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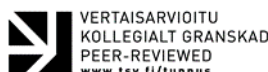
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# Relational approach to infant–teacher lap interactions during the transition from home to early childhood education and care

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**ABSTRACT:** The transition from home care to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a period of intense change and development in young children's socio-spatial worlds. This article focuses on infant–teacher lap interactions during this transition period. This investigation applies a relational approach to the study of infant–teacher lap interactions. In doing so, it highlights the inherently social and contextual nature of interaction. From a relational perspective, actors, context, and situation are seen as constitutive of each other, and their interrelationality is considered central to the emergence of interactions. The data, regarding infants' first months attending ECEC in Finland, is composed of teachers' interviews and participant observations in the form of videos and field notes. The results illustrate infant–teacher lap interactions as constructed in the interplay among actors, context, and situation. This research advances an understanding of transitions as relational processes that develop through time and are constructed within a network of temporal, agentic, contextual, and situational aspects.

**Keywords:** *Infants, educational transitions, relational ontology, video data*

## Introduction

We are faced with the incorporation into formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) of increasingly younger children (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; OECD, 2018). In Finland, the percentage of children under three years of age who are enrolled in ECEC is steadily growing (Finnish institute for Health and Welfare, 2020). The first months of attendance in a new educational setting are a time of change and intense development in a child's socio-spatial world (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014). During the transition from home to ECEC, infants encounter unknown adults, in unknown spaces, as well as the novelties of group care, and the center's routines and activities. Positive interactions with others are key for infants' well-being in ECEC (Dalli & Buchanan, 2011). During infants' transitions, one-on-one interactions with teachers have been found to promote secure attachment (Jung, 2011; Klette & Killén, 2019; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). Nonetheless, during transitions, having positive interactions may be challenging for children with greater levels of distress and/or social inhibition (Bernard et al., 2015; Suhonen et al., 2018). Being in the teacher's lap may offer opportunities for positive interactions that support the infants' transition process. The teachers' lap has been shown to be a place of physical proximity, safety, affection, bonding, attention, and emotional comfort for young children in ECEC (Hännikäinen, 2015). Being on the teacher's lap has been observed to include a number of sensitive, loving, and caring practices through which teachers could promote children's learning, development, and well-being (Hännikäinen, 2015).

The aim of this article is to explore infant-teacher lap interactions from a relational perspective. This work illustrates how infant-teacher lap interactions are constructed within the context of the infants' first transition to ECEC. In this research, the term "teacher" refers both to teachers who hold a bachelors' degree from a university or a degree from a university of applied sciences (social pedagogue), and child caregivers with a vocational (upper secondary level) qualification in social welfare and healthcare (see Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). The data, regarding infants' first seven months attending ECEC, is composed of teachers' interviews and participant observations in the form of videos and field notes. The research draws from relational ontology (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013; Dépelteau, 2018; Emirbayer, 1997; Tierney & Kolluri, 2020) and interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). This investigation advances an understanding of the transition period as a relational process that develops through time and is constructed within a network of temporal, agentic, contextual, and situational aspects.

## Previous research on transitions in early childhood education and care

Educational transitions are defined in a multiplicity of ways. In this work, transition is considered a process involving a person's change from one educational context to another (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). The transition from home to ECEC is most children's first educational transition; however, it can take place when children are very young or nearly school age. In Finland, ECEC is a service for children 0 to 6 years of age, and it is only mandatory for 6-year-olds. Nonetheless, in 2019, 69% of all 2-year-olds and 37% of all 1-year-olds attended ECEC in Finland (Finnish institute for Health and Welfare, 2020). Finland offers 9 to 10 months of parental leave, therefore children under one are rarely enrolled in formal ECEC. This research focuses on ECEC services organized in public and private ECEC centers, operated by multiprofessional teams of trained professionals (see Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018).

