and crying.” Extract 3, lines 10–11). The Finnish clitic particle (-hän) (which

adds emphasis, e.g., “certainly” in English) is used here to construct children’s homesickness as a mutually shared and generally known phenomenon. Children are described as in need of adult proximity and individual recognition and thus positioned as an object of protection by the educators. This is presented as part of the vocation, and commitment to their work, of the educators. This type of account can, therefore, be interpreted as reinforce the educators’ professional discourse, highlighting their expertise in knowing what is in the children’s best interest.

### *Normalising flexibly scheduled ECEC*

In the normalising accounts, the educators evaluate flexibly scheduled ECEC as a normal routine in children’s daily lives. Thus, this type of account did not include the same expression of concern about children’s well-being as produced in the previous types of accounts. Although the normalising account was marginal in the data, it made a clearly different contribution to the conversation about flexibly scheduled ECEC by positioning it as business as usual.

#### Extract 4

1. **Anna:** Normal everyday life, well it’s the child who comes here, I think
2. that this is like ‘another home’. So it doesn’t have to be anything special,
3. but the children have a safe place to be and to act with a trusted
4. adult. No need for anything fancy. And nice that it is kind of homely...

#### Extract 5

1. **Leena:** Well, we have, I guess, it was already when we had the former
2. director, she always emphasized the word home. [a direct translation
3. of day care in Finnish would be day home] so that she would not say
4. that this is day care, but she emphasized the word ‘home’. So we have

5. somehow, we see it as important, that at home the evenings should not
6. be full of activities either.

Extracts 4 and 5 both emphasize the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC as a normal part of children's daily lives. The repeated use of the expressions "normal" (Extract 4, line 1) and "nothing special" (Extract 4, line 2) when describing the time spent by children in a childcare centre during non-standard hours creates an image of flexibly scheduled ECEC as an ordinary everyday practice, the existence of which does not require any special justification and in which children "simply" participate. This account presents a liberating counter-argument to criticism levelled at institutional care during nonstandard hours as special or high-risk service. Therefore, in this account, children become positioned as "every other child" and educators as "ordinary workers".

What, however, is noteworthy in this account is that the educators draw parallels between flexibly scheduled ECEC and home care. Descriptions like "home" (Extract 5, line 2) and "another home" (Extract 4, line 2) refer here to the idea that flexibly scheduled ECEC at its best provides children with home-like care and close relationships with trusted adults. Organized ECEC activities and pedagogy are absent in this type of account. Therefore, it reinforced the discourse of care – their work appears as business as usual for the educators – it does not require any special pedagogical activities but is about creating a home-like environment.

#### *Justifying flexibly scheduled ECEC as supporting children's well-being*

Like the normalising accounts, the justifying accounts run counter to the concern about the threat of non-standard hours of care to children's well-being. However, these accounts not

only create a neutral image of flexibly scheduled ECEC but are oriented towards convincing the listener of its strengths and its superiority compared to regular day care. The following examples illustrate this type of account:

Extract 6

1. **Liisa:** If you think of regular day care, the child is there at best or at
2. worst from five, from Monday to Friday from 6 or 7am to 4 or 5 pm. It
3. is a long time. - - - Here you can have many days off during the week - -
4. - or the day can be very short because one parent is on the morning
5. shift and the other one on the evening - - the day in care might go from
6. 11am to 3pm.

Extract 7

1. **Johanna:** Well, at least the children are somehow closer to me. - - -
2. Maybe because you are with them. With many children you spend many
3. hours together. Almost every day and then it is kind of different, when it
4. is also in the evening time and night which is a more sensitive time for a
5. small child anyway.

Extract 8

1. **Liisa:** And I do seriously believe that it is good for children also to be
2. here in the evening or during the night because in the evening not so
3. many children are attending the centre. So there is a possibility for
4. individual attention and to see the individual needs of a child on that 5.
- day and be genuinely present with the particular child.

In extracts 6–8, flexibly scheduled ECEC is justified through comparing it favourably with the regular day care setting. In extract 6, the educator explicitly criticizes how children may spend a “long time” (line 3) in regular day care settings and in extract 7 the use of the comparative “closer” (line 1) implies that in regular day care the child-adult relationship is more formal. Other reasons for the superiority of flexibly scheduled ECEC over regular day

care mentioned in extract 8 are more individual attention (line 4) and, at times, smaller groups of children (lines 2–3). Thus, in this account, special care times like evenings and nights are constructed as possibilities for, rather than barriers to, good quality ECEC.

