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**Erja Rautamies**

# The Heart of Collaboration

**Educational Partnership in Early Childhood  
Education as Narrated by Parents of a Child  
Exhibiting Challenging Behaviour**

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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND  
PSYCHOLOGY

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## **Educational Partnership in Early Childhood Education as Narrated by Parents of a Child Exhibiting Challenging Behaviour**

Esitetään Jyväskylän yliopiston kasvatustieteiden ja psykologian tiedekunnan suostumuksella  
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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation research examined the educational partnership in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland by analysing narratives of parents with a child exhibiting challenging behaviour. A child's challenging behaviour is understood from both the developmental and contextual perspectives as the development of skills for regulating emotions and behaviour. This study focused on the two essential relationships in the educational partnership, namely the teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships. The educational partnership is examined from three empirical perspectives: (1) the teacher-child relationship and how the child is positioned in this relationship; (2) parental agency and emotions in the parent-teacher relationship; and (3) parental trust in the educational partnership. These perspectives were addressed in three empirical sub-studies based on semi-structured interviews with 23 parents. Data were analysed using narrative methods. First, the analysis revealed three different teacher-child relationships, namely problematic, neutral and caring. The positioning of the child in these relationships varied from troublesome to unconventional and unique. Second, the analysis indicated that parental agency, including the emotions related to it, in the educational partnership varied from proactive and confrontational to hindered. Worry and fear concerning the child's well-being functioned as triggers for all three types of agency. Third, two key elements of parental trust were identified: the well-being of the child, and supportive parent-teacher relationships and collaboration. Critical elements in creating a trustful educational partnership with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour lay in parents' confidence in their child's well-being in a daycare center, the image of their child mediated to them by the child's teachers, and practices supporting their proactive agency in their child's ECEC.

Keywords: educational partnership, early childhood education and care (ECEC), child's challenging behaviour, self-regulation, narrative research, child position, parental agency, trust

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Rautamies, Erja

Yhteistyön ytimessä: Kasvatusyhteistyö haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kertomana varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa

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Tässä väitöstutkimuksessa tarkastellaan haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kertomuksia kasvatusyhteistyöstä varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa. Lapsen haastavaa käytöstä tarkastellaan kehityksellisestä ja kontekstuaalisesta näkökulmasta lapsen itsesäätelyn ja erityisesti tunteiden ja käyttäytymisen säätelyn taitojen kehittymisenä kontekstissaan. Kasvatusyhteistyö ymmärretään relationaalisena ilmiönä tarkastelemalla lapsen ja opettajan sekä vanhemman ja opettajan välisiä suhteita vanhempien kerronnassa. Tutkimuksen kolmessa osatutkimuksessa tarkastellaan: 1) opettajan ja lapsen välistä suhdetta ja lapsen positiota tässä suhteessa, 2) vanhempien toimijuutta ja siihen liittyviä tunteita sekä 3) vanhempien luottamuksen rakentumista kasvatusyhteistyössä. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu 23 vanhemman puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista. Aineisto analysoitiin narratiivisia menetelmiä hyödyntäen. Vanhempien kerronnasta tunnistettiin problemaattisen, neutraalin ja välittävän opettaja-lapsisuhteen kertomuksia, joissa lapsi positioitui eri tavoin hankalana, erilaisena ja erityisenä lapsena. Vanhempien toimijuus ja siihen liittyvät tunteet vaihtelivat proaktiivisen, vastustavan ja estyneen toimijuuden välillä. Pelko ja huoli liittyen lapsen hyvinvoinnin toteutumiseen päiväkodissa olivat tunnistettavissa kaikkien vanhempien kerronnassa. Tämä tutkimus syventää ymmärrystä kasvatusyhteistyöstä haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kanssa. Tutkimus osoittaa, että luottamuksellisen kasvatusyhteistyön muodostumiselle on merkityksellistä lapsen hyvinvoinnin toteutuminen päiväkodissa, kasvattajien vanhemmille välittämä kuva lapsesta sekä vanhempien proaktiivista toimijuutta tukevat kasvatusyhteistyön toimintakäytännöt.

Avainsanat: kasvatusyhteistyö, varhaiskasvatus, lapsen haastava käytös, itsesäätely, narratiivinen tutkimus, lapsen positio, vanhempien toimijuus, luottamus

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Jyväskylä, May 2022  
*Erja Rautamies*

## **FIGURE**

FIGURE 1	The study design.....	14
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## **TABLES**

TABLE 1	Links between the research questions of the study and the three sub-studies .....	29
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TABLE 2	Overview of the three sub-studies.....	38
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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- Sub-study 1 Rautamies, E., Poikonen, P.-L., Vähäsantanen, K., & Laakso, M.-L. (2016). Teacher-child relationships narrated by parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186(11), 1846-1858.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1135429>
- Sub-study 2 Rautamies, E., Vähäsantanen, K., Poikonen, P.-L., & Laakso, M.-L. (2019). Parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(6), 896-908.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1349763>
- Sub-study 3 Rautamies, E., Vähäsantanen, K., Poikonen, P.-L., & Laakso, M.-L. (2021). Trust in the educational partnership narrated by parents of a child with challenging behaviour. *Early Years*, 41(4), 414-427.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2019.1582475>

The author of this thesis was the first author of each research article. The co-authors commented upon each article and advised the first author. The first author contributed mainly to the study design, data collection, analysis of the data, interpretations, literature reviews and preparation of the manuscripts of each of the sub-studies (I, II, III) comprising this dissertation, and wrote the dissertation summary. Contacts with participants were mainly organised via the Family School Programme and with the help of the first author's main supervisor.

# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	
TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	
FIGURES AND TABLES	
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	
CONTENTS	

1	INTRODUCTION .....	11
2	THE EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS OF A CHALLENGINGLY BEHAVING CHILD IN THE FINNISH ECEC CONTEXT .....	15
2.1	The educational partnership in the Finnish ECEC context .....	16
2.2	Relational basis of the educational partnership .....	18
2.2.1	Quality of teacher-child relationships and positioning of the child .....	18
2.2.2	Parental agency in the parent-teacher relationship .....	19
2.2.3	Parental trust in parent-teacher relationships .....	21
2.3	Challenging behaviour in early childhood .....	22
2.3.1	Developmental and contextual approaches .....	23
2.3.2	Perspective of parents .....	26
2.3.3	Perspective of ECEC teachers and the educational partnership .....	27
3	RESEARCH TASK AND OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS ...	28
4	METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES .....	30
4.1	Ontological and epistemological considerations .....	30
4.2	Participants and data collection .....	32
4.2.1	Participants .....	32
4.2.2	Data collection .....	33
4.3	Data analysis of the sub-studies .....	34
4.4	Guiding ethical principles .....	38
5	RESULTS OF THE SUB-STUDIES .....	41
5.1	Problematic, neutral and caring teacher-child relationships and positioning of the child in these relationships .....	41
5.2	Proactive, confrontational and hindered parental agency with related emotions .....	42
5.3	The critical elements of parental trust in the educational partnership .....	43

6	DISCUSSION .....	45
	6.1. Discussion of main findings and implications.....	45
	6.1.1 The teacher–child relationship and the positioning of children in this relationship.....	45
	6.1.2 Parent–teacher relationships: parental agency and emotions	46
	6.1.3 Parental trust in the parent–teacher relationship .....	47
	6.1.4 Relational educational partnership .....	48
	6.1.5 Practical implications.....	49
	6.2 Evaluation of the study: Strengths and limitations.....	50
	6.2.1 Methodological reflections .....	50
	6.2.2 Trustworthiness of the study.....	52
	6.2.3 Concluding remarks and future directions .....	53
	YHTEENVETO.....	52
	REFERENCES.....	56
	APPENDICES.....	76
	ORIGINAL PAPERS	

# 1 INTRODUCTION

“We were never in tune with each other.” Marika

“The challenging behaviour of the child was the starting point of our collaboration....and I have to say that without that collaboration we would have been lost.”  
Sanna

This study focused on the educational partnership in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. The educational partnership was examined from the perspective of parents whose child exhibited challenging behaviour. In the citation above, Sanna described her experience of the educational partnership as empowering, with positive outcomes for both parent and child. Previous studies have also reported similar positive parental experiences of this partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). However, challenging behaviour by a child also potentially poses the risk of complicating the parent-teacher relationship and collaboration in educational contexts (Broomhead, 2013; Honkasilta et al., 2015; Poikkeus et al., 2002; Rautamies et al., 2011), and hence of stressful and exhausting experiences for parents in the educational partnership, as described by Marika above. Thus, the educational partnership is very important for parents, ECEC teachers and children (Bromer et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2010; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). Both research and the official Finnish ECEC guidelines emphasise the importance of the educational partnership as the basis of pedagogical planning and child support in the ECEC context (Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 2018).

The importance of the educational partnership is specially underlined when teacher-parent collaboration involves the parent(s) of a child who exhibits challenging behaviour, as it can promote positive parent-child interaction and coherent pedagogical practices (Dunlap & Fox, 2009; Kuhn et al., 2017; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Although the educational partnership has been widely studied in both the ECEC and school contexts (e.g., Keen, 2007), studies from the parental perspective are generally rare, particularly in the case of parents whose child manifests challenging behaviour. Listening to parents' experiences and

viewpoints is, however, needed when seeking to establish a successful educational partnership with beneficial child and parental outcomes (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Bromer et al., 2011).

In a child's early years, challenging behaviour refers to impulsive, hyperactive and oppositional behaviour (Bronson, 2000; see Lyons & O'Connor, 2006; Pihlaja et al., 2015). This study approached challenging behaviour from the developmental and contextual perspectives, which were seen as closely interconnected, as stated by Sameroff (2010). The focus from the developmental perspective is on the maturation of self-regulatory processes, i.e., a child's growing competencies to regulate their emotions and behaviour (Bronson, 2000; Hemmeter et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2004; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). The importance of parents and ECEC teachers in the development of children's self-regulatory skills has been emphasised (Erdmann & Hertel, 2019; Kurki et al., 2016). Self-regulatory difficulties are a growing concern of early years professionals, with prevalence rates varying from 10% to 20% in under school-age children (Dunlap & Fox, 2009, p. 50; see Bayat et al., 2010; Määttä et al., 2017; Pihlaja, 2008; Pihlaja et al., 2015; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). While there is clear evidence of the continuity of challenging behaviour in teacher-child conflicts and behavioural maladjustment (Manzicoupoulos, 2005), the educational partnership is crucial in identifying each child's individual needs and in planning and implementing relevant support.

This study adopted the contextual approach towards child behaviour of Lyons and O'Connor (2006), viewing it as influenced by and stimulated in children's relationships in their cultural, social, physical and psychological contexts (Coleman & Webber, 2002, p. 165; Fox et al., 2003). Challenging behaviour in children may also threaten the quality of their social relationships with peers and thus also critically threaten their well-being (Doumen et al., 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Silver et al., 2005). Furthermore, challenging behaviour in children also poses risks for their educational interactions with parents and ECEC teachers, complicating their development and learning (Lajunen & Laakso, 2011; Lange et al., 2005; Peters & Jackson, 2008; Theule et al., 2011).

A relational perspective is inherent in the concept of the educational partnership (Kekkonen, 2012a, pp. 50–54). According to Pianta et al. (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2008), a good-quality relationship between ECEC teachers, parents and children is the foundation of successful ECEC, which in turn is the goal of the educational partnership. From the perspective of parental support, the meaning and quality of this relationship is even more crucial when parents have a challengingly behaving child (Corso, 2007; Kuhn et al., 2017). Challenging behaviour endangers the well-being of parents (Johnstone & Mash, 2001; Theule et al., 2011) and their conceptions of themselves as good parents (Harborne et al., 2004; Lajunen & Laakso, 2011; Lange et al., 2005; Peters & Jackson, 2008). Moreover, parents may need support in learning child-rearing practices that can aid their child in regulating his/her emotions and behaviour.

The main purpose of this study was to attain a more profound understanding of the educational partnership by hearing the voices of parents of

a child exhibiting challenging behaviour with special focus on their diverse experiences of the educational partnership. Examining these parental perspectives was expected to generate new insights and knowledge about the central cornerstones in building good-quality educational relationships and, additionally, in developing educational partnership practices to meet the needs of such children and their parents. Methodologically, this study on parents' experiences of the educational partnership applied a narrative approach (Elliott, 2005; Hänninen, 1999; Heikkinen, 2018; Riessman, 2008).

This study on the educational partnership, covering both teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships in the ECEC context, had three aims. The first aim was to investigate parents' narratives on teacher-child relationships and the positioning of their child in these relationships (cf. Lundan, 2009). While previous studies have shown that challenging behaviour in children threatens the quality of teacher-child relationships (e.g., Buyse et al., 2008), the present research sought to reach a more profound understanding of this phenomenon by analysing the positioning of children in these relationships. Although teacher-child relationships have been widely studied, information on the perspectives of parents of a child with behavioural challenges in the ECEC context remains lacking.

The second aim was to examine parent-teacher relationships from the perspective of parental agency in the educational partnership, which, in this context, refers to the different ways in which parents exert influence on the educational partnership (cf. Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Parental agency in the educational partnership is an understudied theme. However, Dunlap and Fox (2007) stress the crucial role of the parents in the educational partnership when collaborating with the parents of a challengingly behaving child. A study by Honkasilta et al. (2015; Honkasilta, 2016) further highlighted the importance of agency in the teacher-parent relationships of mothers of a child with ADHD. However, this kind of research is also needed in the ECEC context. In the Finnish ECEC context, for example, active parental agency is seen as critical when building a shared understanding of the support children need (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 2018), further warranting this kind of study. Previous studies on agency in educational contexts have also demonstrated the importance of a meaningful relation between agency and emotions (Hökkä et al., 2017), and hence emotions related to parental agency were also targeted in this study.

Finally, the third aim of this study was to examine parents' narratives about the educational partnership from the point of view of trust. Earlier studies have revealed that trust is especially crucial in the educational partnership when teachers collaborate with the parents of a challengingly behaving child (e.g., Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunlap & Fox, 2007, 2009). This is because trustful relationships provide the optimal foundation for achieving the best possible kind of child and parental support. Unfortunately, building trustful parent-teacher relationships in cases where the child manifests challenging behaviour carries an acknowledged risk (Dunlap & Fox, 2009; see Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Kos et al.,

2006). The studies by Poikonen and Kontoniemi (2011) and Kikas et al. (2016) have revealed the critical factors pertaining to trust in the Finnish ECEC context. Thus far, however, little empirical evidence has been reported on the factors that are central in building trust in the educational partnership from the point of view of the parents of a challengingly behaving child. In this connection, this study also aimed to promote understanding on parental experiences of trust in the parent-teacher relationship in the context of children with behavioural challenges. In sum, this study focused on the educational partnership by investigating different phenomena in the teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships (see Figure 1).

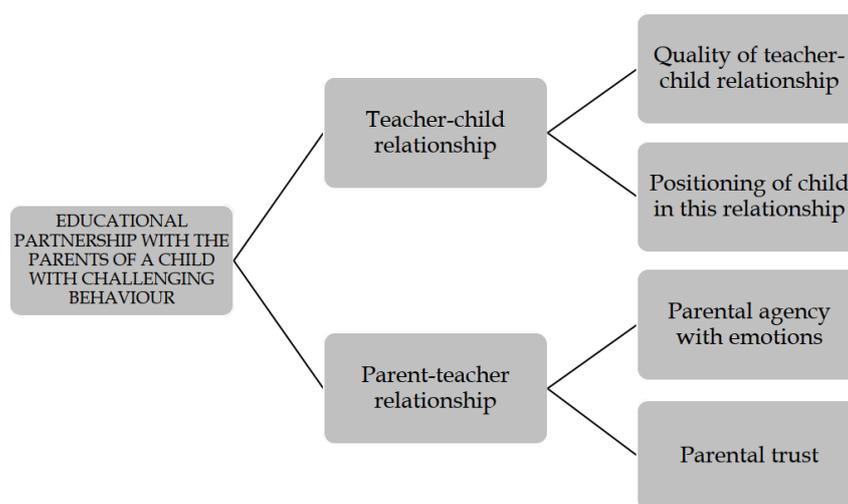


FIGURE 1 The study design

## 2 THE EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS OF A CHALLENGINGLY BEHAVING CHILD IN THE FINNISH ECEC CONTEXT

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland refers to *“a systematic and goal-oriented entity that consists of upbringing, education and care of children and places special emphasis on pedagogy”* (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 2§). Finnish ECEC services are planned, guided and monitored by the Ministry of Education and Culture (<https://minedu.fi/en/early-childhood-education-and-care>). Early childhood education is provided by ECEC professionals from the age of 10 months up to 6 years, after which children enter pre-primary education, which lasts for one year (from age 6 to 7) (see Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019). According to the current legislation, while all children have an equal right to early childhood education parents make the decision as to whether or not their child will participate in ECEC services (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). Pre-primary education, on the other hand, which is included in general education, is compulsory for all six-year-old children (since August 2015; see Salminen, 2017). This service is typically provided (municipal/private) by ECEC professionals in daycare centres in the communities in which the parents reside. This study focused on centre-based ECEC services and pre-primary education. The definition, objectives and principles of early childhood education, pre-primary education and the educational partnership in the Finnish ECEC context are specified by law (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018; Basic Education Act, 628/1998) and the core curricula of ECEC and pre-primary education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 2018; see Heiskanen, 2019). In addition, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre sets guidelines and recommendations for good-quality ECEC (Vlasov et al., 2019). In this study, the term “parent” refers to both parents and guardians of children. The term “teacher” refers to all the ECEC professionals (ECEC teachers and nurses) who are responsible for the education and care of children in the Finnish ECEC context. This term was selected as ECEC teachers, who have pedagogical responsibility and responsibility for the educational partnership with parents, were a focus in this study.

## 2.1 The educational partnership in the Finnish ECEC context

The educational partnership was examined from the perspective of the parents of a child exhibiting challenging behaviour. The concept “educational partnership” is widely used internationally when referring to educational collaboration between teachers and parents or other guardians of children in the ECEC and school contexts (e.g., Epstein, 2010b; Foot et al., 2002; Keen, 2007). However, the main reason for using this concept when talking about parent-teacher collaboration is that has been emphasised since early 2000 in Finnish ECEC curricula and was used in formal ECEC guidelines when the data for this study were gathered (Stakes, 2003, 2005; see Karila & Alasuutari, 2012; Kekkonen, 2012a; Poikonen & Lehtipää, 2009). It is also an important concept in understanding the phenomenon of parent-teacher collaboration.

The educational partnership is defined by Summers et al. (2005, p. 66) as “*mutually supportive interaction between families and professionals focused on the needs of the children and families*”. This child- and family-centred definition stresses the importance of the needs of children and their parents as the starting point for collaboration (see Kekkonen, 2012). According to Epstein (2010b, p. 4) the principles underlying the partnership are “working together” and having “shared responsibilities for children’s development and learning”. Thus, the concept of the educational partnership is based on the idea that parents and teachers share pedagogical responsibility and work together to attain specific pedagogical goals (Epstein, 2010b, p. 4; Tiilikka, 2010, p. 69). Parents, children and teachers are all seen as active agents in the partnership, with the child located at the centre of the partners’ interaction and activities (Epstein, 2010a, 2010b). In this study, the educational partnership was seen as educational interaction based on dialogical interaction between the partners that is focused on the achievement of a common goal (Stakes, 2003, 2005).

It is problematic to define parent-teacher collaboration as a “partnership”, as it suggests that the parents are active partners in a specific kind of parent-teacher relationship. According to Alasuutari (2010a) the concept of a “partnership” refers to an equal parent-teacher relationship, parallel expertise and the proximity of the partners. However, as shown by her study, which identified horizontal and vertical frames in the parent-teacher relationships, actualising this ideal in the parent-teacher relationship may be complicated. Valuing parental knowledge and respecting parents as experts on their child are stressed in the horizontal frame of the educational partnership. In turn, the vertical frame prioritises the expertise and professional knowledge of the ECEC teachers, and thus constructs an asymmetrical parent-teacher relationship (Alasuutari, 2010a). As her study revealed, ECEC teachers as professionals have different kinds of responsibilities, duties, and powers as laid down by law and the curricula than those of parents in the parent-teacher relationship, a situation which challenges the ideal of a symmetrical parent-teacher relationship and equality between the partners. The parent-teacher relationship can also be seen

as an example of institutional power and control over parenthood and parental educational practices (Alasuutari, 2010b, pp. 24–26). Furthermore, the concept of a partnership includes the notion of active participation by both partners (Kekkonen, 2012, p. 48). However, parents can choose the extent to which they participate in the educational partnership. For example, they may or may not wish to share their knowledge and expertise in this relationship and may prefer a closer or more distant relationship with the ECEC professionals (see Karila & Alasuutari, 2012; Strandell, 2012). The current Finnish legislation and ECEC curriculum (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018, 3§, 10; Finnish National Board of Education, 2018, pp. 33–34) utilises the concept of “collaboration”, which aims at enhancing commitment to collaborative activities (“act together”) “with the child and the parents for the benefit of the child’s balanced development and holistic wellbeing”, and “supporting the parents in their task of bringing up their child”. The aims set in the Finnish curricula (2003, 2005, 2018) for the educational partnership/collaboration are very much the same.

In practice, the educational partnership typically means activities such as the sharing information, discussing, planning, supporting and guiding the children (Epstein, 2010a). The most common arenas for interaction in the educational partnership are the everyday drop-off and pick-up situations (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2011). Although those short daily interactions are highly valued by parents in the Finnish ECEC context (Tiilikka, 2005), they are often busy and fraught moments for parents and ECEC teachers (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2011). The educational partnership is also implemented in more official, planned and structured parental meetings or conferences and in other events arranged for families (Alasuutari, 2010a; Karila & Alasuutari, 2012). Of special importance are parental conferences, in which an individual ECEC plan for each child is drawn up in collaboration with the child’s family (Karila & Alasuutari, 2012). These conferences are included in the ECEC guidelines in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018, p. 9) and mandated by law (540/2018). Thus, they underline the importance attributed nowadays to listening to the voices of both children and their parents (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 2018; see Heiskanen, 2019, p. 24). Furthermore, the forms used by the municipalities structure the way the individual ECEC plan (IEP) conferences are carried out (Heiskanen, 2019; Karila & Alasuutari, 2012). The present study focused on the diversity of parents’ experiences of the educational partnership, including everyday discussions and the more structured and regulated type of parental conferences that constitute the central building blocks of the educational partnership.