Unlike the transition to primary school and beyond (Dalli & Buchanan, 2011; Degotardi & Pearson, 2014; Harrison & Sumsion, 2014), transitions to and within ECEC have received less attention. Literature addressing the transition from home to ECEC is mostly concerned with young children's well-being, reactions to out-of-home care, and adaptation to the new setting, with special focus on attachment and separation (Dalli, 2003; Datler et al., 2010; Datler et al., 2012; Klette & Killén, 2019; Nystad et al., 2021). In Finland, hardly any studies have addressed infants' first months in ECEC. Studies that have addressed this period, such as that of Suhonen et al. (2018), studied Finnish infants under one and a half years of age within the ECEC and home environments. They collected their data after three to four months from the infants' first day of attendance, to give time for what they called the adjustment period. Their delay on collecting the data indicates that, during the first months of attendance, young children's stress and cortisol levels may be affected.

According to Fabian and Dunlop (2007), the transition is a social process, which requires children to master their participation in the ECEC environment. This includes learning to cope and to behave within a new culture, place, people, roles, rules, and identity. In educational settings, children are expected to behave in a certain way and to understand the rules, without having to be given instructions (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Recent studies in the context of infant-toddler education have investigated the experiences of infants and toddlers during transitory moments between activities in ECEC (Ridgway et al., 2016; Quinones et al., 2021; Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2016). These studies emphasize that transitions are moments of change marked by learning and development (Quinones et al., 2021), which offer rich pedagogical opportunities (Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2016).

## **Role of infant–teacher lap interactions during the transition from home to ECEC**

During the first months of attendance, infants may have heightened needs for care and intimacy (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014). It has been shown that, during the transition from home to ECEC, teachers play a key role in facilitating the child's entrance into the new setting. Research suggests that a secure relationship with a teacher provides young children with the security needed to interact with others (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014). In the field of infants' ECEC transitions, one-on-one interactions with teachers have been found to support secure attachment (Jung, 2011; Klette & Killén, 2019; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). According to Hännikäinen's (2015) empirical lap research within a Finnish ECEC center, the teacher's lap serves as a place of physical proximity, safety, affection, bonding, attention, and emotional comfort. Hännikäinen identified the teachers' physical positions—being close to the children, often sitting on the floor or a couch—as key in enabling the lap interactions. The physical proximity characteristic of lap interactions enables attunement to infants' initiatives and emotional states, which has been linked to high-quality infant–teacher interactions (Jamison et al., 2014; White & Redder, 2015). Attuned responsive caregiving that stimulates dialogue and offers reciprocity of interaction promotes emotional and cognitive development in young children (Dalli & Buchanan, 2011; Marwick, 2017). Datler et al. (2012) found that, during the transition from home to ECEC, dynamic interaction (reciprocal exchanges) with teachers fostered more explorative interest and higher positive mood. Moreover, the teacher's physical proximity has been identified as having a positive impact on infant–teacher interactions as well as supporting infant–peer interactions and individual exploration (White & Redder, 2015). Additionally, the teacher's physical contact—in particular, reciprocal interpersonal touch—is considered the foundation of affective interpersonal intimacy, fostering well-being, attachment, and participation (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018).

## **A relational approach to lap interactions and transitions**

Joas (1996) suggests that actions emerge in the interplay between the situation and the person's response to the situation. Joas' (1996) theory emphasizes that both the situation and the person's response to the situation are inherently social and contextual, since they are tightly bound to preexisting structures—such as social norms, physical affordances, and historical time—and to situated conditions, such as implementation of norms, use of affordances, timing, and actors' responses. In these terms, infant–teacher lap interactions

are creative dynamic processes that are inseparable from the socially and contextually bound situations within which they emerge. In line with this, in his *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology*, Emirbayer (1997) implies that interacting is a process embedded in the here and now. As Emirbayer (1997) poses it, the “*relations between terms or units [are] preeminently dynamic in nature [...] rather than static ties among inert substances*” (p. 287). With this approach, he seeks to emphasize that entities (actors) gain their meaning and identity within relations, proposing that agency is “*inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of situations, especially from the problematic features of those situations*” (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 294). This advances the understanding that interacting is an inherently social and situational process in which the agentic possibilities emerge from interactions within the situation itself (Dépelteau, 2018). Accordingly, infant–teacher interactions, previously understood as momentary exchanges between persons (Jung, 2011; Klette & Killén, 2019; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012), and in this case, lap interactions, unfold over time as transition occurs and are inseparable from the transition process.