In this account, the educators positioned themselves as advocates of flexibly scheduled ECEC and the children as privileged. At the same time, this type of account reinforces a familistic discourse by implicitly emphasising the primary nature of parental childcare and its characteristics. Thus, flexibly scheduled ECEC, at its best, means that children spend less overall time in institutional care but relatively more time in care in small groups and in greater proximity to an educator than in regular day care settings. This account ignores the pedagogical discourse, which highlights the importance of pedagogical aims, activities and assessment in ECEC.

## *Discussion*

This paper reports on our study of accounts on flexibly scheduled ECEC given by Finnish educators in research interviews. We identified four types of accounts differing in their construction of, and attributions of responsibility for, children's well-being in flexibly scheduled ECEC. The four types of accounts were labelled excusing, compensating, normalising and justifying. Both children and educators were uniquely positioned in each type of account. As accounts and discourses have consequences for actions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), revealing the (in)visible discourses drawn on by educators, when talking about flexibly scheduled ECEC has great importance for understanding and developing care practices.

The results show that educators working in flexibly scheduled ECEC either produced, reinforced or resisted the idea that a gap exists between the ideal of flexibly scheduled ECEC as supporting children's well-being and the reality of its provision. Talk about concern was strong in the excusing and compensating accounts. In the excusing accounts, the narrated concern for children's wellbeing led the educators to distance themselves from their work, possibly hampering their commitment to it. It also distanced the educators from the demands of working life; for example, the fact that flexibly scheduled ECEC enabled women to realise their right to work was not mentioned. Also the economical view on providing costly childcare during non-standard hours was not mentioned in educators talk. Alternatively, in the compensating accounts the concern about children's well-being was constructed as laying the foundation for the vocation of educator and commitment to pedagogical practices. By drawing on the professional discourse in the compensating account, the educators positioned themselves as good workers, whose expertise is key in supporting children's well-being in the 24/7 economy.

Common to the normalising and justifying accounts was that no mention was made of the 24/7 economy as a threat to children's well-being. Underlying these two types of accounts, however, was the caring and familistic discourse. This meant that the more time children could spend in home-like activities in institutional care or at home, the better. These types of accounts might also arise from the need to defend oneself against current imagined or previously experienced criticism of the 24/7 society and institutional childcare (Taylor and Littleton, 2006: 24). Thus, these accounts may serve as rhetorical work (Billig, 1987), countering a criticism that is recognized but not supported.

In the justifying accounts, flexibly scheduled ECEC was constructed as superior to regular day care. Unlike in the compensating account, this was not a result of the

educators' personal commitment to work, but followed from the characteristics of flexibly scheduled ECEC. What is noteworthy is that this account drew strongly on the familistic discourse, i.e., it emphasised the importance of a homely atmosphere and close and stable dyadic relationships between children and educator (see Vincent and Ball, 2006: 29). In the justifying account, the implicit potential risk to children's well-being would be spending too many hours in institutional childcare. To summarise, although the Finnish childcare system can be regarded as an example of institutionalisation, the educators seemed to share the same assumption, such as children's need for intimacy, protection and family time (Ifland, 2013: 237), typically used when defending home care. Interestingly, elements of pedagogical discourse, such as talk about the benefits of teaching and education given by qualified childcare educators (Ifland, 2013: 237) and the benefits from acting in social peer groups, were wholly absent from their accounts. This might be due to the timing of care, as organized activities are typically associated with day-time care whereas evenings and nights are associated more with caring practices. These hidden and contradictory discourses would be an interesting topic for future research.

The main limitation of this study is that the semi-structured interview method guided the discussion between the interviewer and interviewees potentially limiting variation in the data content. Future research adopting an ethnographic approach might produce different kinds of information on educators' constructions of their work. In addition, studying children's and parents' perceptions on the topic would also supplement the picture of the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC provision gained here.

The present study initiates research on a hitherto neglected topic, variation in educators' talk about what is in the child's best interests in relation to the provision of flexibly scheduled childcare. The information provided by the different accounts, including

the varying positioning of both educators and children, offers a frame for both understanding and analysing contemporary discourses on the provision of flexibly scheduled ECEC along with its challenges and possibilities. In addition, producing accounts and talking about children and childhoods finds its way into how we act towards these (Moss and Petrie, 2002: 99). It would also be important to respect parent's choices (or their necessity) to work non-standard hours. It seems that child outcomes, such as socioemotional well-being, and family outcomes, such as economic stability, weigh in the balance when talking about ECEC, especially during non-standard hours. A good working partnership between parents and the care provider is key in reconciling these two needs (Colander 2016). It is necessary to understand the employment policy role of ECEC services as well the pedagogical role and the discourse of children's well-being in this context. Thus, how to enable all children to benefit from good-quality early childhood education and care, however it is timed, should be the main question when talking about flexibly scheduled ECEC.

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