Good-quality teacher–child and parent–teacher relationships assist ECEC teachers in achieving their goals of supporting both the child and the child’s parents in their task of raising the child (Daycare Act, 36/1973, repealed; Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). In the Finnish ECEC context, the current regulations on supporting children’s learning and growth are more explicit than the regulations on parental support (see National Board of

Education, 2016, p. 50). Furthermore, providing support for parents has also been criticised as an excessively demanding task for ECEC teachers in the educational partnership (Mahkonen, 2018). A study by Poikonen and Kontoniemi (2011) showed that parents are generally satisfied with the support provided to their children, i.e., the manner in which teachers work with their children in the Finnish ECEC context but, as their child's principle caregivers, are less satisfied with the support they receive from their child's teachers. Support for both parents and children is seen as critical when children have difficulties in emotional and behavioural regulation that manifests as behavioural challenges (Barkley, 2004; 2008; see Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Laakso et al., 2011; Peters & Jackson, 2008). Despite findings that the parents of these children benefit from parental support, studies on how the parents experience the parent-teacher relationship with its outcomes are scarce.

## **2.2 Relational basis of the educational partnership**

The educational partnership was approached from the point of view of the two relationships, teacher-child and parent-teacher, which comprise the core of both the educational partnership itself (Kekkonen, 2012a, pp. 50-54) and, according to Pianta (1999), ECEC (see Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The quality of these two relationships has been revealed to be important in supporting a child's prosocial behaviour and social and emotional development (Bayat et al., 2010; Corso, 2007; Fox et al., 2003; Hemmeter et al., 2006). As Corso (2007, p. 27) state, good-quality relationships "don't come automatically, but they are built over a period of time through respectful, reciprocal and responsive interactions". Because of their reciprocal nature, the partners' activities, behaviours and attitudes influence how these relationships are formed (see Edwards, 2005; O'Connor, 2010). However, as professionals, teachers are responsible for creating, maintaining and developing these relationships (Karila, 2008; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). As good-quality teacher-child and teacher-parent/guardian relationships are seen as a prerequisite for the well-being and development of children in the ECEC context (see Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Salminen, 2014; Vlasov et al., 2019), it is important to gather knowledge on these relationships and their crucial underpinnings from the perspective of parents.

### **2.2.1 Quality of teacher-child relationships and positioning of the child**

Good-quality relationships and interactions between teachers and children are associated with children's social and emotional well-being and learning (Fattore et al., 2007; Kernan et al., 2011; Salminen, 2014). Conversely, poor or conflictual relationships are seen as a source of risk for children's development and well-being (Pianta, 1999, p. 21: see Pianta, 1994). According to the literature (Buyse et al., 2008; Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Silver et al., 2005), challenging behaviour by children is one factor that has been identified as posing a risk to positive

interactions between teachers and children, leading, in the worst case scenario, to insecure, conflictual, distant and angry teacher–child relationships. In addition, such challenging behaviour may culminate in a negative and dysfunctional teacher–child interaction cycle (Doumen et al., 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012) and dysfunctional pedagogical practices on the part of teachers (Kos et al., 2006; Silver et al., 2005).

To better understand and interpret parents' experiences of the teacher–child relationship, it was studied in light of the criteria established for Finnish ECEC and for the teacher–child relationship. The national recommendations designed to support good quality ECEC focus on teacher sensitivity towards children, noticing and meeting the children's individual needs, and taking cognizance of the individuality of each child, and helping each child identify and cultivate their strengths and interests (Vlasov et al., 2019, p. 63, 74). Additionally, the pre-primary curriculum (2014, p. 17) stresses the unique and valuable nature of each child "as he or she" and states that "each child has the right to be heard, seen, noticed and understood as an individual and a member of his or her community". Furthermore, it states that each child's "diversity and different ways of acting and learning are appreciated".

A good-quality teacher–child relationship is typically described in studies as a relationship with low conflict and high closeness (warmth) (O'Connor, 2010). Teachers' sensitivity, responsiveness and respectful interaction (i.e., emotional support) have been found to be especially, protective factors for children with difficulties in regulating their emotions and behaviour (i.e., internalising and externalising behaviours) (Buyse et al., 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Merritt et al., 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). A good-quality teacher–child relationship is associated with a decrease in children's externalising behaviours and an increase in their social competence (O'Connor et al., 2011; Silver et al., 2005; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). Furthermore, a good-quality teacher–child relationship is important from the standpoint of a child's social competence (Howes & James, 2002), which includes a positive self-concept and self-esteem and a positive identity construction (Poikkeus, 2011). This study focused on the positioning of their child in the teacher–child relationship as narrated by parents (Lundan, 2009), as this was seen as central to understanding the parents' reflections on this relationship. Examining parents' perspectives on the teacher–child relationship and the positioning of their child this relationship offered a new perspective on the educational partnership with the parents of challengingly behaving children.

### **2.2.2 Parental agency in the parent–teacher relationship**

This study also focused on parental agency in the parent–teacher relationship. Parents' active participation in the educational partnership is stressed in cases where their child exhibits social and emotional difficulties (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). It is important to offer the best possible child and parental outcomes, i.e., outcomes that promote meaningful child and parental support, and meaningful pedagogical practices of parents as well as ECEC teachers.

Drawing on agency theories and conceptualisations from the social sciences and educational sociocultural approaches (e.g., Archer, 2000; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Giddens, 1984; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Sairanen, 2020), parental agency was conceptualised here as parents exerting or having an influence on parent-teacher relationships in ECEC. More precisely, parental agency in this study meant *parents' communicational and behavioural actions relating to their child's well-being, learning and development in the ECEC context*. In this study, the concept of parental agency was employed since it can capture the diverse experiences of parents and how these influence their child's ECEC. Information on this topic is currently lacking.

It is worth noting that the concept of participation, which is included in the concept of partnership (Kekkonen, 2012, pp. 47-50), is widely used in research and practice in ECEC. Parents' active participation is seen as highly important in the educational partnership (Clarke et al., 2010; Epstein, 2010a; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010; Kyrönlampi & Karikoski, 2017; Murray et al., 2015). Furthermore, parents' active participation has been an accepted element in the Finnish ECEC system since the 1990s and is currently a central element in Finland's ECEC legislation and curricula (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 20§; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 2018; Stakes, 2003, 2005; see Alasuutari, 2010a; Karila & Alasuutari, 2012; Kekkonen, 2012a, 2012b). After 2015, when individual ECEC plans for children became mandatory, the importance of parents' active participation was accorded even more emphasis (renewed Daycare Act 580/2015; 7 a §; see also Heiskanen, 2019). In addition, in the Finnish ECEC context, the importance of parents' (and also children's) active participation is especially stressed in the case of parents whose child has special needs (Rantala & Uotinen, 2014; Viitala, 2018). Overall, while the concepts of participation and agency are partially overlapping, agency is not understood solely as participation but also includes a strong emphasis on having an influence on social relationships (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). The concept of "participation" in the educational partnership includes participation in, for example, parental meetings arranged by ECEC professionals, which may proceed without any active input by parents (see Hvinden & Johansson, 2007).

To date, parental agency in ECEC has been under-researched. However, Honkasilta et al. (2015) studied parental agency in the Finnish school context. They identified two different kinds of strong agency (i.e., volitional and forced strong agency) as well as weak agency exercised by mothers of a child with ADHD. Their analysis of the agency positions narrated by the mothers revealed the crucial importance accorded by the mothers' to positive experiences of teachers' expertise and trust as well as their experiences of equality and mutual respect in the mother-teacher relationship. In this study, I chose to extend these investigations of parental agency to parents whose child had manifested challenging behaviour as, in line with current Finnish ECEC legislations and curricula (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 2018; see Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Rantala & Uotinen, 2014), appropriate child support should be immediately available

when the need arises. However, I was interested in the range of parents' experiences of agency in the parent-teacher relationship, rather than confining the study to strong and active agency only, as parental agency might also manifest in passive and resistant activities (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Honkasilta et al., 2015).

Furthermore, this study focused on the role of emotions in parents' agency. To date, this topic has been little studied, despite the fact that emotions are considered a motivating force for agency in professionals (Hökkä et al., 2017; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2017) and in human activity generally (Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 19). In the emotion literature, emotions are understood in different ways, including subjective experiences and psychophysiological reactions and behaviours (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2018). In this study, emotions were seen as individual and situational experiences embedded in social events, relations and persons (see also Zembylas, 2007). A study by Hökkä et al. (2017) revealed that pleasant emotions are typically related to proactive and constructive professional agency, whereas unpleasant emotions are related not only to the opposite kind of agency (e.g., criticism and resistant behaviour) but also to constructive agency. Inspired by their findings, the role of emotions in parental agency was an additional aim in the present study.

Although parental agency was studied from the perspective of parents, parental agency can be understood as strongly relational (Edwards, 2005) and contextual by nature. In this instance, Finnish educational settings form the sociocultural context that determines the frames and places for the exercise of agency (see Honkasilta et al., 2015; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Rainio, 2008; Sairanen, 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2013). This means that agency is always constituted and enacted in relation to other people and social relationships in social contexts. Thus, in the present research context, parents' experiences of their agency were investigated in the Finnish sociocultural context, which includes the cultural role expectations, social rules and norms pertaining to ECEC teachers and parents as the clients of ECEC services.

### **2.2.3 Parental trust in parent-teacher relationships**

Parental trust was another component in the parent-teacher relationship examined in this study. Along with agency, trust has been revealed to be a key element in a successful educational partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2010; Keen, 2007; Kikas et al., 2011). Trust forms the basis of the parent-teacher relationships and collaboration in Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education and of good-quality early childhood education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 27; see Clarke et al., 2010, p. 68; Poikonen & Kontoniemi, 2011; Vlasov et al., 2019, p. 62). Parental trust in ECEC teachers was a focus of this study. However, teachers' trust in parents as equal collaborators who have valuable knowledge about their child and his/her education is also seen as important (see Alasuutari, 2010a; Tschannen-Moran, 2001) and thus the parent-teacher relationship can be understood as a reciprocal relationship (Edwards, 2005). The level of mutual parent-teacher trust in Finnish preschools

is high, and Finnish parents are generally satisfied with the commitment and reliability of their ECEC teachers (Kikas et al., 2011; Poikonen, & Kontoniemi, 2011; see Rautamies et al., 2021). ECEC teachers are highly educated and valued professionals in Finnish society, which likely strengthens parental trust towards them and is probably also related to the high expectations of that Finnish parents have regarding their child's ECEC and the educational partnership. These factors highlight the importance of studying parental trust among parents of challengingly behaving children, as behaviour may complicate but also strengthen the building of trust in the parent-teacher relationship.

Both trust and parental agency in the parent-teacher relationship were examined in this study as closely interrelated, fostering one another and being influenced by the activities of both partners (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Adams et al., 2009; Clarke et al., 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). Parental trust and agency in parent-teacher relationships are positively related to the achievement and well-being of children (Bayat et al., 2010; Kikas et al., 2011), and they both have an essential role in child support (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 50; Rantala & Uotinen, 2014; Vlasov et al., 2019, 76). For these reasons, how parents of challengingly behaving children perceived and experienced trust and parental agency in the context of the educational partnership was examined in this study.

Here, trust was defined as *parents' confidence that as professionals in early childhood education ECEC teachers are working for the benefit of both child and the parent*. This definition is a slight modification of that proposed by of Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010, p. 66). According to previous studies, parental trust develops gradually via positive experiences gained in collaboration with ECEC professionals (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Christenson, 2004). In contrast, negative experiences of the educational partnership may erode parental trust, which may subsequently be difficult to rebuild (Cook et al., 2005; Rautamies et al., 2011). A warm teacher-child relationship (see Silver et al., 2005) and enthusiasm on the part of teachers towards their educational work have been found to be essential in building parental trust (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Tiilikka, 2005). Furthermore, the use of meaningful pedagogical practices, which helps to decrease less optimal or unwanted behaviour among children, are seen as important from the viewpoint of parental trust. Openness, honesty, benevolence and reliability have also been demonstrated to be important qualities of teachers in developing parental trust (Tschannen.-Moran, 2001; see Blue-Banning et al., 2004). For example, it is important that all necessary information is shared with parents (Mishra, 1996).

### **2.3 Challenging behaviour in early childhood**

A large number of studies conducted with a variety of methods (e.g., questionnaires, interviews and observations) have examined young children's challenging behaviour from the perspectives of the children themselves, their

parents and their teachers (e.g., Erdman & Hertel, 2019; Fox et al., 2002; Kurki et al., 2016; Lyons & O'Connor, 2006; Pihlaja et al., 2015; Quesenberry et al., 2014). Studies on the impact of these behavioural and emotional challenges on the children in question have revealed the possible negative consequences for their social and emotional well-being and the severe risks for their academic achievement and later learning (Dunlap et al., 2006; Dunlap & Fox, 2009; Doumen et al., 2008; Mantzicopoulos, 2005; McClelland, et al., 2007; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Furthermore, studies have shown that challenging behaviour in a child is caused by difficulties in self-regulation, as manifested in conflicts in peer relationships, which in turn may lead to social rejection (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004; see Poikkeus, 2011; Savina, 2014). For example, a study by Viitala (2014) conducted in the Finnish ECEC context showed that challenging behaviour presented a risk for social exclusion, meaning a lack of friends, exclusion from shared peer activities and rejection by peers. Furthermore, the child risked being negatively positioned and blamed in daycare groups (Lundan, 2009; Suoninen & Lundan, 2005).

### **2.3.1 Developmental and contextual approaches**

Challenging behaviour in children was approached in this study from two interconnected perspectives: developmental and contextual. Both of these perspectives were seen as meaningful from the standpoint of the educational partnership. The child was seen as a developing subject whose behaviour and development cannot be understood in isolation from its context (Coleman & Webber, 2002; see Lyons & O'Connor, 2006; Pihlaja, 2008; Pihlaja et al., 2015; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). In this study, drawing on the ideas of Sameroff (2010), we see that a child's internal developmental processes and social context are interconnected in the child's development. More specifically, in line with this notion of interconnectedness, this study stresses the meaning of relationships in the context of a child's daily life. Pianta (1999, p. 17) describes this as follows:

Adult-child relationships are critical regulators of development; they form and shape it. In the early years, relationships with adults primarily with parents ... and often with child-care providers or with other family members, form the infrastructure of development that supports nearly all of what the child is asked to do in school - relate to other people, be persistent and focused, stay motivated to perform, be compliant-assertive, communicate, and explore the world.

#### ***Development of self-regulation***

In line with the developmental perspective, a child's challenging behaviour is seen in relation to the process of developing self-regulation skills, including emotional and behavioural regulation (e.g. Aro, 2011a, 2011b; Barkley, 2004; Bronson, 2000; McCabe et al., 2004; Määttä et al., 2017; Määttä & Aro, 2011; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). This approach proved fruitful in the frame of the educational partnership, as it laid emphasis on the importance of parents and

ECEC teachers in supporting the development of the child's self-regulation and other, related skills in the child's daily life. The developmental perspective in this study includes the idea that self-regulatory skills are based on the maturation and functioning of the nervous system and are learned in the early years in the child's relationships, especially those with their parents and ECEC teachers (Aro, 2011b; Barkley, 2004; Bronson, 2000; Posner & Rothbart, 2000; see also Eisenberg et al., 2004; Pihlaja, 2018). The study stresses the importance of co-regulation in the development of self-regulatory skills. This is in line with Hadwin and Oshige (2011) and Sameroff (2010), who understand the development of self-regulation as a transactional process of other-regulation and self-regulation, which proceeds from socially supported regulation to self-regulation.

Difficulties in self-regulation in specific contexts such as in the home and daycare center may manifest as, for example, aggressive and overactive behaviour (i.e., externalisation). This typically includes challenges rules and instructions and causing conflicts in different relationships (Barkley, 2004, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Rothbart et al., 2011b; Rueda et al., 2004). Other possible manifestations of difficulties in self-regulation are shyness, inhibition, distress and behavioural withdrawal (i.e., internalising) (Bronson, 2000; Coleman & Webber, 2002, p. 31). However, the latter kinds of behavioural difficulties were not typically exhibited by the children in this study. Because environmental factors strongly influence the way in which difficulties in self-regulation are manifested (Coleman & Webber, 2002, p. 165), pedagogical arrangements, sensitive pedagogical interaction and support from parents and ECEC teachers are important (see Ahonen, 2015). In line with Coleman and Webber (2002), both partners' understanding of the child, child-related characteristics (e.g., temperament and behaviour) and environmental factors and how they are interconnected, were seen as the starting point for appropriate pedagogical support. Understanding of the child's temperament is essential, as children's self-regulatory processes are connected to their temperamental qualities (e.g., impulsive and inhibited behaviour) (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Rothbart et al., 2011a; see Ahonen, 2015). Temperament refers to a behavioural style and inborn tendency to react or feel in a certain manner, which also is highly influenced by contextual factors (Coleman & Webber, 2002, p. 53). Furthermore, other intrinsic factors, such as the child's gender (Buyse et al., 2008), and the development of cognitive functions (e.g., inhibition, memory, attention regulation, problem-solving) and linguistic skills significantly influence the child's self-regulatory processes (Aro et al., 2014; Laakso, 2011; Määttä & Aro, 2011). Reaching a holistic understanding of the child and the child's development in the educational partnership is essential when planning support for the child in close collaboration with the parents.

Since relational and interactional experiences in the child's early years form the basis for self-regulation abilities (Erdman & Hertel, 2019; Kurki et al., 2016; Laakso, 2011; Silkenbeumer et al., 2018; see Savina, 2014), parents and teachers have an important role in co-regulating the child's self-regulatory skills in everyday situations (Dennis, 2006; Harris et al., 2007; Howes, 2009; Kurki et al.,

2016; Poikkeus, 2011; Silkenbeumer et al., 2018). A trustful and well-functioning educational partnership is important for achieving a shared understanding on functional co-regulation and on what constitutes the most effective daily support for the child both at home and in the daycare centre.

### *Contextual approach*

Alongside the developmental approach, the contextual perspective offers another important framework in this study for understanding a child's challenging behaviour (O'Connor, 2010; see Sandberg, 2002). According to Lyons and O'Connor (2006, p. 223), "[a child's] *behaviour is considered as a problem if it does not fit in the social situation in which the individual is located*" (see also Coleman & Webber, 2002, p. 25). In line with this definition, a child's challenging behaviour is understood as a mismatch between the child's behaviour and the demands of the environment or the system around the child (Coleman & Webber, 2002; Lyons and O'Connor, 2006). For example, a child's challenging behaviour, which is manifested as hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive behaviour, is mostly recognised as challenging behaviour in situations in which attentive behaviour is required (Coleman & Webber, 2002, 204). Thus, defining a child's behaviour as "normal", "appropriate" or as "challenging" is rooted in the interaction of the actors in the child's daily-life contexts, and thus it will also vary depending on the norms and expectations of the specific social and cultural context (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006; Pihlaja et al., 2015). According to Lyons and O'Connor (2006, p. 217), a child's challenging behaviour refers to "behaviour exhibited by children in a variety of settings that causes difficulties for the adults charged with the care of those children" (see also Visser, 2002). According to this definition, the behaviour of the child causes negative or unacceptable consequences for his or her relationships with parents and teachers (see Squires & Bricker, 2007). In addition, aspects of the physical environment, such as a chaotic, inconsistent or stressful ECEC environment, may promote a child's challenging behaviour (Corso, 2007; Pihlaja et al., 2015). According to previous research (O'Connor et al., 2011; Poikkeus, 2011), the quality of their relationships greatly influences children's behaviour (social context). Hence, parents' narratives of their experiences of these relationships were explored in this study. Furthermore, Skalická et al. (2015) showed that the quality of the teacher-child relationship and interaction was closely interconnected with structural factors of the behavioural context (e.g., high turnover of teachers). For example, group size influences the well-being of teachers, which in turn influences the quality of the teacher-child relationship (see Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The more stressed teachers are, the less tolerant they become of children's behaviour (Kokkinos et al., 2005; see Greene et al., 2002; Mantzicopoulos, 2005).

The importance of evaluation of the behavioural context, learning environment and pedagogical practices of ECEC teachers is emphasised in the Finnish ECEC system (Heiskanen, 2019), including understanding a child's challenging behaviour. If the contextual factors of a child's challenging behaviour are not understood, then it might unfairly be considered and communicated in

the ECEC context as problematic and undesirable behaviour that derives solely from within the child or the child's upbringing (Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Viitala, 2014). Such an understanding may be interpreted by parents as implying that 'there is something wrong with the child' or that they 'have totally failed in raising their child', which are one-sided and unproductive starting points for a meaningful educational partnership.

### **2.3.2 Perspective of parents**

Challenging behaviour by children influences how parents experience and evaluate parenthood (Barkley, 2008; Broomhead, 2013). Studies on the parenting of challengingly behaving children have most typically focused on children diagnosed with ADHD (e.g., Theule, 2010). As the behavioural manifestations of the children in this study in many ways resembled the behavioural symptoms of ADHD, these previous studies represent a useful source of information, although none of the young children in this study had received any such diagnosis.

Disharmony, discord and conflicts are typical in parent-child relationships and interactions with children who have difficulties in emotional and behavioural regulation (Barkley, 2008; see Wells et al., 2006). Challenging behaviour by children tends to lead parents to adopt authoritarian and dysfunctional educational practices (Lange et al., 2005). These may in turn cause a negative interactional spiral, resulting in feelings of failure and a negative self-concept for both the child and parents (Barkley, 2008; Lajunen & Laakso, 2011). Studies have shown that parents of children who manifest challenging behaviour related to ADHD typically experience difficulties and feelings of inadequacy in raising their children (Harborne et al., 2004; Lange et al., 2005; Peters & Jackson, 2008; see Wells et al., 2006). Parental stress caused by the demands of parenting is typical in these families (Johnstone & Mash, 2001; Podolski & Nigg, 2001; Theule, 2010; Theule et al., 2011), as also are feelings of shame, humiliation and guilt (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Harborne et al., 2004; Lajunen & Laakso, 2011; Peters & Jackson, 2008). While the negative parenting-related emotions described above presumably influence the ways in which parents enact agency in parent-teacher relationships, agency and the emotions relating to it were also targeted in this study.