Previous research in the field of infant–toddler education has investigated children’s experiences during transitory moments, suggesting that transition processes are inherently social and relational (Ridgway et al., 2016; Quinones et al., 2021; Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2016). Relational sociology suggests that communities, such as those of ECEC, are built through the interactions and relations of their inhabitants (Dépelteau, 2018). Moreover, it has been shown that children’s relations within the ECEC environment are bound to ECEC practices and structure (Raittila & Vuorisalo, 2021). Therefore, educational transitions, such as the first transition from home to ECEC, are constructed through individuals’ interactions and relations, which are embedded in a network of political, social, economic, material, and cultural constraints and discourses about the best interest of the child (Tirri & Husu, 2002) and infants’ care and education (Dalli & Buchanan, 2011), materialized in the local ECEC contexts, discourses, and practices (Rutanen, 2014). Accordingly, to better understand infants’ lap interactions during the transition, this research explores the interrelation between the ECEC context, lap interactions, and transitions in constructing infant–teacher lap interactions and infants’ transition processes.

## The present study

The purpose of the present study is to explore infant–teacher lap interactions from a relational perspective. The investigation was guided by the following research question: “How are infant–teacher lap interactions constructed within the context of infants’ first transition to ECEC?” The data have been collected with multiple qualitative methods

longitudinally by the Trace in ECEC -project research team (Rutanen et al., 2019). The project was pre-reviewed by the ethics committee of University of Jyväskylä. All adults are named as “teacher,” and children’s names are pseudonyms. Written informed consent was obtained from the teachers and legal guardians of the children who participated in this study. Children’s approval was negotiated in situ: the observers withdrew from the situation if it felt too invasive or lacking children’s consent (see Rutanen et al., 2018; Rutanen et al., 2021). The Trace in ECEC -project was further elaborated as the Finnish subproject building on a larger study across six countries; ISSEET (Rutanen et al., 2016). The Trace in ECEC -project is following five child cases during multiple ECEC transitions, over a period of 5 years. The participant children were 10 to 18 months old at the time of starting attendance.

The present study draws on data from all five cases, and in particular on field notes and video observations regarding unstructured playtime moments within the ECEC setting, as well as on teachers’ interviews. The data was collected during 7 observation days (per case) conducted at the ECEC centers, over a period of 7 months, for a total of 34 observation days. The observations took place on the first day the child attended the center without the parents, one week after the first day, and on the first, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 7th months of attendance. The video data is composed of video episodes 1 to 15 minutes in length. Each observation day includes 30 minutes to 2 hours’ worth of video episodes and semi-structured field notes covering the full day. The field notes are short explanations describing the child and physically proximal actions of others and the environment on a minute-by-minute basis. Furthermore, the analysis draws from teachers’ interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted one week before the child’s first day, as well as 4 and 7 months after the first day.

## Analysis

Relational ontology assumes situational agency, denying the boundaries between agent and context (Emirbayer, 1997). In this research, it is assumed that, when observing interactions between individuals, we are indeed seeing the interplay between actors and context in action. An *Interaction analysis* approach (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) was employed to advance this view methodologically. *Interaction analysis* proposes that, once a researcher has identified in the data multiple episodes of the interaction to be studied, he/she ought to identify other aspects that are consistently present within the interactional situations (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). In this way, *Interaction analysis* (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) offers practical tools for systematically accounting for the role situation and context played on the emergence of interaction. In this investigation, the analysis started by identifying narrow, observable interactional exchanges between



infant and teacher, followed by an exploration of the situations in which these exchanges took place, and finally of broader temporal and contextual aspects.

The analysis began by scrutinizing the video-recorded data, 30 hours and 20 minutes in total, focusing on the infants' interactions in general. Infant-teacher lap interactions were selected for in-depth analysis, as these happened within a multiplicity of situations, were present in all the study cases, were diverse, and changed over time. The lap is understood as a place of close proximity; the term "lap" is employed as referring to when a teacher is holding a child, whether it is in the arms while standing, holding the child close to the body facing inwards or outwards, or when having the child seated on one's knees or lap, facing inwards or outwards. The lap interactions identified from data were separated into unstructured playtime lap interactions and routine moments' lap interactions. The routine moments—such as arrival, lunch, toilet, going to sleep, and departure—were put aside. The analysis was narrowed down to lap interactions happening during the free-flowing moments of unstructured playtime. Every lap interaction found from field notes and videos regarding unstructured playtime was collected, resulting in a list of briefly described lap interactions, such as "*On teacher's lap, transferring Venla to the hall side to play.*" The diverse lap interactions were scrutinized for commonalities and differences and divided into four categories: 1. teacher taking the child to the lap, 2. crying that leads to lap, 3. child asking for lap, and 4. child positioning himself/herself on the lap (see Table 1, *Lap interactions* for descriptions). Next, the lap interactions from within each category were organized into subcategories according to what was happening beside the lap itself (see Table 1, *Lap situations*). In line with this investigation's ontological approach, situations are considered to offer temporarily embedded and socially constructed (both by the researcher and the interacting persons) contextual information. The interplay of lap interactions and situations guided the data interpretations. In Table 1, the lap interactions and situations have been listed and described.

The analysis continued by exploring each subgroup of lap interactions looking at other contextual aspects, such as age of the child, how long the child had attended the center, physical positions of the children and the teachers, age composition of the peer group, and the whole day as context (timetable, activities, child's mood, etc.). These explorations provided a deeper understanding of the lap in relation to transitions, the ECEC context, and infants. After this, teachers' interviews were scrutinized. Aspects such as why or why not they take children to the lap, what do they consider important about the lap when working with young children, and how is the lap connected to transitions, were extracted. Finally, in light of all the gathered insights about and around lap interactions, the lap interactions and related situations were divided in three groups: 1. first day of attendance during infants' transition from home to ECEC, 2. care during infants' first months of attendance, and 3. education during infants' first months of attendance (see Table 1).



These refer to situated contexts, encompassing temporal and contextual aspects, in which the studied lap interactions emerged. Care and education are not separated ECEC practices; however, the lap interactions that promoted learning are linked to the educational side of ECEC, while the lap interactions that supported providing care are linked to its care side.

TABLE 1 Categories and descriptions

<i>SITUATED CONTEXTS FOR LAP INTERACTIONS</i>	<i>LAP INTERACTIONS AND *LAP SITUATIONS</i>	<i>DESCRIPTION OF LAP INTERACTIONS</i>
	<b>Teacher taking the child to the lap</b>	Instances in which the teacher takes the initiative of taking the child to the lap although the child did not cry, ask, or approach the teacher.
First day of attendance during infants' transition from home to ECEC	*Transition	
Care during infants' first months of attendance	*Safety/Protecting; Controlling; Helping; Carrying; Caring	
	<b>Crying that leads to lap</b>	The child starts to cry and a teacher takes the child to the lap while the child cries. Instances in which the child cries but is not taken to the lap are not included.
	*Comforting	
	<b>Child asking for lap</b>	The child approaches a teacher and shows his/her wish to be taken to the lap. Instances in which the child asks but is not taken are also included.
	*Comfort; Physical proximity; Attention	
	<b>Child positioning him/herself on the lap</b>	The child goes to sit on the teacher's lap without having to ask or show his/her wish to be taken to the lap.
	*Physical proximity	
Education during infants' first months of attendance	*Play; Shared attention	

## Results

The studied infant–teacher lap interactions are embedded within the context of ECEC, the infants' first months of attendance, and unstructured playtime; they are also embedded within situated conditions (here and now), and furthermore they encompass larger social, temporal, agentic, and situational aspects. To make sense of the multiplicity of aspects linked to the emergence of the studied lap interactions, they have been organized within three situated contexts that are temporally and situationally distinct. These situated contexts highlight key contextual aspects that are seen as promoting or constraining the

emergence of certain types of lap interactions. In the following section, situated contexts and their embedded situations and lap interactions are discussed.

### **First day of attendance during infants' transition from home to ECEC**

During the first day's playtime, teachers stayed physically close and gave the newcomer infants individualized attention. In all of this study's cases, the teacher taking and keeping the infant on the lap during the first day's playtime looked different than on later days. Therefore, the first day's lap interactions were interpreted to support the transition. Infants were taken by the teacher to the lap even if the child did not show signs of distress, and they were kept on the lap for prolonged moments. The teacher observed the child, verbalized their joint activity with and for the child, and engaged pro-actively in playful and shared attention activities.