Stressful situations encountered in raising children may lead to parental depression, family dysfunction and divorce, and ultimately to the social exclusion of the parents (Dunlap & Fox, 2007; Fox et al., 2002; Kendall & Shelton, 2003; see Theule et al., 2011). To address the concerns of this study, understanding parents' experiences of the parent-teacher relationship and educational partnership is crucial (Lajunen & Laakso, 2011). For example, experiences of being stigmatised, scrutinised and criticised are familiar to the mothers of children with ADHD and of children with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties (Broomhead, 2013; Peters & Jackson, 2008). As the studies by Dunlap and Fox (2007) and Theule et al. (2011) have shown, social support for parents is inversely related to parental stress when the family has a child (8-12 years old) with diagnosed with ADHD who exhibits challenging behaviour.

These findings likely explain why professionals who collaborate with the parents of children with ADHD strongly stress the need for parental and family support. (see Harborne et al., 2004). As the role of parents is essential in their children's lives, and because their voices, especially of those with challengingly behaving children, are not sufficiently heard (see Worcester et al., 2008), investigation of their experiences of the educational partnership is clearly warranted.

### **2.3.3 Perspective of ECEC teachers and the educational partnership**

Pihlaja and her colleagues (Pihlaja, 2008; Pihlaja et al., 2015), who studied the discursive practices of ECEC teachers in the Finnish ECEC context, found that a child's challenging behaviour is typically described by teachers in various problem-oriented ways (e.g., having problems with limits and group rules or with social behaviour). These children were described as, for example, engaging in aggressive or disobedient behaviour, having weak social skills or being restless (Pihlaja et al., 2015). A study by Viitala (2014) found that teachers emphasised the importance of adapting to and obeying the rules of the daycare group (Viitala, 2014). Her study also revealed that while ECEC teachers described challengingly behaving children as 'having difficulties in ...', they also mentioned their positive qualities and strengths (e.g., a skilful child). The role of ECEC teachers' discursive practices has been highlighted in relation to how they talk about a child's challenging behaviour (e.g., blaming vs. understanding talk) (see Lyons & O'Connor, 2006; Pihlaja et al., 2015; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Pihlaja (2008) showed that children with challenging behaviour easily become negatively labelled in the speech of teachers as a "difficult child" or as a "problematic child" (see Heiskanen, 2019; Heiskanen et al., 2018). From the perspective of these children, such negative labels perpetuate the image that they are bad children (Lundan, 2009; Rautamies & Biskop, 2012; Suoninen & Lundan, 2005). This is also problematic for the educational partnership, especially if the parents feel they are being blamed for their children's emotional and behavioural difficulties due to poor parenting (Broomhead, 2013; see Christenson, 2004). Although previous studies have indicated that children manifesting behavioural difficulties are easily labelled by ECEC professionals, we continue to lack information on how ECEC teachers' discursive practices influence the educational partnership as experienced by parents. We also need more understanding of how these discursive practices are, among other things, related to parental agency and the building of parental trust in the parent-teacher relationship. Hence, teachers' discursive practices as experienced by the parents were also examined in this study.

### **3 RESEARCH TASK AND OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this study was to attain a more profound understanding of the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of the parents of a child exhibiting challenging behaviour. While the educational partnership has been widely studied, research on parent-teacher partnerships from the perspective of the parents of a challengingly behaving child in the context of ECEC is lacking. Therefore, this study focused on the most essential relationships in the educational partnership, namely the teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships, from the novel and as yet unexamined perspective of parents. The teacher-child relationship was examined in the first sub-study and the parent-teacher relationship from the point of view of parental agency and trust in the educational partnership in the second and third sub-studies, respectively. These research efforts were aimed at contributing to the development of ECEC practices and to the bridging of gaps in the literature. To address the deficiencies in knowledge on the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of parents whose child exhibits challenging behaviour, this study sought answers to the following question: How do the parents of a child exhibiting challenging behavior narrate the educational partnership?

More specifically, this overarching question comprised three sub-questions:

1. How do parents narrate the teacher-child relationship and discuss their child in this relationship?
2. How is parental agency manifested and related to the emotions experienced by parents when participating in the parent-teacher relationship?
3. What experiences reported by parents are critical from the perspective of parental trust in the educational partnership?

In this dissertation research, answers to these research questions were sought via three empirical sub-studies (I-III). Answers to the first research question were

addressed in the first sub-study, which focused on identifying different types of teacher-child relationships and the positioning of the child in these relationships as narrated by the children's parents. The second research question was addressed in the second sub-study, which sought to identify the different types of agency and related emotions in the parents' narratives. The third research question was addressed in the third sub-study, which aimed at identifying the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership that can be identified in the parents' narratives. The connections between the research questions of the study and the sub-studies are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Links between the research questions of the study and the three sub-studies

Overarching research question	The three sub-questions	The specific research questions addressed by the sub-studies
<p>How do the parents of a child exhibiting challenging behavior narrate the educational partnership?</p>	<p>1. How do parents narrate the teacher-child relationship and discuss their child in this relationship? (<i>Sub-study I</i>)</p> <p>2. How is parental agency manifested and related to the emotions experienced by parents when participating in the parent-teacher relationship? (<i>Sub-study II</i>)</p> <p>3. What experiences reported by parents are critical from the perspective of parental trust in the educational partnership? (<i>Sub-studies I, II, III</i>)</p>	<p><i>Sub-study I</i></p> <p>1. What kinds of teacher-child relationships can be identified in the narratives of the parents?</p> <p>2. How are the children positioned in the different kinds of teacher-child relationships as narrated by their parents?</p> <p><i>Sub-study II</i></p> <p>1. What types of parental agency can be identified in the educational partnership in the ECEC context?</p> <p>2. How are different kinds of emotions related to these types of agency?</p> <p><i>Sub-study III</i></p> <p>1. What are the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership in parents' narratives?</p>

## 4 METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

### 4.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

This qualitative study sought to understand the phenomenon of “the educational partnership” as experienced and narrated by the parents of a child with challenging behaviour. The *narrative approach* was the core analytical method applied in this study. The ontological and epistemological considerations were based on narrativity (Elliott, 2005; Heikkinen, 2018; Spector-Mersel, 2010), and the narrative approach was applied throughout the research process (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, the narrative approach informed the methodological choices of this study (i.e., data gathering, data analysis, reporting of the results).

In ontological terms, this study emphasised the intentional, relational, dialogical and narrative nature of human beings (Heikkinen, 2018), who aim to make sense and give meaning to their experiences through narratives (Heikkinen, 2001, p. 129). As the focus of the study was to examine the experiences of parents and the meanings they attributed to their experiences (Abbott, 2008; Elliott, 2005), the narrative approach was a natural choice and starting point. The narrative approach taken in this study referred to knowing and to telling (Elliott, 2005, p. 10), and hence the narratives were seen as mediating and constructing reality (Heikkinen, 2001). This study examined the educational partnership as a subjective phenomenon from the viewpoint of parents as described by Spector-Mersel (2010, p. 212): “... we understand ourselves and our world by way of interpretive processes that are subjective and culturally rooted.” Thus, the parents’ narratives analysed in this study constitute a *subjective and relativist reality* instead of a real and objective reality, although the intention was not to deny the natural reality that also exists outside of social and linguistic constructions (Spector-Mersel, 2010). The parents’ narratives were not seen as an objective reflection or mirror of social reality but instead, in line with

the notions of social constructionism, as constructing this reality (see Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 208; Burr, 2003, 2015). In addition, subjectivity in this study meant that both partners in the parent-teacher relationship had their own truth about their lived situations and experiences.

Along with the narrative consideration presented above, three ontological assumptions proposed by Popper (1972, as presented by Heikkinen et al., 2005), were used to elaborate this study. Thus, the ontology of the educational partnership examined in this study rested on three different, interrelated realities: *natural, personal, and socially shared* (Popper, 1972, as presented by Heikkinen et al., 2005). First, the parents' narratives were rooted in natural reality, which refers to the interactional activities of the partners in the teacher-parent relationship in the ECEC context, and which in this study was termed lived reality (see also Hänninen, 1999, p. 128). Second, the parents' narratives were rooted in their personally experienced reality, which exists in an experiential relationship with the social natural world (see Tökkäri, 2018) and gives personal meanings to experiences via self-narratives (see Hänninen, 1999, p. 128). Third, the parents' narratives were rooted in a socially shared reality, in which people construct and re-construct the meanings of their experiences through narratives. Thus, the parents' narratives examined in this study represented *a socially constructed and shared reality* (or a narrative reality) (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Spector-Mersel, 2010; Squire, 2008).

With respect to the epistemology of this study, it was possible to gain knowledge and understanding of parents' experiences through the examination of their narratives. The parents' narratives were relational in nature, i.e., they were produced in a specific situation in dialogical interaction with the researcher (Elliott, 2005; Heikkinen, 2018; Riessman, 2008, p. 8, pp. 23–27). Zilber et al. (2008) stress the importance of context in understanding one's own narratives; They propose three contexts: (i) the immediate intersubjective relational context, (ii) the collective social field, and (iii) the cultural context (see Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 212). In line with this contextual elaboration (see also Burr, 2003, 2015), the parents' narratives can be understood as produced in a specific cultural-historical and institutional context as well as in the immediate relational and interactional context. The parents' narratives were intertwined with the institutional and cultural context of Finnish ECEC and more widely that of Finnish society, including its current policies, rules, norms, values and practices concerning parenting and education. For example, the parents reflected not only on their experiences of the educational partnership but also on themselves as educational partners and as the mothers and fathers of a challengingly behaving child in the ECEC context who had been influenced by their experiences of ECEC teachers' conceptions of an ordinary child and what constitutes the normal behaviour of a child (Alasuutari, 2010b).

## 4.2 Participants and data collection

### 4.2.1 Participants

In total, 23 parents (18 mothers and 5 fathers) who had experienced challenging behaviour by their child and who had been clients of Finnish ECEC services for at least 10 months were invited to participate in the study (see Rautamies et al., 2021). In five cases, both the mother and the father of the child participated. Participation was voluntary. The majority of the parents ( $n = 15$ ) were recruited via the Family School Programme, which is a voluntary group-based support service for families with hyperactive and inattentive children organised by the local family counselling centre (Laakso et al., 2011 see Barton et al., 2004; Lajunen, 2007; Lajunen & Laakso, 2011). Behaviour typical of children with difficulties in self-regulation and typical of ADHD disorder (see Aro, 2011a, 2011b; Barkley, 2004, 2008; Bronson, 2000; Cooper & Bilton, 2013) were identified by welfare professionals and ECEC educators before the children were admitted to the Family School Programme. The remainder ( $n = 8$ ) of the participants were reached by informing daycare centres, primary schools (first-grade classrooms) and the local ADHD association about the study. Some of these parents collaborated with the welfare professionals owing to their child's emotional and behavioural difficulties as well as educational challenges.

The participants' children were typically 6- to 7-year-old preschooler boys ( $n = 17$ ) at the time of the interview. During the data collection period, ECEC also included pre-primary education. At the time of the interviews, the youngest child was five, and the oldest eleven. Two of the oldest children had participated in an extended, two-year pre-primary programme. The fact that the data contained only three interviews with parents of girls supports studies that have reported challenging behaviour to be more typical of boys than girls (Buyse et al., 2008; Doumen et al., 2008; Silver et al., 2005).

The context of the parents' narratives was typically a municipal medium-sized daycare centre in an urban area, offering ECEC services for different age groups, from toddlers (ages 1–3 years) to children aged 3–6/7 years. However, the context of some narratives was private daycare centres. The types of families in the study varied widely, including nuclear families, stepfamilies, and one-parent (single) families. The families typically contained one to three children. The participating parents varied in age and educational backgrounds (vocational vs. higher education). All the interviewed parents had a child who exhibited difficulties in controlling his/her behaviour and emotions, and all but one child had behavioural characteristics typical of ADHD disorder, such as hyperactivity, restlessness, impulsive behaviour and difficulties in concentration (e.g., Bilton & Cooper, 2013). Similar kinds of behaviour were also typically recognised and reported by the ECEC teachers and possibly other professionals (e.g., occupational therapists) who collaborated with these families. The children under school age (7 in Finland) typically did not have a diagnosis of ADHD or any other behavioural challenges when the data were collected, although some

of the children had received a diagnosis on entry to primary school. The parents typically described their child as hyperactive, energetic and impulsive, or as a demanding and defiant child with a strong will. Some parents also described their child as atypical, or as emotional and lonely and as easily encountering difficulties in social situations with other children.

#### **4.2.2 Data collection**

The first two interviews were conducted in 2009, and the majority of the data were gathered over the period 2011–2013, mainly in connection with the Family School Programme described above. Most of the parents in this study were interviewed by the present author ( $n = 18$ ). The other five interviews were conducted by a research assistant and the main supervisor of the study, who was responsible for recruiting the group of parents involved in the Family School Programme, from which most of the interviewees were recruited.

Before starting the interviews, the interview questions were formulated to ensure that the interviews would proceed logically and all the research questions covered. The interviews began with a broader and more narrative-inviting question, after which more specific questions were asked. The main themes of the interviews concerned (i) parents' experiences of the educational partnership and (ii) the child and the child's challenging behaviour, especially in the ECEC context (Appendix 1).

The thematic interviews were conducted in dialogical interaction within a narrative research framework (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Special attention was paid to creating a comfortable, confidential, equal, open, honest and respectful relationship and interaction with the parents that would encourage them to discuss their experiences of the educational partnership honestly and openly. The interviews can be described as dialogical and conversational storytelling situations (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). One aim of the interviews was to encourage the participants to relate bounded, small stories about their experiences of the educational partnership (see Mueller, 2019, pp. 1–2). As the main aim of the interview was to listen to the parents and let them talk without interruption, the role of the interviewer was based on the principles of the narrative approach (Riessman, 2008). However, the dialogical nature of the interviews meant that both the interviewee and interviewer shared their experiences, thoughts and emotions.

Parents were informed about the study in an initial letter asking if they would be willing to participate in the study (Appendix 1). At the start of the interview session, prior to signing the informed consent forms, participants were again informed of the study aims along with the ethical principles to be applied, including the voluntary nature of the study and the manner in which the study was being conducted. The ethical principles of the study had also been included in the initial letter. At the beginning of the interview, in line with the narrative research framework (e.g., Riessman, 2008), the parents were encouraged to narrate their experiences (pleasant and unpleasant) of the educational partnership and to describe their thoughts and emotions about these experiences.

Thereafter, the interview questions were asked in such a way as to ensure that the data would be comprehensive, i.e., cover all of the research questions, especially in situations in which the parents were not forthcoming about the themes of interest. The parents were also asked specific questions if needed. At the end of the interviews, the parents were asked to evaluate their experiences and to describe their needs, wishes and expectations related to the educational partnership, and to describe what they wished would have been done otherwise (Appendix 2).

Most of the interviews followed the narrative interview protocol. The parents talked openly about both their positive and negative experiences of the educational partnership and related emotions and thoughts (e.g., anger, sorrow, disappointment and embarrassment, and joy, gratitude, relief and empowerment). They also talked a lot about their child and the child's behavioural challenges in the ECEC context and at home, and they frequently discussed the relationship between their child and the child's educators and peers. Furthermore, the parents talked about the educational support (or lack of support) of their child and multi-professional collaboration related to the child's support, and they talked about themselves as parents and educational partners.

The interviews lasted on average 1 hour and 15 minutes (ranging from about one hour to three hours) (see Rautamies et al., 2019). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. In total, about 1 600 minutes (approximately 70 minutes per interview) of audio data, yielding 372 pages of transcripts (mean of 16 pages per interview), were analysed in the study.

#### **4.2.3 Data analysis of the sub-studies**

Applying the principles of narrative research (e.g. Elliott, 2005, pp. 8-10; Heikkinen, 2001), this study investigated parents' experiences of the educational partnership. Narrative methods were considered to offer the most useful and relevant approach for this purpose. The following definitions of the concepts of narrative and story were used in conducting this study and its analytical phase. The concept of *narrative* refers to the process and product of narrating, i.e., "the telling" (how and what was told), and *story* refers to the plot or the chain of events (Heikkinen, 2018, p. 172; see Abbott, 2018, 13; Collins English Dictionary; Mykkänen, 2010, pp. 38-42). In this study, a narrative refers both to narratives produced by participants during interviews and to narratives constructed on the basis of these participant narratives as a result of an analytical process by a researcher.

Each of the interviews with the parents analysed in the study contained several narratives on different kinds of experiences each parent had of the educational partnership (e.g., daily pick-up situations and daily information). The analysis of the sub-studies focused in particular on the content of the narratives (i.e., what was told), the meanings the parents attributed to their experiences, and their evaluation of what happened (Riessman, 2008, p. 58; see Abbott, 2009; Elliott, 2005; Hyvärinen, 2008; Hänninen, 2018). The moral and

emotional aspects of the parents' narratives were also examined when analysing the data (see Hyvärinen, 2010). Parents' moral reflections were, for example, related to their interpretations of the responsibilities and duties of educators and themselves in the educational partnership. In analysing the narratives as a resource for interpretation, attention was paid to the words, tone and repetitions used by the parents (Riessman, 2008, p. 59). For example, one mother narrated how she has "acted like a tigress" and that she "had to tell the ECEC educators, who the child is". Using the words "tigress" and "had to" indicated what kind of parental agency was being communicated, in this case confrontational agency.

The overall analytical process consisted of three phases with related goals: (i) gaining acquaintance with the data, (ii) specifying the research questions and to selecting the units of analysis for each, and (iii) analysing the data, starting with selecting an appropriate analytical method. Overall, as this study focused on narratives of parents' experiences, narrative analytical methods were applied (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Squire et al., 2008). Narrative content analysis and categorical-content readings were also used (Lieblich et al., 1998).

In the first phase of the analysis, the interviews were listened to, transcribed and carefully read a couple of times in order to gain a holistic picture of the data (see Hänninen, 2018). Several kinds of experiences were narrated in almost all of the interviews, although mainly in a similar tone. During this phase, the data were condensed and a short summary of each interview was created in accordance with the model developed by Labov and Walezky (1967/1997; see Hyvärinen, 2008, 2010). These summaries included a title, the plot of the narrative and the result of the collaboration (the start, phases, important events, and end of the story). In addition, the role of the actors in the narratives was examined, as also were the main themes of the narratives concerning the research questions. All of these were marked in the margins of the transcripts, along with reflections on the data. Themes such as being heard, issues of equality and power in the parent-teacher relationship and feelings of guilt were identified in the parents' narratives. These marginalia were utilized as a resource in the interpretation of the data.

In the second phase of the analysis, the data were read in relation to the research questions, meaning that narratives, relevant to of each research question were identified and selected for analysis. These selected narratives ranged in length from a few sentences to longer textual entities. After identifying and extracting the narratives (Squire, 2008; Squire et al., 2008) relevant to each research question, they were analysed by applying narrative analysis, narrative positioning analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995; see Riessman, 2008; Bamberg, 2004) and/or narrative content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), including categorisation of their content (see Table 2). The analysis of each of the three sub-studies will be described separately in chronological order.

*The first sub-study* examined parents' narratives on the teacher-child relationship and the positioning of the child in this relationship (Rautamies et al., 2016). In total, 215 narratives were analysed. These narratives contained, for example, parents' talk about teacher-child interaction in specific situations and

their interpretations and perceptions of the teacher–child relationship, the daily information about the child given by their ECEC teachers, and teacher–child interaction in certain situations as described by the child at home. In the analysis of the selected narratives, attention was given to the type and quality of the parent-reported teacher–child relationships and the positioning (Bamberg, 2004) of the child in these relationships. Following the ideas of narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) and narrative categorical-content reading (Lieblich et al., 1998), three different kinds of narratives about teacher–child relationships were identified. These were and categorised as negative, neutral and positive. After this step, the different kinds of teacher–child relationships identified were named and counted. Narratives that represented the characteristics of each category were then selected, and an abstract of each was created as an illustrative example. In the last phase of the analysis, the positioning of the child in each selected episode was examined ( $n = 215$ ) by applying Bamberg’s (2004) notions of narrative positioning (Rautamies et al., 2016). Lastly, the nine different ways in which the child was positioned in relation to the teacher were named.

*The second sub-study* examined how parental agency is manifested and related to the emotions as narrated by the parents (Rautamies et al., 2019). First, all of the interviews were read through carefully, paying attention to how the parents narrated their behavioural and communicational actions, influence and initiatives in the educational partnership (i.e., agency) and the emotions they reported feeling. All emotions mentioned by the parents when reflecting on their agency were extracted from the transcripts and colour-coded. The narratives were then analysed and compared to identify the different kinds of agency in the educational partnership narrated by the parents. Next, three categories of parental agency were found, and all the selected narratives were re-coded into one of these categories and counted. In the second phase of the analysis, attention was paid to the emotions related to these pre-identified and named types of parental agency. Parents’ narratives describing pleasant and unpleasant emotions and their relative intensity were of special interest (see Widen & Russell, 2008). The emotions narrated by the parents were then named and listed under the three categories of parental agency. Next, the starting points or triggers for the enactment of agency, the emotions related to the enactment of agency and, finally, the emotions resulting from the enactment of parental agency were targeted by applying the analytical framework of Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2015). Finally, following the idea of narrative analysis (see Hänninen, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1995), three compound narratives were constructed to illustrate each category of parental agency and the emotions related to it.

*The third sub-study* examined the parents’ narratives with the aim of identifying what they regarded as the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership (Rautamies et al., 2021). First, all of the interview transcripts were read carefully in order to identify and extract all of the talk about trust in the educational partnership and experiences related to this. The level of trust narrated varied from strong to weak or wholly absent. After identifying and extracting the parts of the narratives (Squire, 2008; Squire et al., 2008) relevant to

the issue of parental trust, the data were content analysed (Lieblich et al., 1998) in three phases. First, they were named according to their main content and compared with each other. The results yielded four main categories of factors critical for parental trust in the educational partnership. These categories concerned good quality ECEC (including the parent-teacher relationship and pedagogical practices) and good quality of the educational partnership (including parental support and parents' proactive agency). Finally, in order to describe the main elements of parental trust, the four categories were grouped based on their content into two main categories: (1) the child's well-being, and (2) a supportive teacher-parent relationship and collaboration. Table 2 presents an overview of the sub-studies and the research questions they addressed.