**Example 1. Jani is still a baby.** During his first day, 10-month-old Jani spent most of the time on the teacher's lap. Jani was not crying and he seemed interested in exploring; however, he was kept on the lap. On the pre-first day interview, the teacher said: *"On the same day [that Jani starts], three more children are actually starting, but they're all a little older. I think that the lap is reserved for Jani. It may be a relief for myself; he is still a baby."*

Jani's example highlights how the first day of attendance constitutes a distinctive context for infant-teacher lap interactions. The lap is given a distinctive value, which is linked to the ways teachers see young children's needs during their first day. In the example, although Jani was interested in exploring the new setting, and—as it was observed in later days—he would have been capable of doing so, he spent most of his first day on the teacher's lap. This meant that the other newcomers in Jani's center did not have the same access to the lap. The peer group composition (not having any other new "babies," and Jani being younger than the other newcomers) played a central role in the emerged lap interaction.

### **Care during infants' first months of attendance**

Supporting children's needs and well-being as well as advancing practices that promote the best interest of the child are central aspects of the Finnish ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018). In the data regarding unstructured playtime, four different types of lap interactions were identified, in which the lap supported the child's immediate needs: 1. teacher taking the child to the lap, 2. crying that leads to lap, 3. child asking for lap, and 4. child seated on teacher's lap. These lap interactions happened within diverse situations. Overall, the laps in the context of care during playtime happened less over time. In general, as the months passed, the infants became more autonomous, more secure, focused more on playing, exploring, and on peers instead of teachers, and learned

to access and navigate resources in the ECEC setting. Nevertheless, different laps for care changed in different ways through the transition process. In the following subsections, each type of lap interaction and the different situations within which they were observed are explained.

### ***Teacher taking the child to the lap***

During playtime, teachers took the child to the lap in situations in which the lap supported care. In particular, the following common situations were observed. Situations in which the lap supported safety or protection, e.g., “[...] *the teacher takes Ella to the lap when bigger children try to crash her.*” Situations in which the lap helped control the child, e.g., “*The teacher takes Jani to the lap and stops him from going to another room.*” Situations in which it enabled physical and/or emotional support, e.g., “*Jani wants to climb to the slide. The teacher takes him on the lap and puts him on the slide.*” Situations in which it supported carrying, e.g., “*On the teacher’s lap, transferring Venla to the hall side to play.*” Finally, situations in which it facilitated physically approaching the child, e.g., “*The teacher takes Venla to the lap and checks her diaper.*”

Within these situations, the lap interactions, characterized by the teacher approaching the child and taking him/her to the lap, seem to be linked to the first months of attendance, i.e., to the infants’ transition. These are linked to aspects such as the age of the child, children not knowing where to go, and needing assistance within the setting. Overall, these laps for care diminished as the months passed. Over time, children learned to navigate many of these situations independently. Moreover, they grew and became more autonomous.

### ***Crying that leads to lap***

Within crying situations, lap interactions have been interpreted to support comforting and calming the child. In the interviews, teachers reported that the lap is the most efficient tool for calming and preventing crying, although they point out that it does not always work. During infants’ first months of attendance, during playtime, teachers took the children to the lap when crying almost on every occasion. For example: “*Peer hugs and tries to lift Ella. Ella cries. The teacher takes her to the lap*”; “*Viola cries when she realizes/remembers that mum has left. The teacher takes her to the lap.*” According to teachers’ interviews, the situations in which an infant or toddler cries and he/she is not taken to the lap are linked to availability. For example, in relation to what is the teacher doing/has to do at the moment, how many teachers are present, as well as who and how many other children need the lap at the same time. This indicates that crying situations and lap interactions most often go hand in hand, as teachers will always take the child to

the lap if they can. In line with previous research (White et al., 2020), in the data, more crying was observed during infants' first days of attendance; only some of the children cried during the following months. Overall, after four months of attendance, there were seldom occurrences of crying during playtime. Accordingly, the laps for care to address crying diminished over time.

### ***Child asking for lap***

To get to the lap when teachers are standing or busy, children need to ask for it. In this regard, it was observed that children raise their hands, get closer to the teacher, and use their voices to get teachers' attention. The children showed wanting to be taken to the lap within a multiplicity of situations. Three common types of situations in which the children were taken to the lap when asking were identified: situations in which the lap interaction led to comfort, e.g., "[Ella] gets nervous, wants a lap", situations in which the lap interaction provided physical proximity, and situations in which the lap interaction led to shared attention. The observed situations were, nevertheless, not exclusive of each other; for example, in some situations the lap interaction led to comfort and physical proximity or to shared attention and comfort. Next, an example in which the child is asking for a lap after two months of attendance is discussed.

**Example 2. Asking for a lap during outdoor playtime.** Viola has attended the center for two months. In this outdoor playtime episode from a video, the teacher is actively taking care of a group of six children including Viola. The teacher is talking to the children and giving toys to play with in the sand. Viola approaches the teacher and lifts her hands while looking at the teacher's face. The teacher, who is standing, picks Viola up. Viola points at something; the teacher comments on it. Viola engages with the teacher's response and keeps pointing. The teacher does not take Viola toward where she is pointing; they stay where they are, near all the other children. After that, they communicate very little; the teacher keeps Viola in her arms but focuses on the other children. After one whole minute, the teacher puts Viola down; Viola shakes her legs in negation, but the teacher tells her something and the child stays on the ground. Almost immediately, Viola follows the teacher and asks for a lap again. This time, the teacher does not pick her up. She just talks her out of it and continues helping others. Viola keeps following her around and asks for a lap another three times. The third time, the teacher picks her up and almost immediately puts her down. The teacher proposes to Viola to play ball with a peer. The teacher assists the children with the game of ball, showing them how to take turns and showing Viola how to kick the ball toward her peer. Viola seems interested and engaged in the game, but as soon as the teacher steps away, Viola follows her and asks for a lap again. The teacher insists that she goes to play.

In this example, the lap interaction seems to support physical proximity and shared attention. The child seems content when in the lap, even if they are not talking, and she also seems happy when the teacher pays attention to her, even if she is not in the lap. However, when the teacher turns her attention to something else, she wants the lap again.

In Viola's case, a gradual change in this type of lap interactions was observed. In the example, Viola had attended the setting for two months. At two months of attendance, Viola was 20 months old. As Viola continued asking for a lap in situations in which it supported physical proximity and attention, teachers started to put her down after shorter moments and to reply to Viola asking for a lap with different answers but not always taking her to the lap. Within such contextual and situational premises, taking the child to the lap may not be seen as supporting the child's well-being and transition process. The example illustrates other contextual and relational aspects that were also observed to be important, such as the teacher's physical position (standing) and lack of availability, as the other children were also in her care. Furthermore, in the interviews, teachers discussed that children seem to ask more to be taken to the lap during outdoor playtime in winter. For children who are learning to walk, the outdoor winter terrain may pose additional challenges. Thus, the time of year and how it interacts with children's transition may impact the emergence of this type of lap interaction during outdoor play. Overall, in the data, children showed less desire to be taken to the lap as the months passed. Almost no occurrences were observed at 4 and 7 months of attendance.

### ***Child seated on teacher's lap***

During playtime, teachers sitting low, on the floor or a sofa, near the children, creates opportunities for children to position themselves on the lap. These types of lap interactions were observed within situations in which the lap interaction promoted physical proximity or "battery charging," for example: *"Venla sits on the teacher's lap for a while, with a toy in her hand. Follows the hustle and bustle of the other children [...] Venla sits on the teacher's lap and looks [into the room]."* These lap interactions are different from the previous ones, in which the child had to show that he/she wanted a lap, because in a way, here, the lap is made available to the child before he/she positions himself/herself on it. There was not a clear pattern on how much or how long during the transition the children sat on the lap for "charging their batteries." Some children did not sit on the lap for "battery charging," others did it less over time, and others did it more over time. These lap interactions are characterized by the lack of dialogical exchanges and the emphasis on physical proximity. In the next section, lap interactions that support dialogical exchange will be discussed. In the following example, a situation from a video episode, in which the lap interaction supports Viola's physical proximity, is discussed.