TABLE 2 Overview of the three sub-studies

Sub-studies	Research Questions	Unit of analysis, data	Analysis
I Teacher-child relationships narrated by parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation (Rautamies et al., 2016)	1. What kinds of teacher-child relationships can be identified in the narratives of the parents? 2. How are the children positioned in the different kinds of teacher-child relationships as narrated by the parents?	21 interviews with the parents (17 mothers, 4 fathers)  Narratives ( $n = 215$ ) on the teacher-child relationship	Analysis of narratives and qualitative content analysis 1. Categorical-content reading 2. Analysis of the positioning of the child
II Parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership (Rautamies et al., 2019)	1. What types of parental agency can be identified in the educational partnership in the ECEC context? 2. How are different kinds of emotions related to these types of agency?	23 interviews with parents (18 mothers, 5 fathers)  Narratives ( $n = 68$ ) on parental agency in the educational partnership	Qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis
III Trust in the educational partnership narrated by parents of a child with challenging behaviour (Rautamies et al., 2021)	1. What are the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership in parents' narratives?	23 interviews with parents (18 mothers, 5 fathers)  Narratives of parents on their experiences of parental trust in the educational partnership	Qualitative content analysis and analysis of narratives

### 4.3 Guiding ethical principles

Ethical principles, the importance of which are emphasised when doing qualitative and narrative research, were considered throughout the research process (see Hänninen, 2008). This study was implemented following the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012, 2019) and the ethical guidelines on conducting narrative studies. The ethical principles of relevance here concerned maintaining appropriate ethical attitudes and behaviour towards the participating parents and the trustworthiness of the study.

The following ethical principles received special attention when interviewing the parents: *respect for their dignity, free will, autonomy and privacy,*

*and preventing any harm to the participants* (e.g., Hänninen, 2008; Josselson, 2007; Kuula, 2015; Smythe & Murray, 2000). These principles were also followed with respect to the children and ECEC professionals mentioned in the parents' narratives. Furthermore, an important aim of the study was to make it a *strengthening experience* for the participants throughout the research process (see Heikkinen, 2001; Syrjälä et al., 2006). In terms of respecting the free will of the participants, they were given sufficient oral and written information before providing their informed consent (Smythe & Murray, 2000). In other words, the parents were carefully informed about their rights and the researchers' duties in the study. With this information, misunderstandings or the misuse of participant data can be avoided.

Creating a confidential relationship with the parents served as the starting point for the data collection (Josselson, 2007, p. 539). The parents were informed before the interviews about the motives, aims, proceedings and voluntary nature of the study and the relevant ethical principles before being asked them to sign the informed consent form. They were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. Additionally, they were informed that their anonymity, as well as the anonymity of their child, the daycare centre and their child's educators, was guaranteed in the study reports. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were given pseudonyms to be used in the initial data and reports. In addition, the parents were only asked for personal data or information that was of direct relevance to the study, as per the Finnish Data Protection Act 1050 (2018).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, especially with respect to the documentation, analysis and reporting processes, the research process was guided by the following principles: carefulness, honesty, objectivity and sensitivity. For example, as already stated, the parents were only asked to divulge personal background information of direct relevance to the study. Owing to the sensitive nature of the analysis and the results, participant anonymity was maintained in all the study reports. Furthermore, data protection was guaranteed by storing the audio recordings and transcripts in password-protected files on a personal computer. The names and places (daycare centres) mentioned in the interviews were coded with pseudonyms, and the key link to the names and pseudonyms was kept in a separate, secure file on a password-protected computer. Only the author of this thesis had access to the original interview data, as the co-researchers were not involved in the interview analysis.

As the author of this thesis, I also critically reflected on my activities and choices concerning the study during the research process, starting from the values, motives and aims of the study (Hänninen, 2008). I found the research topic to be important and topical, as research showed that social and emotional difficulties were becoming increasingly common in daycare centres (Määttä et al., 2017; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). I also had personal, professional experiences with challengingly behaving children. I also acknowledge the importance of early support for children via a successful educational partnership in the ECEC context not only for children's well-being, learning and growth but also their

mental health. One of the motives for this study was to obtain knowledge that could assist ECEC teachers in successfully cooperating with children who have difficulties in self-regulation and their families.

## 5 RESULTS OF THE SUB-STUDIES

### 5.1 Problematic, neutral and caring teacher-child relationships and positioning of the child in these relationships

The first sub-study examined parents' narratives about teacher-child relationships and the way their child was positioned in these relationships (Rautamies et al., 2016). The findings revealed three different kinds of teacher-child relationships, i.e., problematic, neutral (functional) and caring, in accordance with which the child was positioned. The parents' narratives about teacher-child relationships mainly fell into the neutral category (103/215 narratives). Furthermore, the findings showed that the children were positioned in these three teacher-child relationships in nine different ways, ranging from the child as troublesome to the child as unconventional and unique. The three different kinds of relationships and how children were positioned in them are described next.

A problematic teacher-child relationship was described by the parents as conflictual, distant and unprofessional. The child was typically positioned in this relationship as the *wrong kind of child* or a *troublesome child* who caused conflicts in the child group. The child was in the parents' words "too wild" or "too difficult". Teachers' communications about the child, especially in pick-up situations and parental conferences, were experienced by the parents as negative. In these narratives, the teachers had not found effective pedagogical methods through which they could cooperate with the child.

A neutral teacher-child relationship can be described as a functional and professional relationship. In this relationship, the child was mainly positioned as *a child with a need for special support* or as *an unconventional child* who was accepted as he/she was and who was supported by the teachers as a part of their daily work. However, the child was also positioned as *an ordinary child* whose special needs were not recognised by the teachers, a situation which the parents saw as

problematic. The child's challenging behaviour was not a problem for the teacher, who was able, according to one mother, to get along with the child. In addition, the parents emphasised the professional quality of the teachers' behaviour. These narratives typically described teachers' daily information about the child as neutral.

A caring teacher-child relationship can be described as a warm and intimate relationship. In these narratives, the child was mainly positioned as a *good child* or as an *individual child*. In some contexts, the child behaved well, while in other contexts the child more commonly exhibited challenging behaviour. Furthermore, the child was positioned as a *unique child* who for some teachers was a source of much joy and delight. In these relationships the teacher and the child typically liked each other very much. Warm and humorous daily information from the teachers about the child also characterised these narratives. Teachers emphasised the positive qualities of the child, while the parents narrated the child as talented and gifted. The teachers were narrated as skilful professionals who found effective pedagogical methods to cooperate with the child.

## **5.2 Proactive, confrontational and hindered parental agency with related emotions**

The second sub-study examined parental agency in parent-teacher relationships and the emotions these aroused in parents (Rautamies et al., 2019). Three different kinds of parental agency were identified, namely proactive, confrontational and hindered. The findings showed that emotions and parental agency were closely interconnected. Fear and concern, especially about the child's well-being in the daycare centre, were narrated by all parents across all three types of agency. Positive emotions were related to proactive parental agency, while negative emotions were related to confrontational parental agency. Ambivalent and neutral emotions were typically narrated by parents with hindered agency.

*Proactive parental agency* was identified in most of the interviews (16/23). Typically, this agency type was manifested in collaborative activities by the parents who shared common goals with the teachers. For example, the parents and the ECEC teachers collaborated in helping the child to handle tantrums and difficult emotions. The ECEC teachers supported parents' proactive agency by, for example, documenting parents' thoughts and wishes, as well as agreements and disagreements, regarding their child's individual educational plan. If misunderstandings arose in the parent-teacher relationship, these were resolved. Finally, collaboration with the teachers led these parents to experience of relief, joy and gratitude. Parents whose narratives showed proactive agency with related positive emotions were named *grateful partners*.

*Confrontational parental agency* was identified in seven interviews, but accounted for more than 60% of the parental agency described in these narratives in only two cases. The parents reported engaging in many activities to support their child's well-being in the daycare centre, but without obtaining any positive results. One mother said that in desperation she acted like a tigress in trying to find a friend for her child in the daycare centre, but no such friend was ever found. The parents and the ECEC teachers did not arrive at a shared understanding of the child, the child's difficulties or of the child's needs for support. Emotions like anger, guilt, shame and sorrow were typically narrated by the parents in connection with this agency type. They were disappointed when they felt that they and their child were totally misunderstood by the teachers. Parents whose narratives showed confrontational agency and emotions related to this were named *desperate fighters*.

*Hindered parental agency* was identified in 19 interviews and was prominent in one interview. It was characterised by cautious activities and initiatives by the parents in the educational partnership that resulted in minimal influence. Descriptions, such as "being stunned when this flood of negative feedback started", characterised these parents' talk about their experiences of the educational partnership. Pick-up situations were especially anxious moments for these parents. The parents could be described as uncertain parents, whose emotions and will were conflicting, and who only afterwards understood how they should have communicated with the teachers. The parents typically reflected on collaborative situations from the perspectives of both themselves and the teachers. The enactment of agency led these parents to feel anger, frustration and disappointment when they noticed that their cautious initiatives had no influence. The parents whose narratives indicated hindered agency and emotions related to this were named *confused receivers*.

### **5.3 The critical elements of parental trust in the educational partnership**

The third research question, especially focused on in the third sub-study, examined parents' different kinds of experiences from the viewpoint of parental trust in the educational partnership (Rautamies et al., 2021). The following two main categories of elements critical for parental trust were identified: (1) the child's well-being in the daycare centre, and (2) a supportive and collaborative parent-teacher relationship.

The well-being of the child was the primary concern of all the parents, especially on the issue of poor peer relationships owing to the child's impulsive behaviour. Parental trust in the child's well-being at the daycare centre was associated with a respectful and good-quality teacher-child relationship and the use of fair and meaningful pedagogical practices by the ECEC teachers, as narrated by the parents. As one mother stated, it was important for parents that

the teachers “knew the child, accepted the child and saw the child in a realistic and holistic way”. The importance of not negatively positioning the child and professional behaviour on the part of the ECEC teachers were emphasised by the parents.

The second element of trust, a supportive parent-teacher relationship and collaboration, included supporting the parents as capable mothers and fathers and encouraging the parents as active partners in the educational partnership. The narratives that showed strong parental trust included expressions of gratitude not only on account of how their child was pedagogically supported by the ECEC teachers but also owing to the support they themselves received. It was important for the parents not to feel blamed or judged by the teachers because of the challenging behaviour of their child, which could be perceived as “incompetent parenting”, as one mother explained. The importance of supportive interaction, i.e., honest, sincere and neutral or positive everyday communication, was emphasised by the parents. The parents thought that they should not be burdened by daily negative messages about the behaviour of their child. Supportive collaboration can be interpreted as strengthening parents’ hope and trust with regard to their child and themselves, as well as strengthening their ability to cope with the educational challenges they encounter while raising their child. This also included an understanding and compassionate way of communicating with the parents. The importance of being heard by the teachers was emphasised by the parents. It was important for them that they could share their concerns about their child’s well-being, their knowledge of their child, and their pedagogical thoughts with the ECEC teachers. A successful educational partnership based on parental trust produced positive outcomes, such as a common understanding of the child and the child’s behaviour and shared educational goals and pedagogical methods.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

The main purpose of this study was to obtain more profound knowledge and understanding of the educational partnership from the viewpoint of the parents of a child with challenging behaviour in the ECEC context. The educational partnership was examined by focusing on the teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships. The teacher-child relationship was addressed from the perspective of the positioning of the child in the relationship, and parent-teacher relationships were explored from the perspectives of parental agency and parental trust.

### **6.1 Discussion of main findings and implications**

#### **6.1.1 The teacher-child relationship and the positioning of children in this relationship**

The study confirmed that a child's challenging behaviour poses a risk to the smooth functioning of the teacher-child relationship as perceived by the parents (e.g., Buyse et al., 2008; Doumen et al., 2008; Manzioupoulos, 2005). However, dysfunctional and conflictual relationships were not the most prevalent types of teacher-child relationships identified in the study. Rather, the parents' narratives of their experiences of the teacher-child relationship ranged widely from problematic to functional and caring. The results reflect the findings of Greene et al. (2002), who identified high rates of negative, but also neutral and positive, teacher-student interactions in their study of 5- to 11-year-olds with ADHD (Greene et al., 2002). The present results also support those reported by Ahonen (2015), who found that interactions between ECEC teachers and children with behavioural challenges varied from warm to distant. The present parents emphasised the importance of teacher sensitivity and lack of negativity and conflicts as the basis for establishing a warm and respectful teacher-child relationship. This kind of teacher-child relationship is characterised by strong

emotional support (Pianta et al., 2008) and can thus be beneficial for children with difficulties in self-regulation (Buyse et al., 2008; Merritt et al., 2012).

Previous studies have shown that a child's challenging behaviour poses a significant risk for the child being negatively positioned in the teacher-child relationship and in teachers' talk about the child (Lundan, 2009; Pihlaja, 2008; Pihlaja et al., 2015). The present study partially supports these findings, indicating that positioning the child negatively as a "troublesome child" or as the "wrong kind of child" was common in problematic teacher-child relationships. However, the parents' narratives indicated that the positioning of the child ranged broadly from negative to neutral and positive, as previously reported by Viitala (2014). In the narratives reporting negative positioning of the child, the teacher interpreted the child's disobedient behaviour as intentional, and as causing harm to both the teacher and other children. Locating the difficulty "inside the child" can be considered problematic from the point of view of the educational partnership. Interpreting a child's behaviour as deliberate shows lack of understanding of the relationship between a child's behaviour and the context in which it occurs, as stressed, for example, by Thomas and Loxley (2007). The present study supports an earlier finding that everyday short discussions with teachers are especially important for parents (Karila, 2011; Tiilikka, 2005). Further, the present study revealed that such discussions can serve as arenas for enlightening parents about current teacher-child relationships and how their child is positioned in these. For the parents, it was of critical importance that their child was not negatively positioned in this relationship. In this study, the parents emphasised the importance of ECEC teachers showing appropriate professional attitudes and behaviour when working with their children. It is noteworthy that despite the legislative guidelines on ECEC, the risks remain that in the case of children with challenging behaviour a good-quality teacher-child relationship and a professional approach towards the child may not be realised.

### **6.1.2 Parent-teacher relationships: parental agency and emotions**

Although the agency of teachers, children and students has been investigated in other educational settings, particularly in Finland (e.g., Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Rainio, 2008; Sairanen, 2020), parental agency remains an understudied phenomenon, especially in the field of ECEC. The present findings revealed diversity in the manifestations of parental agency in the parent-teacher relationship in ECEC. Two different kinds of active parental agency were identified, i.e., proactive and confrontational agency, and one type of passive agency, i.e., hindered parental agency. These findings mirror the types of parental agency, varying from active to passive, in the educational partnership previously identified in the Finnish school context (Honkasilta et al., 2015).

The commonest type of parental agency identified in the parents' narratives was proactive agency, which included parents' active initiatives (e.g., making suggestions and proposing initiatives, and asking for help) in the parent-teacher relationship. In particular, it was important for the parents that they could collaborate with the teachers in promoting the well-being of their child, as earlier

stressed by Fox et al. (2002). Proactive parental agency was, in these narratives, supported by the ECEC teachers, who took parents' initiatives seriously by, for example, documenting their thoughts concerning their child's education and well-being. This proactive parental collaboration with teachers in supporting and promoting the well-being of their child, also supports the notion of the relational nature of agency (see Edwards, 2005, 2010; Sairanen, 2020) and the collaborative partnership (Kuhn et al., 2017). In the case of confrontational agency, the ECEC teachers either did not support or ignored the active initiatives proposed by the parents. In such cases, the two parties did not collaborate or share common goals regarding their activities.

The findings of this study showed parental agency to be intertwined with emotions in the educational partnership. While a close relationship between emotions and agency has been noted earlier in studies on the agency of professionals (Hökkä et al., 2017; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015), the present study yielded insights into the rich variety of emotions and related parental agency in the ECEC context. The emotions narrated by the parents varied from unpleasant to pleasant and seemed to either activate or impede their agency. For example, joy and satisfaction worked as triggers for proactive agency and active initiatives in the educational partnership. Unpleasant emotions, like fear, anger and concern for the child's well-being, worked in turn as triggers for enacting either proactive or confrontational agency. This result is in line with the study by Hökkä et al. (2017), who found that unpleasant emotions may also promote constructive agency in social relationships. The findings also showed that fear, along with embarrassment and confusion, prevented some parents from exercising active agency, particularly in pick-up situations, during which they reacted cautiously or minimally to the information provided by teachers on the day's events.

Finally, the findings confirmed the emotional and relational nature of parental agency and showed that parental agency is not yet a well-established construct. Here, drawing on current discussions of agency (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2013), parental agency in the ECEC context was operationalised as parents having an influence, in particular on their child's well-being, through their behavioural and communicative actions in the educational partnership. This conceptualisation could also be utilised in future studies on parental agency.

### **6.1.3 Parental trust in the parent–teacher relationship**

The experiences parents narrated on the topic of the well-being of their child at the daycare centre were critical in relation to their trust in the educational partnership. This was an expected result, as challenging behaviour presents a potentially serious threat to a child's social well-being in the daycare centre (Corso, 2007). Parents' experiences of fair, equal and meaningful pedagogical practices by the ECEC teachers were also related to parental trust in the educational partnership. This can be explained by the links between the negative positioning of a child, a dysfunctional teacher–child relationship and the pedagogical methods used (see Salminen, 2014). The findings confirmed the

importance of teachers having a holistic understanding of the child and taking a positive attitude to the child when collaborating with the parents of a challengingly behaving child. This is reasonable, since there is a risk of the image of the child in these cases becoming too narrow and negative (Rautamies & Biskop, 2012). Parents' experiences of problematic teacher-child relationships and of teachers labelling the child as a "bad child" were related to the lack of parental trust in these parents' narratives on the educational partnership. The study revealed the importance of implementing a pedagogy based on the strengths of the child, as outlined in the Finnish ECEC guidelines. This appears to be stressed in cases of children who exhibit challenging behaviour. Although in general the parents were satisfied with how the Finnish ECEC educators worked with their children (Poikonen & Kontoniemi, 2011), the findings revealed a risk for parental dissatisfaction with the pedagogical practices of the ECEC teachers when faced with a challengingly behaving child (Kos et al., 2006). One reason for this may be parents' high expectations of the professional competence of ECEC teachers, who are generally highly educated in Finland.

A supportive parent-teacher relationship and collaboration was another critical aspect of trust in the ECEC educational partnership identified in this study. This aspect included respectful attitudes and behaviour on the part of the ECEC teachers towards parents and viewing parents as capable. This seems reasonable, as the parents of a child with challenging behaviour, i.e., with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, are familiar with accusations of poor parenting (Broomhead, 2013; Peters & Jackson, 2008). Parents' experiences of being heard by the ECEC teachers were especially important from the perspective of parental trust. This aspect included hearing parents' concerns about the well-being of their child, especially in relation to their child's peer rejection and consequent lack of peer relationships. Listening to parents may reduce parental stress and anxiety, both of which are common states for the parents of a challengingly behaving child (e.g., Harborne et al., 2004; Peters & Jackson, 2008). Recognising parents as experts on their child enhanced parents' proactive agency and active influence on their child's ECEC. This study supports the findings of Poikonen and Kontoniemi (2011), who stressed the importance of mutual trust in the educational partnership. Respect and trust shown by ECEC teachers towards parents as capable educators of their child can be interpreted as prerequisites for ECEC teachers' supportive practices and for proactive parental agency and trust in the educational partnership, as also found previously (e.g., Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Bromer et al., 2011; Keen, 2007; Minke, 2006).

#### **6.1.4 Relational educational partnership**

The main question addressed in this study was: How do the parents of a child exhibiting challenging behavior narrate the educational partnership? The educational partnership was variously narrated in this study, as the parents' narratives about their relationships with ECEC teachers, their efforts at exercising agency and the emotions related, and their trust in the educational partnership

itself also varied. Overall, the educational partnership was narrated as (1) relationally constructed, (2) individually manifested, and (3) emotionally imbued.

The parents' narratives mostly indicated a functional and close but also conflictual and distant parent-teacher relationship. The parents narrated themselves mostly as active partners in this relationship (proactive and conflictual parental agencies) but also as passive partners (hindered parental agency). The parents' contribution to the educational partnership was above all to bring their knowledge about their child into their discussions with the ECEC teachers, especially by expressing or trying to express who the child is. In the parents' narratives, parental trust was observed to be an especially important basis for a functional educational partnership and was strongly related to relationally constructed parental agency. Parents emphasised the importance of achieving a shared understanding about their child with the ECEC teachers. They strongly emphasised the importance of the ECEC teachers showing trust towards the child, of viewing the child as a potentially good and competent child, and in their ability as the child's parents to manage difficult situations with the child. For teachers to gain parental trust, parents considered it as especially important that the child was not negatively positioned as the wrong kind of child or as a troublesome child.

The parents' narratives were richly informed by emotions, varying from anger, dissatisfaction and bewilderment to satisfaction, gratitude and joy. This emotional component testified to the importance and sensitive nature of the educational partnership as experienced by the parents, along with their strong expectations and needs regarding their collaboration with the ECEC teachers. These findings highlight the role of ECEC teachers as professionals who have the responsibility for creating and developing the parent-teacher relationship (Karila, 2008). The importance of professional attitudes and behaviour by ECEC teachers in their relationship with the child and the child's parents, including and not stigmatising the child or blaming the parents for the child's behaviour was found to be crucial for a well-functioning educational partnership and for parental trust in the parent-teacher relationship. Valuing parents' expertise on their child, adopting functional pedagogical practices, and understanding the perspective of parents are critically important for achieving a functional and equal collaborative relationship with parents, especially when collaborating with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour.

### **6.1.5 Practical implications**

First, the findings of this study can serve as guidelines for ECEC teachers when attending to and reflecting on teacher-child relationships and how they position children in them. The study demonstrated the importance of sensitivity on the part of ECEC teachers in how they speak about individual children and what kinds of images they wish to convey about them when discussing them with their parents. The discursive practices of ECEC teachers in pick-up situations were found to be crucial in building a trustful educational partnership. In these situations, it is also crucial that parents "get to know the good news too" and that

the parents receive a holistic image of the child that portrays a unique and developing child who has specific strengths as well as areas in which support is needed, as proposed by Alijoki and Pihlaja (2011, p. 263). Furthermore, it is important in these situations to tell parents about their child's peer relationships, as this issue is related to the development of parental trust that their child's well-being is being considered in the daycare centre.

Second, the study highlights certain aspects of the parent-teacher relationship that teachers need to acknowledge and act upon. One of these concerns the way in which parental agency is manifested in the educational partnership. ECEC teachers should, for example, reflect on the prerequisites for achieving shared and sufficiently concrete goals as well as possible obstacles to proactive agency on the part of parents (see also Fox et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2015). Noticing and discussing the emotions that arise in parent-teacher relationships when collaborating with the parents of challengingly behaving children would appear to be important. For example, unpleasant emotions like shame and guilt are typically experienced by the parents of such a child (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Harborne et al., 2004) and may hinder parental agency, as shown in this study.

Third, the findings of this study may assist reflection on the factors that enhance or hinder the development of trust in the parent-teacher relationship. The findings point to the importance of teachers viewing the challengingly behaving child from both the child's and his/her parents' perspectives (Laakso et al., 2011). A more comprehensive understanding that can help teachers better support these children in the ECEC setting can be gained by teachers listening to what parents have to say on issues such as their children's behaviour, temperament and personality, interests and individual needs (i.e., intrinsic factors) (see Buyse et al., 2008). Listening to the parents proved to be a good starting point for supporting children's self-regulatory skills in the transactional child-context relationship (see Sameroff, 2010). It is important to listen to parents' concerns about their child's well-being, and about pedagogical aims and practices.

## **6.2 Evaluation of the study: Strengths and limitations**

### **6.2.1 Methodological reflections**

Narrative methods were a natural methodological choice when focusing on a sensitive topic, such as parents' experiences of the educational partnership (see Hänninen, 2008). In line with the goals of the study, a narrative approach also enabled the participants' voices to be heard (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Because of the emotionally evocative nature of the narratives (Heikkinen et al., 2007), it was also possible via the narratives to holistically enhance understanding of parents' experiences.

The data gathered for this study were rich and included positive, negative and neutral experiences. The data mostly comprised narratives by mothers (5 fathers, 18 mothers). On the assumption that discussions between women may be more emotional than discussions between men, this may be one reason why most of the parents' narratives were very emotional in their nature, including in relation to the educational partnership. It may also be that the mother was the more active spouse in the educational partnership, and hence may also have had more definite expectations and needs regarding the partnership than the father. Moreover, to gain a more comprehensive picture of the educational partnership, the voices of ECEC teachers should also be heard. As, in line with narrative research (Spector-Mersel, 2010), the parents selected their narratives, it is possible that they did not narrate certain experiences at all. In this sense, although rich, it can be argued that the data were partial and incomplete (see Riessman, 2008). The parents can be seen as purposeful actors in the interviews insofar as they may, for example, have narrated some of their experiences for specific purposes, such as to gain understanding of or find a moral justification for the behaviour of their child (Hänninen, 1999). Thus, we can assume that the participants' narratives were likely influenced by their motives. Furthermore, it should be noted that the interviewers guided and possibly sometimes also interrupted the parents and their narratives with questions. Although the interviewers mainly assumed the role of listeners in the interviews to minimise their influence on the parents' narratives, the interview data should be regarded as situational and dialogical (Riessman, 2008).

During the interviews, much attention was paid to creating a confidential atmosphere that encouraged the participants to divulge both sad and happy experiences of educational partnership. Additionally, the study was conducted so that the participants were "treated fairly" by informing them sufficiently about their rights and the researchers' duties. The interpretation and publication of the parents' narratives poses an ethical question about the ownership of the narratives (Smythe & Murray, 2000). In line with the assumptions of the narrative approach (e.g., Riessman, 2008), I understood the subjectivity of my role as a researcher when interpreting the parents' narratives and when retelling and reconstructing them. In practice, the narratives of the parents were touching and easily generated moral interpretations of the ECEC teachers' actions. This was especially the case with the narratives demonstrating a lack of parental trust. The solution was to reflect very carefully on the interpretations made. A research diary was used to enhance reliability concerning the analytical process and the study results. It is also worth recognising that as a kindergarten teacher and a mother, I have experiences of the educational partnership from the point of view of both a parent and an ECEC teacher. While this could be viewed as a potential limitation from the standpoint of objective knowledge, a reader of the narratives might regard this as a strength in terms of understanding and recognising the most meaningful aspects of the educational partnership as narrated by parents.

## 6.2.2 Trustworthiness of the study

Correspondence, persuasiveness and coherence are the criteria proposed by Riessmann (1993) when evaluating the trustworthiness of narrative studies. Conelly and Clandinin (1990) in turn proposed the concepts of *verisimilitude*, *apparentness* and *transferability* instead of the concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability (e.g., Estola, 1999; Heikkinen et al., 2012). These concepts, which have been considered suitable for narrative research as a whole, were also used in the present study.

*Verisimilitude* (resembling truth) refers to a reader being convinced by the narrative both logico-cognitively and emotionally and seeing the narrative as both credible and potentially true (Conelly & Clandinin, 1990; see also Heikkinen et al., 2007, p. 17). In this study, to ensure verisimilitude, the findings were organised to yield insights on parental experiences of the educational partnership in a credible and truthful way. In practice, all of this means that in an effort to capture the meanings they gave to their experiences, the interviews with the parents were listened to and read carefully, with special focus on the content of narration (see Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993). After this, to capture the variety and richness of the data and avoid losing anything essential, a written summary of each interview was made (see Labov & Walezky, 1967/1997). It should be noted that the findings remain more or less subjective interpretations of the parents' narratives, although I tried to be as faithful as possible to the meanings of the narratives as they seemed to be intended by the parents. Discussions with my supervisors on my interpretations of the parents' narratives further enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

To guarantee the *apparentness* (or transparency) and the *coherence* of the study, the research process has been carefully described, including the reasons for choosing the research topic, the epistemological and ontological assumptions, and its methodological underpinnings (see Conelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 2008, pp. 195–196). In addition, the process of gathering the data, including the selection of the participants, and the process of analysis have been accurately described so that readers may evaluate the interpretation process (Tracy, 2010). Balancing interpretations against direct quotations from the original data (Morrow, 2005) was intended to promote trustworthiness. The complex nature of the phenomenon of the educational partnership and the richness of the concepts applied in the study presented some challenges to write a coherent study report. The role of language (Finnish in this study) is emphasised in narrative studies when participants mediate their experiences and when the researcher retells them in the study reports. The sub-studies and the summaries were written in English, which was not the language of the parents. However, a native English-speaking academic, who can also speak Finnish, checked the study reports and gave his suggestions for more accurate translations. He paid special attention to the quotes used in the study reports, which he also received in the original Finnish.

Qualitative research and the narrative approach utilise the criterion of *transferability* instead of external validity or generalisability (Conelly & Clandinin,

1990; see also Tracy, 2010). By providing enough information about the research context and the research procedure, readers can follow and evaluate the interpretations of the data and generate their own ideas about how to transfer the findings to other contexts (Morrow, 2005). The findings of this study can especially be transferred to other national and international ECEC and school contexts when investigating the educational partnership as a phenomenon. However, it should be noted that educational partnership is typically more intensive in the Finnish ECEC context (and in the other Nordic ECEC contexts) than, for example, in school contexts. The results may also be of value when considering the educational partnership with all parents, not just with parents of challengingly behaving children.

### **6.2.3 Concluding remarks and future directions**

This study yielded insights on the teacher–child and parent–teacher relationships as components of the educational partnership from the perspective of parents, together with an elaborated theoretical understanding of the diverse nature of this phenomenon both generally and specifically in the case of parents with a challengingly behaving child. The study also provided practical guidelines for the building of a successful educational partnership.

The findings showed how parents view the teacher–child relationship and, crucially, how children are positioned within it by ECEC teachers. The findings also indicated the importance of parental trust in the educational partnership, and that this trust is enhanced by parents' positive experiences of their child's well-being and a supportive teacher–parent relationship. The results emphasised the relational and emotional nature of this partnership, which is based on parental agency and trust.

From the point of view of practice, the study yielded guidelines for evaluating the teacher–child and parent–teacher relationship and for reflecting on what kinds of interaction and behaviour in these relationships support parental trust and agency and hence help in building a strong educational partnership that supports children's behaviour and development. These guidelines can be implemented in ways that improve practices in the ECEC context.

The findings can especially be utilised in the pre-service training of ECEC teachers so that they are better prepared to work successfully with the parents of challengingly behaving children and create a trustful educational partnership with them. Furthermore, the results point to the importance of adequate in-service training and counselling when collaborating with these parents and their children. As challenging behaviour by children can present the risk of exacerbating the stress levels of those involved with them (Greene et al., 2002; Jeon et al., 2019) and interacting pedagogically with them (Ahonen, 2015) attention should also be paid to the well-being of ECEC teachers.

The findings of this study can be considered as applicable in other national and international ECEC and school contexts when developing ECEC practices. The findings can also be applied in policy-making to ensure the best possible

prerequisites for a successful educational partnership with the parents of challengingly behaving children, including the structural quality factors of ECEC (e.g., the adult-child ratio, group sizes, low turnover of teaching staff) (see Skalická et al., 2015; Vlasov et al., 2019). The present narrative interview study on parents' experiences could be complemented by a similar study on the experiences of ECEC teachers to obtain a more complete picture of the educational partnership.

## YHTEENVETO

### **Yhteistyön ytimessä: Kasvatusyhteistyö haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kertomana varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa**

#### **Tutkimuksen tausta**

Tämä väitöskirjatutkimus sijoittuu suomalaisen varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstiin ja se koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta ja yhteenvedosta. Tutkimuksella pyrittiin saamaan uutta tietoa kasvatusyhteistyöstä haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen aineistonkeruu sijoittuu ajankohtaan, jolloin kasvatusyhteistyö linjattiin Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteissa (2003, 2005) kasvatuskumppanuudeksi. Kasvatuskumppanuudella viitataan tässä tutkimuksessa vanhempien ja henkilöstön sitoutumiseen edistämään yhdessä lapsen hyvinvointia sekä kasvua, kehitystä ja oppimista (Stakes, 2003; 2005). Lisäksi kasvatusyhteistyön tavoite on tukea vanhempia tai huoltajia heidän kasvatustehtävässään. Tutkimuksessa lähestytään kasvatusyhteistyötä relationaalisenä ilmiönä tarkastelemalla vanhempien kertomuksia opettajan ja lapsen sekä opettajan ja vanhemman välisistä suhteista.

Lapsen haastava käytös on uhka opettajan ja lapsen (Sabol & Pianta, 2012) sekä opettajan ja vanhemman välisen myönteisen suhteen ja vanhempien luottamuksen rakentumiselle (Barkley, 2008; Lajunen & Laakso, 2011). Näiden suhteiden muodostumista uhkaavat myös opettajan ja vanhemman väliset jännitteet, jotka johtuvat esimerkiksi haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempia syyllistävästä puhetavoista (Broomhead, 2013; Peters & Jackson, 2008). Lapsen itsesäätelyn pulmat ja haastava käytös ovat lisäksi uhka lapsen hyvinvoinnille, kasvulle ja oppimiselle sekä lapsen myönteisten sosiaalisten suhteiden rakentumiselle (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Silver ym., 2005; 2010; Theule ym., 2011). Vaikka kasvatusyhteistyötä on tutkittu paljon koulun ja varhaiskasvatuksen konteksteissa (esim. Alasuutari, 2010a; Karila & Alasuutari, 2012; Keen, 2007), kasvatusyhteistyön tutkimus erityisesti haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien näkökulmasta on ollut vähäistä varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa.

Tässä tutkimuksessa lapsen haastava käytös viittaa lapsen ylivilkkaaseen ja impulsiiviseen käytökseen sekä lapsen itsesäätelyn kehityksen pulmiin, jotka ilmenevät erityisesti lapsen vaikeutena säädellä tunteitaan ja käyttäytymistään (Bronson, 2000; Lyons & O'Connor, 2006; McCabe ym., 2004; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Lasten itsesäätelytaitojen tuen tarve onkin lisääntynyt viime vuosina (Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; ks. Määttä ym. 2017). Kasvatusyhteistyön merkitys korostuu, kun lapsella ilmenee kehityksen tai oppimisen haasteita tai kun ilmenee huolta lapsen hyvinvoinnista (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet, 2018, s. 54–56). Lapsen itsesäätelyn kehityksen ja lapsen hyvinvoinnin turvaamisen edellytyksenä voidaan pitää sitä, että varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisen kasvatusyhteistyö perustuu myönteiseen suhteeseen lapseen ja lapsen vanhempiin (Hemmeter et al., 2006; Dunlap & Fox, 2009; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Toimiva kasvatusyhteistyö haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kanssa on

tärkeää varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisten ja vanhempien sekä lapsen näkökulmasta (esim. Kuhn ym., 2017).

### **Tutkimuskysymykset ja tutkimuksen toteutus**

Tutkimuksen tarkoitus on kuulla ja ymmärtää haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kokemuksia kasvatusyhteistyöstä varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan opettajan ja lapsen välistä suhdetta sekä millaisena lapsi näyttää tässä suhteessa vanhempien kertomana. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan vanhempien ja opettajien välisessä suhteessa vanhempien toimijuutta ja siihen liittyviä tunteita sekä vanhempien kertomuksia luottamuksesta. Tutkimukselle asetettiin pääkysymys ja kolme tarkentavaa alakysymystä. Tutkimuksen pääkysymys oli: Millaisena kasvatusyhteistyö näyttää käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kertomuksissa?

Tarkentavat alakysymykset olivat:

1. Mitä vanhemmat kertovat opettajan ja lapsen välisestä suhteesta sekä lapsesta tässä suhteessa?
2. Millaisena vanhempien toimijuus ilmenee ja miten se on yhteydessä vanhempien tunteisiin opettajan ja vanhemman välisessä suhteessa?
3. Millaiset vanhempien kasvatusyhteistyön kokemukset ovat merkittävimmät vanhempien luottamuksen näkökulmasta?

Tutkimuksessa haastateltiin yhteensä 23 vanhempaa (18 äitiä ja 5 isää), jotka kokivat lapsensa käyttäytymisen haastavana ja joilla oli kokemusta vähintään kymmenen kuukauden ajalta kasvatusyhteistyöstä varhaiskasvatuksen henkilöstön kanssa. Tutkimusaineisto on kerätty pääosin vuonna 2011–2013. Tutkimukseen rekrytoituista perheistä suurin osa ( $n = 15$ ) osallistui tutkimuksen käynnistyessä Perhekouluun, jossa tuettiin ryhmämuotoisesti ylivilkkaita sekä impulsiivisesti ja haastavasti käyttäytyviä lapsia ja heidän vanhempiaan (Laakso ym. 2011; Sandberg ym., 2004). Perhekouluun osallistuneilla lapsilla oli sekä varhaiskasvatuksen että terveydenhuollon ammattilaisen arvio tai lausunto lapsella tunnistetuista itsesäätelyn haasteista (Barkley, 2008). Muut tutkimukseen osallistuneet perheet ( $n = 8$ ) rekrytoitiin lähestymällä päiväkoteja ja kouluja (1. ja 2. luokat) sekä paikallista ADHD-yhdistystä.

Tutkimuksen keskeisimmät tieteenteoreettiset lähtökohdat ja metodiset valinnat nojaavat narratiiviseen tutkimukseen (Elliott, 2005; Heikkinen, 2018; Hänninen, 1999; Riessman, 2008; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Narratiivisuutta hyödynnettiin niin tutkimusaineiston keruussa, aineiston analyysissä kuin sen raportoinnissakin. Tutkimusaineisto hankittiin narratiivisuuteen pohjautuvilla puolistrukturoituilla haastatteluilla (Riessman, 2008). Analyysissä sovellettiin narratiivisia analysointimenetelmiä (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Lisäksi tulosten raportoinnissa korostui kerronnallisuus.

## **Tutkimustulokset**

Kasvatusyhteistyö näyttäytyi haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien erilaisina, yksilöllisesti vanhemman ja opettajan välisessä suhteessa rakentuvina, tunteiden kyllästäminä kertomuksina. Tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin ongelmallisen, neutraalin ja välittävän opettaja-lapsisuhteen kertomuksia, joissa lapsi positioitui usealla eri tavalla. Ongelmallisen opettaja-lapsisuhteen kertomuksissa lapsi positioitui ensisijaisesti vääränlaiseksi ja hankalaksi lapseksi. Neutraalin opettaja-lapsisuhteen kertomuksissa taas erilaiseksi lapseksi, jolla tunnistettiin erityisen tuen tarpeita, mutta myös tavalliseksi lapseksi, jolla näitä ei tunnistettu. Välittävän opettaja-lapsisuhteen kertomuksissa lapsi positioitui hyväksi, erityiseksi ja yksilölliseksi lapseksi, joka tuotti iloa opettajalle.

Tulokset osoittivat, että vanhempien toimijuus näyttäytyi proaktiivisena, vastustavana ja vetäytyvänä vanhemman ja opettajan välisessä suhteessa. Vanhempien toimijuus ilmeni heidän kertomuksissaan kiitollisten vanhempien aloitteellisuutena ja yhdessä työskentelynä opettajien kanssa. Se ilmeni myös vanhempien epätoivoisina yrityksinä vaikuttaa lapsensa hyvinvointiin sekä vanhempien kykenemättömyytenä toimia haastavina kokemissaan kasvatusyhteistyön tilanteissa. Vanhempien kerronnassa tunteet kietoutuivat vahvasti heidän toimijuuteensa. Miellyttävät ja epämiellyttävät tunteet, kuten ilo ja kiitollisuus tai pettymys ja kiukku olivat yhteydessä vanhempien aktiiviseen toimijuuteen (proaktiivinen ja vastustava toimijuus). Ambivalentit tunteet, kuten se että vanhempi koki sekä pelon että luottamuksen tunteita yhtäaikaisesti ja tämän kokemuksen aiheuttama epävarmuus puolestaan olivat yhteydessä vanhempien vetäytyvään ja epävarmaan toimijuuteen.

Tutkimuksessa ilmeni, että lapsen hyvinvoinnin toteutuminen päiväkodissa sekä opettajan kannustava suhde vanhempaan olivat merkityksellisiä vanhempien luottamuksen näkökulmasta. Vanhempien luottamus lapsensa hyvinvoinnin toteutumiseen sisälsi vanhempien kokemuksen lapsen oikeudenmukaisesta ja tasavertaisesta kohtelusta sekä opettajien mielekkäistä pedagogisista käytänteistä. Lisäksi vanhempien luottamus oli kytköksissä myönteisiin toimijuuden kokemuksiin. Vanhempien kokemukset epäoikeudenmukaisista ja ei-toimivista pedagogisista käytänteistä, lapsen leimaamisesta hankalaksi lapseksi sekä kokemus lapsen ei-toimivista toverisuhteista puolestaan olivat tunnistettavissa vanhempien epäluottamuksen kertomuksissa.

## **Johtopäätökset**

Tutkimuksen johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että tutkimus syventää ymmärrystä kasvatusyhteistyöstä tarkastelemalla sitä relationaalisenä ilmiönä, jonka keskiössä ovat opettajan suhteet niin lapseen kuin vanhempaankin. Haastavasti käyttäytyvän lapsen vanhempien kanssa tehtävässä yhteistyössä erityisen merkityksellisinä näyttäytyvät lapsen positio, vanhempien toimijuus ja tunteet sekä luottamus. Vanhemmat korostivat opettajien ammatillisten asenteiden ja toiminnan merkitystä suhteessa lapseen ja vanhempiin.

Tutkimuksen perusteella voidaan väittää, että luottamuksellisen kasvatusyhteistyön keskiössä ovat erityisesti vanhempien kokemukset opettajan ja lapsen välisestä suhteesta. Tärkeää on ennen kaikkea se, etteivät vanhemmat koe, että

heidän lapsensa leimataan väärenlaiseksi, pahaksi tai hankalaksi lapseksi. Vanhempien luottamuksen kannalta merkittävänä kokemuksena voidaankin pitää tutkimuksen perusteella sitä, että vanhemmat voivat luottaa lapsensa hyvinvoinnin toteutumiseen päiväkodissa.

Vanhemman ja opettajan välinen suhde näyttäytyi haastavasti käyttäytyvän lapsen vanhempien kertomuksissa moninaisena: läheisenä ja toimivana, mutta myös konfliktisena ja etäisenä. Tämä tutkimus syventää ymmärrystä vanhempien kasvatusyhteistyön toimivuudesta. Vanhempien kokemus kuulluksi tulemisesta oli tärkeä esimerkiksi silloin kun vanhemmilla oli huolta lapsen toverisuhteista päiväkodissa. Vanhemmat kokivat tärkeäksi, että heidän lapsitunteuksensa ja ajatuksensa toimivista pedagogisista käytännöistä otettiin huomioon. Vanhempien toimivuuden voidaankin nähdä rakentuvan relationaalisesti ja tuottavan yhteistä ymmärrystä lapsesta ja toimivista pedagogisista käytännöistä. Vanhempien kertomuksissa opettajat mahdollistivat vanhempien aktiivisen vaikuttamisen lapsensa varhaiskasvatukseen. Tutkimus osoitti, että vanhempien toimijuus ja tunteet näyttäytyivät yhteen kietoutuneina. Tunteet sekä edistivät että ehkäisivät vanhempien toimijuutta.

Tutkimus antaa välineitä varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisille rakentaa luottamuksellista kasvatusyhteistyötä ja vahvistaa vanhempien toimijuutta. Tutkimus osoittaa päivittäisten kohtaamisten merkityksellisyyden, kun toimitaan haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kanssa. Näissä tilanteissa on tärkeää, että vanhemmille kerrotaan lapsen onnistumisista sekä toverisuhteista ja leikeistä, jotka ovat lapsen hyvinvoinnin toteutumisen kannalta merkittäviä. Lisäksi kasvatusyhteistyössä on keskeistä pyrkimys jaettuun lapsikäsitukseen sekä jaettuihin pedagogisiin tavoitteisiin ja toimintakäytäntöihin, jotka voidaan saavuttaa yhteisissä kasvatustaluteluissa vanhempia kuulemalla. Kasvatusyhteistyötä haastavasti käyttäytyvien lasten vanhempien kanssa tulisi jatkossa tutkia myös varhaiskasvatuksen henkilöstön näkökulmasta.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Invitation to participate in the study

#### *Challengingly behaving children in the daycare centre: Parents' experiences of the educational partnership*

My name is Erja Rautamies, and I work in the Department of Education (early childhood education) at the University of Jyväskylä. I'm currently doing my doctoral thesis, in which I plan to examine the experiences of the educational partnership of parents who have a challengingly behaving child. My aim is to interview parents who have been clients of daycare services for at least 10 months and who consider that their child (age 3 to 7 years) shows challenging behaviour. I am interested in the different kinds of experiences (pleasant and unpleasant) of parents especially those that parents have found to be significant. I am also interested in knowing parents' wishes for when collaborating with early childhood education professionals.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and participating parents can withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. In addition, the privacy of all participants will be protected, and their anonymity guaranteed. All personal data will be coded so that it will not be possible to identify any of the participants, children, daycare centres or ECEC professionals from the study reports. The original data will be used and securely stored by the principal investigator. We will ask all potential participants to give their informed consent to participate in the study and to record the interviews, which will later be transcribed. The interview data will be used in this study to develop and improve ECEC practices. I, as the principal investigator, together with my supervisor will commit to handling the interview data confidentially and to conduct the research responsibly by following the relevant guidelines.