**Example 3. Viola wants too much lap.** Viola has attended the setting for two months. In this playtime episode, Viola goes and sits on the lap of the teacher, who is seated on the floor. Viola sits facing the teacher and focusing her attention on her, without playing or taking toys. They mostly sit in silence. After a while, the teacher stands Viola next to her. She keeps her arm around Viola and tries to create a group conversation involving a peer who is close by. Viola goes back to sit on the lap. This

continues: the teacher stands Viola next to her on several occasions and Viola goes back to sit on the lap every time. Viola sits on the lap altogether for 14 minutes.

This example illustrates how agents' choices and preferences are interpreted within the situation and the broader context. Overall, children's access to this type of care related lap may be denied if it is not seen to support the child's well-being and transition process. According to the interviews, the teachers working with Viola did not have a unified agreement on what was the best way to deal with Viola's way of being on the lap. Overall, Viola's teachers often tried to get her to explore and play, instead of staying for long periods of time on the lap. As in example 2, Viola having attended the center for two months and being 20 months old played an important role in the way the lap interaction developed. In this example, the teacher was available, as she did not go anywhere in the 20-minute episode, and she was only caring for Viola and one other peer. Moreover, she was seated, which enabled the lap interactions to last for long moments. Nonetheless, she tried to encourage Viola to play and engage in peer interaction.

### **Education during infants' first months of attendance**

According to its steering document, the Finnish ECEC is play-based; learning is fostered through shared attention and dialogical exchanges during play and within other daily activities (EDUFI, 2018). The following lap interactions have been interpreted to be embedded in the context of education for infants-toddlers, as dialogical exchange and playful shared attention are supported. These lap interactions happened when teachers were sitting low near the children and were available. Teachers were not busy and they did not necessarily approach the children. Children were the ones who positioned themselves on the lap. On some occasions, children just positioned themselves on the lap, on others they brought something to show or share. For example, *"Ella puts a dummy on the teacher's lap, the teacher sings, Ella talks. On the floor, looking at a toy car with the teacher. On the teacher's lap, calm."*

Teachers' positions, sitting near the children and being available, played a key role in the emergence of this type of lap interaction. Differences among centers were identified from data, as for where and how (available or busy) the teachers were during unstructured playtime. In example 4, one of the centers is described in this regard.

**Example 4. Is it the same?** In Leo's center, during unstructured playtime, the children normally played independently and among themselves and teachers were nearby. However, the teachers seemed busy. In the videos, they are constantly coming and going: preparing, tidying, dressing up children, washing hands, changing diapers, etc. In the few situations in which a teacher was observed sitting near the children, just hanging out, during unstructured playtime, the person was a student or a trainee. Nevertheless, very often in the mornings, a teacher sat with all the children and led a group play activity that resembled unstructured playtime. During those moments,



some children positioned themselves on the teacher's lap; however, the lap interactions promoted physical proximity as no shared attention or dialogical exchange happened.

This example reflects on the nature of unstructured playtime, as in the example it seemed that the play activity being guided, and in a group, constrained children's possibilities for bringing the play into the lap. These lap interactions in which the teacher's lap is available and the child access that lap were the main type of lap interaction that supported dialogical exchange and playful shared attention in the data. Within these situations, children had full access to teachers' laps, meaning that teachers did not limit the length of the lap interactions or remove the children from their laps. Moreover, the relaxed and flexible nature of the lap interactions seemed to be key in enabling children to bring their own play and interests into the lap. Nevertheless, among the children who attended centers in which teachers were available, sitting near the children during unstructured playtime, individual differences were observed. Overall, during the transition, this type of lap interaction increased over time while all the others diminished.

## Discussion

This article takes lap interactions as a window into infants' first transition to the ECEC process. With this selected focus, it has illustrated the construction of infants' lap interactions during the transition, in the ECEC context, from a relational perspective. Relational sociology advocates for a relational understanding of (inter)action, highlighting the inherent sociality of actors (Dépelteau, 2018). Relational thinking provides educational researchers with tools to overcome the limitations of a dichotomized view of context and agent in the study of social interaction (Kalamkarian et al., 2020). By re-thinking infant-toddler transitions and lap interactions relationally, this study has shed light on some relational aspects involved in the construction of infant-teacher lap interactions; for instance, children's positions within the group, multiple others being present, access to the lap, material constraints, and physical positions.