I am willing to participate in the study and I consent to my interview being recorded. I also consent to the utilisation of the transcribed and coded interview data for the research purposes described above.

Date \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to the utilisation of the transcribed and coded interview data in research by other students supervised by the principal investigator and her supervisor in the Department of Education at the University of Jyväskylä.

Date \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

Principal investigator:  
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## Appendix 2: Interview

### **The main themes of the interview**

(briefly described at the beginning of the interview):

I Orientation

II Parents' experiences of the educational partnership

IV Evaluation (parents' needs, expectations and wishes)

In this study, the term challengingly behaving child refers a child who has difficulties in regulating his/her emotions and behaviour (as discussed with the child's parents) and the challenges this presents in the educational context.

### **I Orientation: Family, child, child's challenging behaviour**

- Could you please describe the members of your family and the age of the child in question?
- Could you describe why and how you decided to participate in the study? If you have participated in the Family School Programme, could you please tell me how you were admitted to the programme?
- How would you describe your child's challenging behaviour? How does it manifest at home and in the daycare centre?
- Could you describe a typical day in the life of your child?
- What does your child typically tell you about his or her daycare day?
- How would you describe the relationship between your child and the ECEC teachers?

### **II Questions on your experiences of the educational partnership**

- I would like to hear about your experiences of the educational partnership. I would like to hear generally about both pleasant and unpleasant experiences and experiences that have been meaningful for you.
- How would you describe the beginnings of the educational partnership?
- How has the educational partnership progressed?
- Could you please tell me about any pleasant, unpleasant, and meaningful experiences you have had?
- I would like to hear especially about your experiences over the past year, (autumn and spring terms), including different kinds of collaborative and interactive situations. Could you tell me about experiences that have been pleasant, unpleasant or challenging and meaningful for you?
- Extra questions: Could you please also tell me about your experiences of everyday meetings, and could you describe a typical pick-up situation/parental conferences, such as the IEP, which is drawn up for your child/multiprofessional meetings in the daycare centre/meetings with other parents?
- How would you describe your relationship with the ECEC teachers? What kinds of experiences, expectations and needs do you have in this relationship?

- Could you tell me about the kinds of discussions and feedback there have been about the challenging behaviour of your child?
- In what ways your child's challenging behaviour been a topic in the educational partnership?

### **III Evaluation**

- If you had the possibility of starting the educational partnership all over again, what would you do differently?
- What could or should the ECEC teachers in your educational partnership have done differently?
- What were your expectations and needs towards the ECEC teachers and the educational partnership?
- What do you think is important in the educational partnership for parents who have a child with challenging behaviour?

*Thank you for the interview!*



## ORIGINAL PAPERS

### I

#### TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS NARRATED BY PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DIFFICULTIES IN SELF- REGULATION

by

Rautamies, E., Poikonen P.-L., Vähäsantanen, K., & Laakso, M.-L. (2016)

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## **Teacher-child relationships narrated by parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the relationships between teachers and children (4 - 6 years old) with difficulties in self-regulation from the parent's point of view. Narratives were constructed in 21 interviews with parents of children who have difficulties in self-regulation. The study focused on two questions: i) What kinds of teacher-child relationships can be identified in the parents' narratives? and ii) How is the child positioned in this relational context? The teacher-child relationships found were labelled neutral, problematic and caring. Within these categories, the child was positioned in nine ways ranging from the child as troublesome to the child as unique. The study offers tools for analyzing the teacher-child relationship. It helps to understand this relationship from the parental point of view, thereby contributing to the objective of supporting the development and wellbeing of children in the early childhood education context in cooperation with their parents.

Key words: teacher-child relationship, self-regulation, early childhood education and care, narrative research, position, parent

### **Introduction**

The teacher-child relationship has been identified as a key element in a child's development and well-being, and in the giving of high quality care and education in early childhood education settings (Howes & James, 2002). It has been focus of several studies in daycare centers and in schools, and has typically been measured by teacher-reports based on questionnaires and interviews and also by observational data (Pianta, 1999; Sabol & Pianta 2012). However, it has been less examined via qualitative methods from the parent's point of view, especially where it concerns the relationship between teachers and children at risk in forming positive teacher-child relationship (see Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This study examines the teacher - child relationship in the Finnish early childhood education and care context (ECEC) from the parent's point of view by utilizing the narratives of parents who have a child with difficulties in self-regulation. Such problems are typically manifested as a child's difficulties in behavioral and emotional control, i.e., as challenging behavior on the part of the child (Bronson, 2000). These difficulties in self-regulation affect both the peer and teacher-child relationship (Lundan, 2009; Suoninen & Lundan, 2005) and strongly influence the

child's socio-emotional well-being (Savina, 2014). Such a child may thus be negatively positioned as a 'difficult child' in a daycare center in the speech of the teachers (Pihlaja, 2008). Studying the teacher-child relationship from the parent's point of view with a focus on the positioning of the children with difficulties in self-regulation behaving child in this relationship could contribute new understanding on the elements involved in building good teacher-child relationship in the ECEC context.

The critical factors supporting children with difficulties in self-regulation in the ECEC context are a good teacher-child relationship and a sensitive and confidential parent-teacher relationship (Bromer, 2011; Merritt et al., 2012). In Finland, parents are important partners in the domain of institutional early childhood education. According to the National Curriculum Guidelines (2005), the principle objective of early childhood education and care in Finland is to promote the child's overall well-being. This goal can be fostered, in particular, through good quality relationships with children and families. Parents have an important role in ECEC in supporting their child's growth, development and learning and in the process of early identification of children with a need for special support. According to the current Finnish care guidelines, special support should be given as soon as possible to both child and parents when a child has difficulties with self-regulation (Riikola et al., 2013). Childs' behavior may increase parental stress and parents' negative educational practices, and for parents in this situation, daycare educators are key sources of support. Such support entails more intensive co-operation between parents and ECEC educators, which in turn entails confidential relationships between the two parties. A feeling of trust (Mishra, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, 2001) is the prerequisite for the formation of confidential teacher-parent relationships (Kikas et al., 2011). For parents, trust is strongly influenced by their interpretation of the teacher-child relationship. For this reason, we considered it important to examine parent's views of the teacher-child relationship.

### **Teacher-child relationship**

The teacher-child relationship has been approached from several theoretical frameworks. At first, research was strongly influenced by attachment theory (Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The quality of a child's attachment and the kinds of working models (Bretherton, 1985, 1991) have an important impact on the child's formation of relationships, behavior in social situations, and sense of self later in life (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Howes & James, 2002). The studies based on attachment theory have helped in identifying the key elements of a high quality teacher-child relationship and understanding of the emotional aspects of that relationship (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The teacher-child relationship has been characterized, for example, as positive and secure, functional, negative and insecure, and conflictual and dependent (Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014, Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Pianta, 1994, 1999). Closeness, open communication, conflict and dependence have been identified as important dimensions of the teacher-child relationship

(Pianta 1994; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). High levels of closeness and low levels of conflict have been proposed as the signs of a high quality teacher-child relationship (O'Connor, 2010). The teacher's sensitivity (Pianta & Sabol, 2012) and physical and emotional availability (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), which mean openness to a child's request for help and awareness of a child's needs are also important in forming a good teacher-child relationship. Secure attachment to teachers is linked to school success and child well-being (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Looking at the teacher-child relationship through the lenses of the attachment theory is useful, especially when studying the perceptions of parents. However, there are other fruitful concepts that can be employed. For example, interactional and sociocultural thinking emphasize the influence of context on how the teacher-child relationship is formed and evaluated (Pianta, 1999). The studies based on the ecologically oriented systems theory and on the developmental systems theory has enriched understanding of the teacher-child relationship by placing it in a broader context (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The most recent studies have also contributed to understanding of teacher-child relationships in schools and ECEC settings in different cultural contexts (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Fumoto, 2011; Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Joshi, 2009; Page & Elfer, 2013; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012).

#### *Teacher-child relationship when a child has difficulties in self-regulation*

This study focused on the relationship between the teacher and a child with difficulties in self-regulation. Such difficulties typically manifest as disobedience, hyperactive and impulsive behavior and conflicts with other children (i.e. externalization) (Bronson, 2000). Other possible manifestations are distress, shyness, inhibition and withdrawal behavior (i.e. internalization) (Bronson, 2000). These different manifestations are connected to the child's temperament (Rothbart & Derryberry, 2002). Self-regulation is linked to the child's goal-oriented behavior and ability to follow rules (Barkley, 2004). According to Vygotsky (1962, 1978), self-regulation develops from interpersonal control to intrapersonal control (see Savina, 2014). In this process, the internalization of speech (Barkley, 2004) is important, as also are the roles of parents and teachers. The quality of the teacher-child relationship may either increase or decrease children's internalizing and externalizing problems (O'Connor, Dearing & Collins, 2011; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). Low teacher-child conflict and high teacher-child closeness are associated with a decrease in a child's externalizing behavior (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong & Essex, 2005) and an increase in a child's social competence (Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). Thus the teacher-child relationship is seen as a protective factor for children who are at risk for externalizing behavior (Sabol & Pianta, 2012) and who have adjustment problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

Children with externalizing problems, such as aggression and hyperactivity, are more likely to have conflicts with teachers, a situation more typically encountered with boys (Buyse et al., 2008; Silver et al., 2005), while there is also a risk for the development of a maladaptive interaction cycle between a

teacher and a child (Doumen et al., 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). In the longitudinal study by Doumen et al. (2008), children's aggressive behavior predicted teacher-child conflict at the beginning of the kindergarten year; this in turn predicted children's aggressive behavior later. In the ECEC context, a positive relationship between teacher and child is strongly connected to the children's social and emotional well-being (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2006). The quality of the teacher-child relationship is especially important for children's self-regulatory development (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Merritt et al., 2012). Teacher's emotional support (sensitivity and emotional involvement, warmth and respectful interaction) in relational and classroom context can, in particular, be seen as a protective factor for children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Buyse et al., 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Merritt et al., 2012). From the point of view of a child's development, identity-construction and well-being, studying the quality of the teacher-child relationship in cases where children have difficulties in self-regulation is of especial importance. Also, in order to attain a deeper understanding of this relationship we need to understand the child's position in this respect.

#### *The position of the child in relational context*

Position (Bamberg, 2004) is a concept which expresses interactional agency, practices and the thoughts behind interactional situations, for example teachers' concepts about of a child (Lundan, 2009, 21). Actor positions can be identified in interactional situations. They can be stable or they can change over time, and they are influenced by power structures (Lundan, 2009). In daycare centers, teacher-child relationships are built on everyday interaction, which can easily be rendered negative by teachers when working with children who have socio-emotional and behavioral problems (Pihlaja, 2008). The challenges presented by problematic teacher-child interaction appear, in particular, in the way the participants are positioned (Lundan, 2009; Suoninen & Lundan, 2005). Negative positioning promotes negative identity construction (Lundan, 2009); for example, a narrative 'bad guy' identity may be strengthened in the interactional process (Suoninen & Lundan, 2005). In contrast, in positive teacher-child interaction, a child's positive narrative identities are strengthened, and hence in interaction situations teachers offer the child a variety of positive positions (Lundan, 2009). Studying parents' narratives on the teacher-child relationship can offer a new perspective on how children with difficulties in self-regulation are positioned in the ECEC context.

### **Aim and research questions**

This study focused on the relationship between teachers and children with difficulties in self-regulation in the Finnish ECEC context. The teacher-child relationship and the position of a child were studied from the parents' point of view. The following research questions were set:

1. What kinds of teacher-child relationships can be identified in the narratives of the parents?
2. How are the children positioned in the different kinds of teacher-child relationships narrated by their parents?

### **Method**

#### ***Context of the study***

This study was conducted in the Finnish ECEC setting. According to the current Finnish ECEC legislation, all children have a subjective right to public ECEC services before the child starts compulsory formal education, which begins in the year the child reaches the age of 7. Further, the 6-year-old children attend free, mandatory pre-primary education for one year, 4 hours a day. The aim of the pre-primary education is to provide all children with an equal opportunity of learning the basic skills needed for primary school. ECEC services are administrated by Ministry of Education and Culture. Municipalities have the main responsibility for arranging ECEC services in Finland. In the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland (2005), the guiding principle for education is the holistic view that care, education and teaching form an integrated whole. ECEC is carried out as teamwork by well-educated and multi-professional educators. Typically three educators work together in groups of 3-to-6-year-old children in Finland. In this study, all educators in the group, whether kindergarten teachers or practical nurses (day care nurses), are referred to as *teachers*.

#### ***Participants and data collection***

The data for this study consist of interviews conducted by the first author with 21 parents (17 mothers and 4 fathers) over the period 2009-2013. These parents all reported that their child had difficulties in controlling his/her behavior and emotions and was thus prone to behaving in ways that could be interpreted as challenging. Typically, these problems had also been noticed by the teachers. Most of the parents had sought external help for themselves and their children from the Finnish 'Family School' program, which was organized by the family counselling center for families where a child had difficulties in self-regulation. This was the source for recruiting most of the participating parents. Some parents were also reached by sending the research request to different daycare centers, primary schools, and to the parents of the local ADHD association. Most of the interviewed parents had been clients of daycare services for several years, or at the least for 10 months. Participation in the study was voluntary. Parents were informed about the study and its ethical guidelines (e.g. confidentiality and

sensitivity). At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewer gave an honest description of the aim of the study and how the analysis and reporting of the data would be implemented in such a way that it would not be possible to identify the participants, concerning the children and the daycare-centers narrated by the parents. Parents were also told that the original data would only be used by the researcher (first author). The parents were then asked to give their informed consent and they were also informed to have the possibility to withdraw from the study at the any point during the research process.

In a narrative research framework (Riessman, 2008), qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in dialogical interaction with the participants. Parents were asked to talk on the following main themes: i) their child in the daycare center, ii) their child's relations with the teachers and other children, and iii) good and unhappy experiences of the educational partnership. The interviews can be described as conversational and dialogical storytelling situations (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Parents were encouraged to speak about their own experiences, thoughts and emotions openly and freely. If needed, they were asked more specific questions related to these themes, such as 'Could you tell me what a typical day would be like for your child in the daycare center' or 'Could you tell me what typically happens when you pick your child up from the day care center'. The interviews lasted an average of 1 hour 15 minutes. The shortest interview lasted about one hour and the longest about 3 hours.

### *Data analysis*

All the interviews were audio-recorded and afterwards transcribed verbatim by the first author and literally as a written protocol. The data were analyzed mainly by applying a narrative approach (Riessman, 2008; Spector-Mersel, 2010). The analytical process comprised three phases. In the first phase, all the interviews were carefully read and all parental narratives concerning the teacher-child relationship were selected. These narratives pertained to i) interaction between a teacher and the child, ii) teachers' concepts, attitudes and expectations with respect to the child and the child's activity, iii) what teachers had told the parents about their child iv) what the child had told his or her parents about the teacher-child relationship, and v) the parents' interpretation of the teacher-child relationship. In total, 215 teacher-child relationship narratives were selected for the analysis.

In the second phase, after the selection of the narratives, they were categorized in accordance with their content and tone initially into the categories of negative, neutral and positive teacher-child relationship following the principles of narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) and categorical-content reading (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). Most of the interviews typically included narratives from all three categories. After re-reading the narratives, the categories were re-named according to their content, and the number of occurrences were counted, as follows: negative narratives were labelled '*problematic*' (n = 62), neutral narratives were labelled '*neutral*' (n = 103), and positive narratives '*caring*' (n = 50) teacher-child relationship narratives.

After identifying and re-naming the three different kinds of relationship narratives, the narrative that was considered to best represent the characteristics of its category was selected and an abstract of it was created as an illustrative example.

In the third phase of the analysis, the positioning of the child was examined in 215 teacher-child relationship narratives. Applying Bamberg's (2004) notions of narrative positioning, we initially identified and named 12 different ways in which the child was positioned in relation to the teacher. Some of them were later combined, leaving 9 positions, which were named and their frequency counted. Three positions in each category were recognized.

## **Findings**

In this section, we present the findings related to the different kinds of teacher-child relationships and the positioning in these relationships of a child with difficulties in self-regulation as narrated by the child's parents. In order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants, we do not report the names of the parents, children, daycare centers or teachers, but, where needed, use pseudonyms.

### *Teacher-child relationships narrated by the parents*

As can be seen in Table 1, the teacher - child relationship was most frequently described as neutral (n = 103), followed by problematic (n = 62) and caring (n = 50). Since the relationship was more frequently described as neutral and caring (n=153) than as problematic (n=62), we would interpret the parents' narratives of the teacher-child relationship as mainly positive. Next, we describe each category of teacher-child relationship and present a typical story to illustrate each relationship.

Table 1: Teacher-child relationship narratives identified in the parents' interviews

<b>Narrated teacher-child relationship</b> n = 215	<b>Neutral relationship narratives</b> n = 103	<b>Problematic relationship narratives</b> n = 62	<b>Caring relationship narratives</b> n= 50
<b>Quality</b>	Formal, confidential, professional	Conflictual, distant, unprofessional	Warm, intimate, reciprocal
<b>Typical content</b>	-Teacher gets along with the child and vice versa  -Teacher can cooperate with the child  - Teacher's report of the day is neutral	-Teacher and/or child do not like each other  - Teacher finds it difficult to cooperate with the child  -Teacher's negative information of the child and child's behavior	-Teacher and child like each other very much  -Teacher knows how to cooperate with the child  -Teacher's talk about the child's personality, individual needs and well-being

### *Neutral relationship*

The neutral teacher-child relationship reflects the parents' description of the relationship as formal, confidential and professional. According to the parents, the child and the teacher got along with each other and the teacher cooperated well with the child. Although at home the child did not talk about teachers very much and the child was not specially attached to any particular teacher, the relationship was nevertheless described as good and well-functioning by the parents. The teachers were narrated as reacting professionally and in an emotionally neutral way to the challenging behavior on the part of the child. The parents were also informed in a neutral way about the challenges posed by the child and the events of the day when the parents came to pick their child up. The parents trusted the teachers to manage challenging situations and to give the child the pedagogical support needed in the group. The narrative by Paul's father illustrates the typical characteristics of the neutral teacher-child relationship.

Paul needed special attention, arrangements and special activities more than the other children in the group because of his challenging behavior. The teachers really made an effort to see that Paul got all the special support and individual guidance he needed. The teachers noticed his particular challenges and deal with them neutrally. They devised suitable supportive activities. They also tried to obtain further knowledge about his challenges. The teachers really have been professionals right from the very beginning.

### *Problematic relationship*

The problematic teacher-child relationship was described as conflictual, difficult, distant and unprofessional by the parents. According to the parents, one or some of the teachers did not get along with the child or 'they just didn't like each other', as one mother put it. The parents had further noticed that the child's behavior was a cause of trouble and confusion to the certain teachers and it was difficult for these teachers to understand the child's behavior and to manage challenging situations with the child. The parents thought that a situation where a teacher lacked experience and knowledge about children with challenging behavior

could have a negative influence on the teacher-child relationship. The teachers themselves had also said that they needed professional help in order to support the child. The problematic teacher-child relationship was also described as lacking in warmth on the teacher's part. As an example of, we next present the narrative by Mark's mother, which exemplifies this kind of relationship:

Mark caused trouble from the very beginning after starting in a daycare-center. It was only the third day, when the daycare nurse stood, hands on hips, and asked: "What can we do with such a child like this?" Another nurse said that Mark will be assigned to a special group when he starts primary school. Mark's liveliness and impulsive behavior complicated his teacher and peer relationships and caused the teachers extra trouble and stress. After one conflict I asked the teacher whether she could take a positive attitude towards our son, and she answered: "If I answer to your question, I will be unprofessional." I felt that the teacher viewed Mark as just too wild or too difficult. The situation got so bad that they said they would put Mark in another group.

#### *Caring relationship*

The caring teacher-child relationship was characterized as reciprocal, warm, intimate and affectionate, with strong emotional connectedness between both parties. The parents narrated that a lot of the teachers had formed a special relationship with the child. The teachers were 'strongly attached to the child' and vice versa, and the child brought much joy to the teachers, who 'really cared for these children'. According to one mother, for her child one teacher in particular was 'the most loved'. The children spoke a lot about their teachers at home. The teacher and the child interacted closely with each other and shared a nice sense of humor, as one mother reported. According to the parents, the teachers also described the day's events to the parents in a warm and humorous way. The teachers acted professionally and were committed to their pedagogical work. The parents emphasized the professional knowledge the teachers had about the children, their individual needs and how to support their individual well-being in the daycare center. These teachers noticed and accepted the child's unique personality. Matthew's mother narrated the teacher-child relationship in the following way:

Matthew had a very special relationship with one particular teacher. The teacher liked him so much. Our son is in her (teacher's) heart. The teacher understood Matthew and knew how to work with him in everyday challenging situations and conflicts. The child's temperament was the starting point when cooperating with the child. The child's impulsive behavior was not a problem for the teacher and she did not fixate on the child's challenging behavior. The teacher knew who the child was, she accepted him and trusted the child. Once the teacher told me how: "Matt is so lively and wild and one's always a bit apprehensive about what might happen next, but he is so sweet and lovely too."

#### *Positioning of the challengingly behaving children as narrated by their parents*

Next, we illustrate how the child was positioned in the neutral, problematic and caring teacher-child relationship narratives of the parents. Table 2 describes these positions.

Table 2: Positioning of the child in the parents' narratives of the teacher-child relationship

<b>Narrated relationship</b>	<b>Neutral relationship</b> (103 narratives)	<b>Problematic relationship</b> (62 narratives)	<b>Caring relationship</b> (50 narratives)
<b>Positioning of the child</b>	<p><b>Unconventional child</b> (20) - different kind of child - challenges presented by the child are noticed and accepted</p> <p><b>Child in need of special support</b> (44) -teachers make an effort to support the child as part of their work</p> <p><b>Ordinary child</b> (39) - child is like the others - child's challenging behavior was not noticed</p>	<p><b>Wrong kind of child</b> (25) - child is doing the wrong things - negative features of the child are emphasized</p> <p><b>Special child</b> (13) - teachers would like a specialist to support the child or to provide a diagnosis for the child</p> <p><b>Troublesome child</b> (24) - child causes trouble and conflicts intentionally - child is disobedient - child is to blame and is stigmatized</p>	<p><b>Good child</b> (21) - talented child in some contexts - positive features of the child are emphasized</p> <p><b>Individual child</b> (18) - child is an unique personality, whose welfare and individual needs are important in daycare</p> <p><b>Unique child</b> (11) -very special, and important to the teacher - child and child's personality as source of delight</p>

*Positioning of the child in the neutral teacher-child relationship*

In the case of the neutral teacher-child relationship, we identified three ways of positioning of the child: as an unconventional child, a child who needs special support, and as an ordinary child. An unconventional child was described as a different kind of child, who was challenged in controlling his/her emotions and behavior in certain situations. This was accepted by the teachers as a neutral and normal fact. According to the parents, the teachers emphasized that the behavior of the child was not intentional but it is due to difficulties in self-regulation. Child was also positioned as a child who needs special support. The child's special needs were noticed and the teachers supported the child as a part of their normal educational work. The child was also positioned as an ordinary child in the neutral teacher-child relationship narratives. One mother described how the teachers took a similar attitude to the child as to any other child and, if something troublesome happened, the teachers were quick to emphasize that such things can happen to any child. The teachers did their best to avoid the child being stigmatized as a troublesome child.

Some parents also narrated that the teachers did not tell them about troublesome situations that must have occurred during the day. If so, this kind of omission can be interpreted as a desire by the teachers to represent the child to the parents as just another ordinary child. According to some parents, the image of their child that teachers conveyed to them was overly positive. The child's problems were spoken of as not so significant or they were not noticed by the teachers. This, according to one father, was the reason why the child was unable to get help and professional support early enough. One mother was very sorry that her child's difficulties were attributed to the child's liveliness and not a sign of severe difficulties, as was diagnosed later on. Another mother wondered whether the teachers did not want to tell them about all the difficulties they had

encountered in the daycare center, or was it just that the child only behaved challengingly at home. The mother felt that she had not been heard by the teachers. She was also worried that her child might be acting in too normal and too agreeable a way in the daycare center. She was concerned whether their son could really be the boy that he appeared to be in the daycare center and whether the teachers understood him and his personality as the boy they knew at home. Despite the dissatisfaction of these parents with the way the teachers spoke about the child's behavior they nevertheless described the teacher-child relationship in a positive way as functional and neutral.

#### *Positioning of the child in the problematic teacher-child relationship*

In problematic teacher-child relationship narratives three ways of positioning of the child were identified: as a wrong kind of child, a special child and as a troublesome child. Such a wrong kind of child was narrated as behaving badly and doing things that were wrong most of the time in the daycare center. The negative features of the child were emphasized by the daycare staff, which was why it was difficult for the parents to meet the teachers when picking their child up. One mother wondered why only negative features were documented, as there were positive things in the child too. A child was compared by the teachers to the other children of the same age. The child was unlike the other children, and just did not fit into the mold of a normal child, as one mother expressed it. Some parents stated that the child was too wild, too bad or too difficult because he/she was not good at the skills the teachers expected them to have, such as listening, concentrating, and behaving peacefully. For example, one teacher had wondered how: 'the child is able to play well, but only with the girls and not with the other boys, as he should be doing.'

The child was also positioned as a *special child* in the parents' narratives, which for them was a problematic and negative thing. In some narratives, the teachers had proposed that a specialist be asked to observe the child or to provide a diagnosis for the child, which some parents found scary and threatening because of the way this information was presented to them. The parents and the teachers did not find a common understanding of the severity of child's problems. One mother described a communication with a teacher after her son had caused a harmful situation in the daycare center: '*After some kind of pinching and disturbance the teacher suggested their need to investigate the reason for the problematic behavior.*' The mother did not see the difficulties as bad as the teachers did.

A *troublesome child* was narrated to be a nasty and difficult child, who intentionally caused trouble. The child hit others, caused conflicts, was disobedient and acted in ways that a child was not supposed to act, behaviors which made the parents think about how bad, nasty and difficult the child is. The child, as one who teased others, was also positioned as stigmatized and always the guilty party. When conflicts arose between the children, the child was blamed, as Peter's mother narrates: '*When something happened, it was Peter who was blamed...and he learned to apologize even when he hadn't done anything wrong and once he was accused of bullying, and he wasn't even in the daycare center on that day.*' Peter

himself had also asked his mother at home, why he is always being blamed. Some parents were afraid that the stigma would follow the child from one group of children to another via documentation, individual ECEC plans or internal communication within the daycare staff.

*Positioning of the child in the caring teacher-child relationship*

The child was positioned as a good, unique and individual child in the parents' narratives of the caring teacher-child relationship. The child was typically described as a good child who was talented, especially in certain areas. Despite the many difficulties the child had in self-regulation in specific situations, the child's positive features and strengths were emphasized by the teachers in their communication with the parents. When talking about the child's challenging behavior, the teachers emphasized the context of that behavior. The child was described by the teachers as a whole personality. Parents narrated the teachers as knowing the child as he/she is and accepting the child unconditionally: according to one mother: 'They saw the child in a realistic way, they noticed the challenges the child presented, and what is difficult for a child, but they also noticed and saw the strengths of the child, giving no special weight to either aspect.' Despite the challenging behavior of the child, the teachers saw the child as skillful, talented, good and unique. The teachers strengthened the parents' faith that the child is inherently good and that the parents can cope with the child, even in the face of severely challenging behaviors. The teachers had a major role in supporting the parents' belief in themselves and in trusting the child. They also had a major role in mediating a positive image of the child. This was particularly emphasized in the individual ECEC planning discussions, as described by Mathew's mother: 'In that discussion I realized that there really are so many beautiful and good things in our child, and that these features are visible in the daycare center.'

The child was also narrated by the parents in the relational context as a *unique child*. A child was described as a cause of special joy to some teachers, according to whom the child was lovely and irresistible. For some teachers, the child was special. One teacher told a mother how: 'Miika is always such a happy boy, and enthusiastic about doing things, and how he never complains, these are his very strengths.' These teachers knew how to cooperate with the child in challenging situations. One mother narrated how the teacher had a clear image of the child and child's special needs and how to cooperate with the child. The teacher had understood that: 'Commanding the child just doesn't work', and according to the mother, understanding this was the key element in achieving positive cooperation with the child. In the parents' narratives, the teachers were positioned as specialists who understood the child and child's individual needs and who knew how to work with the child. The teachers were described as having rich knowledge about children and a strong belief in themselves as professionals, and supported the child's well-being and development. The child was positioned in these narratives as an '*individual child*' with individual needs.

## Discussion

In this qualitative study, we examined the teacher-child relationship in the Finnish ECEC context in cases where a child has difficulties in self-regulation. This relationship was explored from the parents' point of view, with the additional aim of enriching understanding of the ways the child was positioned in this relational context. It has been reported that challenging behavior by a child puts at risk the possibility of forming a good quality teacher-child relationship (e.g. Mantzicopoulos, 2005). However, this present study revealed that in such cases the relationship between a teacher and a child is not always narrated as challenging and negative. Three different teacher-child relationships were identified in the parents' narratives: neutral, problematic and caring relationships. Thus the relationships described by the parents ranged widely from conflictual through formal to warm and intimate. Furthermore, we discovered that the way the children were positioned in these three different teacher-child relationship narratives also varied from negative through neutral to positive.

The caring teacher-child relationship described by the informants resembled the 'positive relationship', characterized by warmth, closeness and attachment, reported in previous studies (Pianta, 1999; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The caring relationship was also described as unique, and based on strong positive emotions on the part of the teacher. The neutral teacher-child relationship was narrated also as a positive relationship, but was more a functional and professional relationship based on neutral emotions on the part of the teacher. In both types, the teachers were narrated as positively involved with the children and their work, and able to meet the children's individual and special needs. The problematic teacher-child relationship described here resembled previous conceptualizations of teacher-child relationship as dysfunctional, conflictual, insecure, uninvolved, distant and angry (Pianta, 1994). Compared to previous findings, however, the parents in this study did not narrate the teacher-child relationship by drawing on such concepts of dependence, clinginess or over-reliance.

Previous studies have found that children who behave challengingly in a day care center are positioned negatively (e.g. Pihlaja, 2008). Impulsive children can sometimes become scapegoats and are blamed for all the aggressive actions that occur during peer conflicts (Singer & de Haan, 2011). This study complements the current understanding by showing a broader spectrum in the ways children were positioned in ECEC settings. The nine positioning found varied from negative (such as troublesome) to neutral and positive (such as unconventional, ordinary and unique). In some narratives, the child's challenging behavior seemed to be problematic for teachers while in other narratives it was narrated as an acceptable fact of life. Overall, the study indicates that the relationships between teachers and challengingly behaving children in ECEC settings are multiple, and that a child can be variously positioned in this relational context.

### *Conclusions and implications*

Via a narrative approach (Elliott, 2005), this study showed what kinds of meanings parents attribute to the teacher-child relationship. The parents reflected a lot on the emotional aspects of the teacher-child relationship. They narrated teacher-child closeness very positively; this may also derive from the cultural context (Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014). They reflected on whether the teachers understood, accepted and liked the child or not. The parents were aware that their challengingly behaving child was not like the other 'ordinary' daycare children or what teachers' expect and would wish a child to be, such as socially competent and independent child with good self-regulation abilities (see Alasuutari & Markström, 2011). Emotional support from the teachers was important for the parents, and as the latest research has shown it is also important in supporting the children with difficulties in self-regulation (Buyse et al., 2008; Merritt et al., 2012). The parents also commented on pedagogical aspects of the teacher-child relationship by reflecting on whether or not the teacher is able to interact in a pedagogically meaningful, warm and respectful way with the child, and able to cope with the child. The findings showed that teachers' professional involvement and way of working with a child, along with professional love (Page & Elfer, 2013), were important for the parents when reflecting on the teacher-child relationship.

This paper emphasizes the relational aspects of the ECEC context and gives an insight into the teacher-child relationship from the parental point of view. The importance of the teacher-child relationship was emphasized in the parents' narratives. The nature of the relationship was connected to how a child was positioned, which in turn reflected teachers' concepts of the child (Lundan, 2009); these varied in this study from the 'good' child to the 'bad' child. The findings of this study have implications for teachers' pre-service and in-service training. For teachers, this study offers tools to reflect on and analyze the teacher-child relationship and how a child is positioned in this relationship, and to find novel positive ways of positioning a child in relational situations and of modifying their concepts of a child. The findings further indicate that teachers should pay attention to what kind of image of their child they convey to the parents in interactional situations, especially when a child's behavior is challenging.

The findings also show the importance of listening to parents in order to understand a child's behavior, personality, interests, and individual needs. All this lays a foundation for sensitive teacher-child interaction and for understanding and accepting the child unconditionally (see Buber, 1993; Lundan 2009). This study emphasizes the importance of a positive teacher-child relationship and highlights the role of the structural dimensions of ECEC services in ensuring good quality teacher-child relationships (Howes & James 2002). More attention should also be given to the adult-child ratio, stability of teachers, teacher's education and the possibility for teachers to reflect on teacher-child relationship in the context of giving professional guidance.

Difficulties in self-regulation manifest in many ways, all of which influence the teacher-child relationship. Most of the parents described their child as a hyperactive child who was unable to concentrate and who had difficulties in

social behavior, especially with other children. The unique child was in some narratives described as a mesmerizing personality, suggesting that it may not be so hard to like this kind of misbehaving, hyperactive and impulsive child. In this study, we aimed to capture a parental perspective on the teacher-child relationship. There were also some limitations in this study. We are aware that teacher and child narratives and observational data would also have been important in order to gain a more profound understanding of teacher-child relationship. Observation as a method has been widely used in studying the teacher-child relationship in schools. We suggest that greater use of it should be made when researching children with difficulties in self-regulation in the ECEC context. Discussions with children are also an important way of hearing their voices. When generalizing the present findings, we need to remember that most of the children in the sample were boys (only 4 girls). According to their parents, the children's difficulties in self-regulation were mainly manifested as externalizing behavior, which does not cover the full range of difficulties in self-regulation. Furthermore, the children's parents (mostly mothers) can be regarded as active parents, who were willing to seek help and to participate in the study. In sum, the findings of this study enrich understanding of the variety in the teacher-child relationship. Finally, we suggest that all teachers should try to form at least a neutral teacher-child relationship with all the children in the ECEC and school contexts. The starting point for moving in a more positive direction away from a problematic teacher-child relationship is teachers' awareness of their concept of the child underlying that relationship.

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## II

### **PARENTAL AGENCY AND RELATED EMOTIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP**

by

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## **Parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the understudied issue of parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership in the context of Finnish early childhood education and care. We asked i) what types of parental agency can be identified in the educational partnership and ii) in what ways are emotions related to these types of agency. The narrative method was used to analyse the interview data of parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation. The findings indicate that parental agency in the educational partnership varied from proactive and confrontational to hindered. Typically, pleasant emotions were related to proactive and unpleasant emotions to confrontational parental agency. Ambivalent and neutral emotions in turn were related to hindered parental agency. This study enhances understanding of the educational partnership from the viewpoint of parents of a child with difficulties in self-regulation. The study also contributes to the theoretical debate on the emotions related to agency.

**Keywords:** early childhood education, educational partnership, emotions, narrative research, parental agency, self-regulation

## Introduction

This study addresses parental agency in the educational partnership in the early childhood education setting. The importance of the *educational partnership* has been strongly emphasized in several studies that have concluded that close collaboration between parents and educators ensure the best conditions for children's development and learning (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson & Beegle, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker & Ice, 2010; Reynolds & Schlafer, 2010). Summers and colleagues (2005, p. 66) define an educational partnership as "mutually supportive interaction between families and professionals focused on meeting the needs of children and families". In practice, this means, for example, sharing information about a child (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005) in order to gain an overall picture of the child, including the challenges facing the child and the child's strengths and individual needs. A successful educational partnership also has a positive impact on parental support (Foot, Howe, Cheyne, Terras & Rattray, 2002).

*Parental agency* can be interpreted to be an important goal of, and a prerequisite for, a successful educational partnership (e.g. Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2015; Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2008; Zellman & Perlman, 2006). However we need more understanding of the manifestation of parental agency in the educational partnership in early childhood education contexts. In this study, we see parental agency mostly in terms of the behavioral and communicational actions by parents on behalf of their child in the relationship with educators. For parents, this means influencing and taking a stance via discussions and negotiations of meaningful goals and practices for supporting their child. Generally, parental agency aims at influencing early childhood education and promoting the wellbeing of a child in a daycare center.

This study was carried out in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland (2016) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (2016) emphasize the importance of collaboration with parents when supporting children's welfare, learning and development. Parental agency is especially important in drawing up the individual educational plan (IEP) (see Karila & Alasuutari, 2012) required for every child in the Finnish ECEC system according to the revised Early Childhood Education Act (1973/2015). The availability of early support emphasized in the above-mentioned curricula rest on the agency and successful collaboration of both parties in the educational partnership.

Successful collaboration and the appropriate exercise of parental agency are especially important for supporting children who have been identified as exhibiting problem behavior and difficulties in their social and emotional development typical for children with difficulties in self-regulation (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Such problems may manifest as difficulties in regulating impulses and strong emotions (aggression, frustration and fear), and difficulties in playing and interacting with other children (sharing, cooperating, playing and making friends) and following general rules (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). These difficulties may challenge the learning, development and wellbeing of the child, and they may also complicate the peer relations and parent-teacher

relationship (Rautamies, Poikonen, Vähäsantanen & Laakso, 2016). Thus far, we do not have much information about parental agency in the ECEC context. In particular, we need more understanding of the role of parental agency in the case of children having these kinds of difficulties.

Agency has often been understood as humans' rational, intentional and goal-oriented activity (Giddens, 1984). However, emotional aspects also play an important role in subjects' agency (see Barnes, 2000; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, Paloniemi & Eteläpelto, 2017, in press). Emotions (e.g. Chen, 2016; Schutz, Hong, Cross & Osbon, 2006) and agency (e.g. Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011) have mainly been studied in the field of education, but the connections between them are not well understood (Barnes, 2000; Hökkä et al., 2017, in press). Challenged by this gap in the literature, we were especially interested in further understanding of parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership specifically in the early childhood education setting. This study is based on interviews with 23 Finnish parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation, i.e. difficulties in regulating their behavior and emotions. The narrative approach was applied when analyzing the interview data (see Riessman, 2008). This study aimed at enriching understanding of the educational partnership from the parental point of view and to offer tools that can assist educators in achieving a successful educational partnership. The study also contributes to the theoretical debate on the meaning of emotions in relation to agency.

## **Agency: theoretical considerations**

### *Contextual and relational dimensions of agency*

Agency refers to the presence, participation and active influence of individuals in their social, cultural and material environment, in other words, engagement in activities and the use of power for the purpose of exerting influence in social situations (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013; Giddens 1984). Agency is enacted in the form of discursive, practical and embodied actions and relations with the world (Archer, 2000). Agency is often understood as proactive and change-oriented action manifested via taking stances and making suggestions, but it can also be manifested through resistance to expected or ongoing actions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

We approached agency by utilizing its personal and structural (contextual) dimensions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Specifically, this study focuses on the contextual and relational dimensions of agency. We assume that parental agency in the educational partnership is enacted relationally (Edwards, 2005) together with the educators. The educational partnership sets a common goal relating to the target child's wellbeing, development and learning. We presume that parents' experiences of the educational partnership have an influence on their agency. Drawing on the notions presented by Emirbayer & Mische (1998), we also presume that situational, contextual, structural and socio-cultural factors, such as ECEC practices and power-relations, are the frames within which

parental agency is exercised. Although our present focus was on the contextual and relational dimensions of agency, we agree with the view that personal factors also have an influence on parental agency.

Griffiths, Norwich and Burden (2004) furthered understanding of the parental partnership in the school context in their study of the agency in parent-professional communication of the mothers of children with dyslexia. Honkasilta, Vehkakoski and Vehmas (2015) also studied parental agency in the school context by analyzing the agency of mothers of children with diagnosed ADHD. The authors identified three categories of agency: mothers' volitional strong agency (active partners), forced strong agency (e.g. advocates, aggressive agents) and weak agency (e.g. bystanders, withdrawing agents). Archer (2003) similarly showed that agency can vary across different situations and over time.

In our study parental agency refers to parents' behavioral and communicational activities in their relationship with ECEC educators. The aim of parental agency is to influence early childhood education and the wellbeing of a child in a daycare center. In practice, this means parental initiatives and actions, information-seeking, initiating discussions, being present and participating in formal and informal interactional situations and collaboration with educators. Parents can choose for example whether to participate or not at parents' meetings, and to communicate or not with educators in pick-up and drop-off situations. In the Finnish ECEC context, we assume that parental agency is enacted relationally with educators and influenced by the values, norms, rules, institutional practices and material and physical circumstances of the specific daycare center.

### *Emotions related to agency*

Emotions are a motivating force for human activity (Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 19), which is why it is important to study the connection between emotions and agency (Hökkä et al., 2017, in press). Emotions can be defined as emotional reactions (or strong feeling) deriving from one's personal circumstances, including specific events, social situations and social relationships with others (Hökkä et al., 2017, in press; Oxford Living English Dictionary). Emotions are socially constructed and personally enacted and connected to the attainment of personal goals, and the maintenance of standards or beliefs pertaining to social situations (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 344). Emotions are experienced, negotiated and expressed in social contexts via social practices and interaction (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015).

Studies on emotions in relation to agency have indicated a strong reciprocal connection between emotions and the enactment of professional agency (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2017, in press; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015;). For example, enacting agency fostered positive emotions and vice versa. However the connection between negative emotions and enacting agency seem to be more complicated: negative emotions were related to resisting agency and taking a critical stance, but also to constructive, active agency (Hökkä et al., 2017, in press).

In this study we adopted the circumplex model of emotions which contains two dimensions of emotions (valence and arousal) (Widen & Russell, 2010). According to the model the nature of emotions variate from unpleasant to pleasant and the arousal intensity of emotions vary from low to high (Posner, Russell, Peterson, 2005). Pleasant emotions include emotions like love, joy, pleasure, satisfaction, pride, excitement and surprise and unpleasant emotions include emotions like fear, anger, frustration, anxiety, sadness, distress, guilt and shame (see Chen, 2016). We were interested in all the verbal and other expressions of emotion that the interviewed parents produced when reflecting on their agency in the educational partnership and intensity of these emotions.

### **Research aims and questions**

Our aim in this study was to investigate parental agency in the educational partnership and the emotions related to the types of agency found. The following research questions were set:

1. What types of parental agency can be identified in the educational partnership in the ECEC context?
2. How are different kinds of emotions related to these types of agency?

### **Methods**

#### ***Utilizing narrative method in this study***

The narrative approach was used to analyze the interview data (Riessman, 2008). This study emphasizes the meaning of narratives as a meaning-making process for the informants (Elliott, 2005), and arising from the sharing of experiences with others (Bruner, 1990). Narratives contain cognitive and emotional aspects informing the audience about what happened and how the subject experienced the events in question (Bruner, 1990). The narrative method is very useful when investigating emotionally rich experiences (e.g., Boudens, 2005; Hänninen, 2000). Emotions are related to the individual's needs, goals and intentions (Hänninen, 2000). The emotional aspects of narration are often based on moral reflection on one's own and other people's actions which in turn are based on interpretations of the intentions, responsibilities and duties of the actors in social situations (Hänninen, 2000; Singer, 1995). Strong emotional experiences are related to issues which threaten or advance values important to the subject (Singer, 1995).