This paper argues that the transition constructs the infant-teacher lap interactions, and the lap interactions construct the transition. To do so, the situated contexts of infant-teacher lap interaction have been discussed, proposing a procedural and situated understanding of context. These situated contexts are 1. the infants' first day of attendance during the transition from home to ECEC, 2. the context of care during the infants' first month of attendance, and 3. the context of education during the infants' first month of attendance. Within the infants' first day of attendance, during unstructured playtime, situations were observed in which the lap interactions supported the transition



itself. Similarly, “rites of passage” are actions or ceremonies that support the person’s entrance into a new setting. As Fabian (2002) describes it, the first day’s lap interactions are similar to what Fabian calls rites of transition, whose main aim is to cushion the infant’s entrance into the new setting. With the first day’s lap interactions, the liminal space between the home care and the ECEC care is acknowledged and softened by providing the child with individualized attention and physical proximity.

After the first day, situations in which the lap interactions supported the child’s immediate needs were observed. These lap interactions were situated within a context of care as part of the transition. The teacher’s lap has been described as a place of well-being for young children (Hännikäinen, 2015) that provides children emotional comfort. According to this research’s results, it can potentially support infant–teacher physical proximity and affect, which are positively related to children’s learning and development (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Dalli & Buchanan, 2011; White & Redder, 2017). However, during the transition, when faced with a child who prefers to stay on the lap for long periods of time, in a fashion that seems to conflict with the child’s play, independence, and overall adaptation to group care, teachers seem to gently push the child to explore and interact with peers. In line with this, previous research suggests that, during transitions, children’s assimilation to the new setting’s culture is an important goal (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Accordingly, the care related laps can be considered as a rite of incorporation (Fabian, 2002), the aim of which is to support the child’s acquisition of the new setting’s culture.

Finally, after the first day, situations in which the lap interactions promoted playful shared attention and dialogical exchanges were observed. These lap interactions were situated within a context of education during the transition. According to research, the teacher’s lap is an important place for learning (Hännikäinen, 2015). During the first months of attendance, the education related laps offered opportunities for proximity, attunement, and one-on-one interactions that have been identified to foster secure attachment and infant–teacher intimacy necessary for infants’ transition (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Jung, 2011; Klette & Killén, 2019; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). Overall, the results indicate that lap interactions are inseparable from the established aims of ECEC, i.e., care and education (EDUFI, 2018) as well as the aims set for infants’ transition period (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

The generalizability of the results is limited by the small size of the sample. Moreover, it is understood that each day in ECEC is different and, since not all days were observed, only some aspects of the transition are present in the data. Furthermore, merely unstructured playtime lap interactions were considered. Another important aspect is that the data was not collected focusing exclusively on the lap interactions; however, this has

allowed exploring the lap within its broader context. Finally, this research has focused on infants during their first transition to ECEC at the age of 10–18 months; it is expected that studying lap interactions focusing on older children who start ECEC for the first time would produce different results.

Further studies should take into account the goals and organization of the ECEC context when trying to understand children's social interactions within the ECEC environment. If, as Emirbayer (1997) suggests, persons are inseparable from the context in which they are embedded, it would be interesting to find ways to improve teacher–child interactions by enhancing the goals and qualities of the ECEC environment, for instance, by assessing contradictions among goals, and between goals and the ECEC's organization, that could be hindering the possibilities for positive interactions.

## Conclusions

This relational investigation of infant–teacher lap interactions proposes that the emergence of lap interactions is inseparable from the context and situation within which they take place. In this way, it suggests that, during infant's first transition from home to ECEC, infant–teacher lap interactions are inseparable from the process of transitioning infants' needs during their first months of attendance, the characteristics of ECEC being group based, educationally and care-oriented, and the teachers' emphasis being on promoting infants' well-being, incorporation into the peer group, and autonomy. This work aimed to illustrate how infant–teacher lap interactions are constructed in the interplay among actors, context, and situations. Thus, this study argues that researchers and teachers may benefit from reflecting on the ways in which infants' transitions, as a context for interaction, are defined. To do so, we propose exploring the roles that time, relations, spaces, physical positions, ECEC's goals, and teachers' views play in the emergence of interactions within the ECEC environment.

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