In this interview study, we investigated parental agency, and related emotions, in the educational partnership. We examined parents' narrated emotions related to their experiences of their agency in the educational partnership. Instead of a real and objective reality this study proposes a subjective and relativist reality (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Interpretations of a person's experiences are also influenced by the cultural-historical context as well

as the immediate social and interactional context influence (Burr, 2003). It also should be noted that parents' reflection on, and interpretations and emotional descriptions of, their experiences of agency in the educational partnership may change over time, i.e., across narrative occasions (see Hökkä et al., 2017, in press). In this study, we emphasize the social nature of narratives (Elliott, 2005). The parents' narratives were produced in interaction with the researcher. Thus an interview can be seen as a social and dialogical situation in which the informant is a purposeful actor (Riessman, 2008, 8, 23-27). For parents, an interview situation may, for example, offer a possibility to share experiences, gain understanding, or find a moral justification for the behavior of the actors.

### *Participants and data collection*

The data consisted of 23 interviews (18 mothers and 5 fathers), conducted over the period 2009-2013. Parents who had been clients of ECEC services for at least 10 months and who thought their child behaved challengingly, i.e., had difficulties in controlling their behavior and emotions, were invited to participate in the study. Most of the participating parents had been clients of ECEC services for several years. Most of them (n = 15) were reached via the so called "Family School" program (for more details, see Rautamies et al., 2016). The remaining parents (n = 8) were recruited by sending a research-request to daycare centers, primary schools (first-grade classrooms) and the local ADHD association. Participation in the study was voluntary. Before signing the research consent, all parents were informed about the aim of the study and its ethical principles (confidentiality and sensitivity), such as anonymity, i.e., that no parent, child, educator or daycare center would be identifiable in any of the study reports.

The qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted mainly by the first author in dialogical, conversational interaction with the participants within a narrative research framework (Riessman, 2008). The main role of the interviewer was to create a trustful interview situation for the parents and to support and to listen to parents' narratives respecting the main themes of the study. Parents were asked to talk about the following main themes in the interview: (i) pleasant and unpleasant experiences of the educational partnership, and (ii) their experiences of their child in a daycare center. Parents were encouraged to describe their experiences, emotions and thoughts freely and, if needed, asked to elaborate by answering more specific questions. The interviews lasted on average 1 hour 10 minutes (ranging from about one hour to three hours).

### *Data analysis*

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim mainly by the first author. The purpose of the first phase of the analysis was to reach an understanding of the way parental agency was enacted in the relationship with educators. First, all the interviews were read carefully, and the episodes which contained parents' narratives of their agency in the educational partnership were extracted. Special attention was paid to the parents' narratives concerning their behavioural and communicational actions and initiatives in the educational

partnership and the outcome of their agency. Next the different kinds of parental agency in the educational partnership present in the episodes were identified. After examining the similarities and differences between the kinds of agency identified in the episodes, three categories of parental agency were constructed. At the end of the first phase, all the selected episodes were re-coded into one of the three categories and the number of episodes in each category counted.

In the second phase, the emotions related to the three types of parental agency in the educational partnership were examined. Attention was especially paid to the parents' narration of pleasant and unpleasant emotions and the intensity of these emotions according to the circumplex model of emotions (Widen & Russell, 2010). The emotions narrated by the parents were named and listed under these three categories. Ambivalent and neutral emotions were also identified. By utilizing the analytical framework of Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2015) the following aspects were targeted for analysis: the starting points or triggers of enactment of agency; the emotions related to the enactment of agency; and, finally, the emotions the enactment of parental agency led to.

In the third phase, using narrative analysis, three stories were constructed to illustrate each category of parental agency (Polkinghorne, 1995). Each story illustrated a different, typical way of enacting parental agency and the emotions related to it in the educational partnership. First, three interviews representing the most typical way of enacting agency in each category was selected from the data. These interviews contained more than 70% of the parental agency narrated in each category, and thus formed the core of each story. The three stories were then enriched by other parents' narratives in the same category of agency in order to illustrate the variety in the parents' narratives. After that, the three stories were finalized and named. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

### **Findings: Parental agency, and related emotions, in the educational partnership**

The main findings of the study are presented as the three stories described in the previous section. Of the three types of parental agency identified, two were labeled active and the third was labeled hindered.

#### ***Narratives of active parental agencies***

Two kinds of active parental agency were identified in the study: *grateful partners with proactive agency* and *desperate fighters with confrontational agency*. Most interviews contained some narration of proactive parental agency.

### *Grateful partners with proactive agency*

The narrative of *grateful partners* included descriptions of proactive parental agency in the educational partnership accompanied by a moderate to high intensity of pleasant emotions. Typically, to support a child, the parents actively collaborated with the educators. For example, together with the educators, they 'helped the child to handle their emotions of anger and harm', as one mother reported. These parents participated actively at educational meetings and in everyday discussions with the educators. The parents also actively sought the help of other professionals for their child and for themselves.

*Fear* appeared to be one of the triggers of parental proactive agency. Parents were afraid of the consequences that difficulties in self-regulation would have for their child. Such parents 'didn't want their child to become a troublemaker' or 'to become a lonely child without any friends', as one mother put it. Parents were also *worried* that they were not coping adequately with the educational challenges their child presented and narrated feelings of *inadequacy*. Experiences like these led parents to undertake many actions and initiatives in the educational partnership. They expressed their need for support very openly when communicating with the educators. Jane felt she and her husband would not be able to cope as parents without the help of the professionals. 'The ordinary ways of parenting were just not enough' as she said. She felt so *relieved* at getting the educators as educational partners and not having to cope alone any more.

Parents asked the educators for advice on how to deal with the child's educational challenges and also welcomed advice and support from the educators with feelings of *pleasure*. Parents also emphasized the activeness of their role in the educational partnership: 'Obtaining support should be initiated by the parents, and the parents have to be active if they want to get support', as one father stated. The parents made suggestions and initiatives which were taken seriously by the educators. The parents narrated feelings of *satisfaction and joy* when their proactive agency produced positive results. The parents communicated important knowledge about their child to the educators which 'made the educators better understand the child's personality'. The parents narrated positive experiences of collaboration with the educators and of receiving positive feedback on their proactive agency from the educators:

We [the parents and the educators] always made plans for a common goal, and together we took small steps forward... And we got feedback from the educators saying that it has been so easy to cooperate with us. And we really have tried to make an effort at doing that.

Most parents emphasized the importance of the discussions in which child's individual educational plan (IEP) was drawn up together with the educators. Parents' thoughts and wishes were documented in the child's education plan, which made the parents feel their initiatives were important and noticed, as one mother stated:

I think it's important that it can be seen [in the child's individual learning plan], that the difficulties have been solved and that we as a family have been committed to the child's education. And what is very important is that it can be seen that we have coped at difficult times. And it was really great that we could write down our wishes, comments, agreements and disagreements by ourselves into the child's learning plan.

Parents also communicated openly with the educators when encountering challenges in the educational partnership. One mother asked the educators to deal again with a conflict between children in a daycare center in which her child was unfairly blamed. The mother was so *happy* when the conflict was finally resolved successfully by the educators. Parents' proactive agency led them to feel *satisfaction and gratitude* towards the educational partnership and the child's early childhood education. According to Jane, 'the cooperation has been so great' and they 'would have been lost without the educators'.

#### *Desperate fighters with confrontational agency*

The narrative of desperate fighters contained descriptions of confrontational parental agency in the educational partnership accompanied by a high intensity of unpleasant emotions. Fighters participated actively in parental meetings and other parental activities. They suggested, requested, wanted, demanded and ordered the educators to support their child's wellbeing in their struggle over what they felt to be in their child's best interests, as narrated by Mary:

I acted like a tigress defending him [the child], and I had to tell them who he is. I dragged our child forward, and in all possible ways with tooth and nail tried to find a place and a friend for him, and how much I wept because these were never found.

The triggers for parental confrontational agency can be interpreted as *deep concern* over the child's wellbeing in the daycare center. Parents narrated the *distress and sorrow* they felt, especially over the child's relationships with other children, and they were worried about whether the child was teased. These parents were also worried about the formation of a negative self-image, low self-esteem and a negative teacher-child relationship and expressed concern about whether their child carried the 'negative stigma of a bad boy'. Mary felt her child 'was not understood or liked' and 'he couldn't be the boy who he is in a daycare center'. One trigger for confrontational parental agency may be the feeling that the parents are the only ones who support the child. Mary narrated that she 'had to' make so many efforts to support her child because the child 'wasn't able to regulate his behavior'. She also said that if she 'hadn't done that, who would?' The situation caused the parents to feel *anger*, especially because they felt that the educators did not support their child.

These parents narrated that they did not share a common understanding with the educators regarding the child and child's difficulties. They described the personality and the behavior of the child in order to enhance the educators' understanding of the child. Mary asked the educators to visit their home so that they could better understand their child in the home context. She also communicated the relational needs of the child and suggested educational

practices that could support the child's well-being in the daycare center. For example, she asked the educators 'to make the day schedule as clear and structured as possible' because environmental changes distressed the child. Parents expressed their worries as well as their expectations of good ECEC services to the educators. They were also courageous enough to talk about the challenges of the daycare center.

I said to the educators, I really hope you make an effort so that my child can be a part of this group...He's really challenging for us [the parents] too, but he cannot be the one, who do not have a place in the group. And he should be accepted in the group, and he should have a friend.

Unfortunately, parental active agency in these cases did not lead to positive results but instead to *frustration and disappointment* and for Mary to feelings of *despair, guilt and sorrow*. She felt guilty because she couldn't change the educators' understanding of the child and because of 'poor parenting, which may have caused their child's difficulties'. Feelings of guilt were strengthened because of 'all the harm and sick leave' the family had caused the educators. Mary described her experiences of the educational partnership as a relationship in which the partners were 'wearing different pairs of shoes all the time', and in which a common understanding and common goals were never reached.

### ***Hindered parental agency***

The parents with hindered agency narrated a few cautious actions and initiatives in the educational partnership that most typically were accompanied by ambivalent emotions. This finding is reported in the narrative of *the confused receivers*.

### ***Confused receivers with hindered agency***

The parents who showed hindered agency in the educational partnership made some cautious initiatives when cooperating with the educators. They narrated their dissatisfaction with the educational partnership when encountering what they perceived as unfair practices. However, they did not seek to influence these situations by practicing active agency. Lisa reported this as follows:

It was hard and frightening, day after day, to only get negative messages about our son. Soon I got to feeling that I just didn't want to go to the daycare center to collect our child, because I was so afraid of what might have happened that day. I so much longed to hear other kinds of messages too, because there were also good things about our child too... The stigmatizing of our child made me feel so sad and angry.

The parents narrated about many strong emotions like *fear, worry and anger*, when confronting situations like the one described above. The triggers for hindered parental agency can be understood to be emotional *confusion*. Parents with hindered agency seemed mostly to be *uncertain parents with conflicting will*, who several times, just after the event, knew how they should have acted in certain situations. Lisa said that as parents they 'should have put a stop to the

negative path of stigmatizing the child earlier'. Narrating things in this way ('should have') implies that these parents wished they had practiced more active agency.

These parents were also afraid of the trouble their child might have caused during the day, like Lisa, who said, 'I was so afraid of what was happened'. This fear can be argued to have weakened their active agency and sometimes to have made them want to escape the situation. Lisa narrated feeling *ambivalent emotions* when she thought about some of the practices of the educators. She said she did not know whether it was a good thing or not that when a child was transferred from one group of children to another so too was the child's individual learning plan.

On the other hand it was really great that the papers of the child's individual learning plan were transferred together with the child...On the other hand, I sometimes got the feeling that I would soon be saying to the educators that you can't transfer these papers to another group because of the possibility of stigmatizing the child. But anyway, it was a good practice, because it was done in the child's best.

Parents also reflected on the challenging educational situations caused by their child's behavior from the educators' point of view, a process that may have further strengthened their ambivalent emotions. One mother narrated she 'understood the situation of the educators and how they were also as worried about the child as the parents'. These parents agreed that their child had frequently caused difficult situations for the educators in the daycare center. Some parents narrated how they were incapable of acting in certain situations. Lisa narrated how she was 'locked in helplessness' or how she 'just could not act' in some interactional situations. One parent narrated how, when she went to pick up her child, she was 'lying under the burst of the educators', i.e., she received negative feedback about her child's behavior. Parents made some cautious initiatives for better practices. Lisa expressed her wish to the educators that 'positive features of the child had also been recognized and documented'. However the parents felt their initiatives had no effect or they were ignored by the educators, which finally led to feelings of *disappointment* and *anger*.

In some interviews, hindered parental agency was related to the neutral emotions of the parents. One mother described her communication with a substitute educator in the daycare center. She said she 'could immediately see in the face of this educator if there was something negative to tell' when she came to pick up the child:

It was the day, when something had happened again, pinching or whatever it was...and the educator asked me 'would this be a reason for further medical investigation?' And at first I got the feeling I was being blamed, but then I thought that maybe this educator just didn't know everything about our situation...and another day when this educator told me that 'sand had been thrown down some other child's neck', I just said 'yeah, yeah'. And I thought that maybe this educator was thinking that this just doesn't interest me at all, but that wasn't so. My point was that it was nothing new for me.

The previous episode was narrated with low emotional intensity. The mother initially felt she was being blamed, but after reflecting on the situation her emotions were more neutral. Some parents did not put too much weight on their negative experiences of the educational partnership, and nor did they seem to be worried about their child's wellbeing in the daycare center. As these parents mainly narrated good experiences of the educational partnership, they might not have had any reason to adopt a more active type of agency in these kinds of exceptional situations. One mother said she 'didn't bother talking about her concerns and burdening the educator' who was only working for a while in the daycare center. Some parents reflected on their responsibility and possibility for active parental agency in the daycare center. One mother, at home explaining the reason for her hindered parental agency in the situation, said that, as a mother, she 'can't influence negative behavior by her child in the daycare center'.

### *Summary of the findings*

Proactive, confrontational and hindered types of parental agency were identified in this study (Table 1). Proactive parental agency in the educational partnership was typified by parental actions which led to a positive result. The parents with confrontational agency also acted and made initiatives in their interaction in the educational partnership. However, these initiatives were either not noticed by the educators or did not produce positive results. The parents with hindered agency made some cautious initiatives in the educational partnership, but with minimal influence.

The typical emotions of the parents with proactive agency in the educational partnership were worry, fear, relief, pleasure, joy and, finally, feelings of satisfaction and gratitude over the positive results of a successful educational partnership. The typical emotions of parents with confrontational parental agency in the educational partnership were intense worry about their child's situation, and distress, sorrow, anger, disappointment and frustration related to their negative experiences in seeking to enhance the educators' knowledge of their child and to support the child's wellbeing. These experiences led to feelings of despair and guilt at not being the kinds of parents they would have liked to be. The parents with hindered agency also narrated experiencing emotions of worry and fear. However, they most typically exhibited ambivalent emotions along with confusion and embarrassment. The enactment of hindered parental agency in the educational partnership finally led to unpleasant emotions like anger, disappointment and frustration, although also, in some cases, to emotional neutrality and calmness.

Table 1. Emotions related to the types of parental agency identified

Type of agency	Proactive agency	Confrontational agency	Hindered agency
Interviews N = 23	$n_1 = 16, n_2 = 23$	$n_1 = 2, n_2 = 7$	$n_1 = 1, n_2 = 19$
Nature of agency	Several initiatives and activities noticed and supported by the educators  Collaborative activities	Several initiatives, activities and demands ignored by the educators	Some cautious initiatives having no influence
Triggers for agency	Worry, fear	Worry, fear, distress, sorrow	Worry, fear, uncertainty, ambivalent emotions
Emotions related to enactment of agency	Relief, pleasure, joy	Anger, disappointment	Confusion, embarrassment
Enactment of agency led to	Satisfaction and gratitude	Anger, frustration, despair, guiltiness, shame	Anger, frustration, disappointment
Constructed narratives	Grateful partner	Desperate fighter	Confused receiver

Note:  $n_1$  refers to the number of interviews comprising more than 60% of the narrative type, and  $n_2$  refers to the number of interviews containing some amount of the narrative type.

Next, the similarities and differences in the emotions related to the three types of agency of the parents' narratives will be elaborated. All the parents narrated *fear and worry* concerning the wellbeing of their child in the daycare center. The emotions seemed either to activate or to freeze the parents' agency. *Anger* was most typically identified in the narratives of the confrontational and hindered types of parental agency. *Anger* was related to the confrontational type of agency in the constructed narrative of the *desperate fighter*. However, anger did not seem to lead the parents in the constructed narrative of the *confused receiver* to adopt a more active type of agency. The emotions of *shame and guilt* were most typically identified in the *desperate fighter* narrative, when the parents reflected on themselves as parents and educational partners. Shame was expressed about the harm the child in question caused the other children and the educators. Shame was also related to parents' reflection on their inability to "educate" their child to behave like the other "normal children" in the daycare center. Narratives of being "the wrong kind of parents" or "not good enough parents" were also

typical of the *desperate fighter narrative*. These parents also felt guilty over their disagreements with the educators, which may be connected to their expectation that they should agree with the educators.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

This qualitative study investigated parental agency and the emotions related to it in the educational partnership as narrated by the parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation. Three types of parental agency -proactive, confrontational and hindered- were identified in the educational partnership in the context of early childhood education. Honkasilta et al. (2015) also found that parental agency can vary in the school context. This study enriches these findings, since it also shows that emotions are closely related to parental agency. Typically, pleasant emotions were related to the proactive type of parental agency, which gave parents positive experiences of being able to influence their child's early childhood education and wellbeing in the daycare center. Unpleasant emotions in turn were related to the confrontational type of parental agency, which included resistance and taking a critical stance towards the educators (see also Hökkä et al., 2017, in press). Ambivalent, and in some cases neutral, emotions were related to the hindered type of parental agency.

Positive experiences of the educational partnership and the pleasant emotions that arise from these experiences can also be interpreted as building trust and strengthening the proactive type parental agency whereas negative experiences build distrust and strengthen the confrontational or hindered types of parental agency (see also Adams & Christenson, 2000; Poikonen & Kontoniemi, 2011). The proactive parents very openly expressed their need for support when communicating with the educators and vice versa (see Edwards, 2005). They also talked about their educational challenges and disagreements openly with the educators, which imply mutual trust between the partners. The parents with confrontational agency, in turn, implied distrust by stating that if they as parents did not support their child then who would.

The parents with proactive agency worked cooperatively with the educators. They shared concrete goals in the educational partnership and both parties were active in seeking to attain these goals. For example, together they helped the child to deal with anger and harming others. The partners drew on each other (see Edwards, 2005) in supporting the wellbeing and development of the child. The educators, in turn, enhanced proactive parental agency by, for example, acknowledging the parents' initiatives and by giving positive feedback on the parents' activities. This did not happen in the educational relationship for the parents with confrontational or hindered agency and neither did the two parties share common goals. Some parental goals such as finding a place and a friend for a child in the daycare center were also very difficult to achieve. In generally, parents' reflection on achieving their individual or common goals in the educational partnership was related to the emotions they experienced. Parents' moral reflection and judgements on their own activities and those of the educators were also associated with their emotions (see Schutz et al., 2006).

Although the contextual dimensions of agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) were emphasized in this study, it can be argued that both the personal and contextual dimensions were intertwined in the parents' narratives. Parents with confrontational agency can be described as courageous actors with good self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001), strong knowledge about their child and a clear understanding of what makes for good ECEC services. The parents with hindered agency in turn most typically narrated themselves as uncertain agents. Although interpretations of the connection between personality and parental agency cannot be made, personal factors matter in educational partnership. The parents' interview data also contained a lot of talk about their child and themselves as parents that reflected dominant cultural narratives (see Hänninen, 2000; 2004). For these parents, their child was not like the "ordinary child" in the daycare center (see Alasuutari & Markström, 2011) and they reflected on themselves as not being "good enough parents" because they were unable to educate their child in how to behave. Dominant cultural narratives concerning parenting and daycare children should also be discussed when seeking to cooperate with parents of a child with difficulties in self-regulation, as such families are untypical.

This study investigated parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership in ECEC context from the parents' point of view, a topic that has been little studied. Although the results are based on parents' subjective and relativist reality in a specific context (Spector-Mersel, 2010) they are reflected authentic situations. Even if direct generalizations cannot be made based on a narrative study (Riessman, 2008), this study furthers understanding of parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership. However, to obtain a more complete picture of the topic, it would also be important to study educators' experiences. The reliability of this study was enhanced by carefully following the idea of transparency and ethics of narrative research throughout the research process (Heikkinen, Huttunen & Syrjäälä, 2007).

Finally, this study indicates that parental agency in the educational partnership cannot be described merely as volitional and intentional activities by parents in pursuit of their goals (see Bandura, 2001). In this study, emotions played important role in parental agency in the educational partnership, and hence greater attention should be paid to them. Emotions like fear, shame, anger and guilt should be discussed when working with the parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation. The discussion of emotions can promote parents' self-understanding and educators' understanding of parental agency in the educational partnership. It is also important to discuss the concrete, meaningful goals as well as the duties and responsibilities of both partners in the educational partnership.

This study contributed to understanding of the importance of emotions in human agency. The results may be useful in supporting proactive parental agency in the educational partnership. Above all, this requires a parent-educator relationship based on mutual trust, respect and equality (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Trust can be assumed to be of especial importance when working with the

parents of children with difficulties in self-regulation. The development of trust as well as the other important elements of a successful educational partnership need to be further investigated. This will be the challenge for the next phase of this study.

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### III

## TRUST IN THE EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP NARRATED BY PARENTS OF A CHILD WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

by

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## **Trust in the educational partnership narrated by parents of a child with challenging behaviour**

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### ***Abstract***

This study examined trust in educational partnership in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland, from the viewpoint of parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Typically, such children have difficulties in regulating their behaviour and emotions. Semi-structured interviews with 23 parents were analysed in terms of content in a narrative framework. The analysis revealed two critical elements of trust in educational partnership: 1) Child well-being in the day care centre, and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration. Critical factors in the first trust element were educators' respectful and good-quality relationship with the child and fair and meaningful pedagogical practices. The second element of trust included educators' support of parents as capable mothers and fathers, and encouragement of parents as active partners in the educational partnership. These findings of this study enrich understanding of the development of trust in educational partnership when working with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour.

**Keywords:** a child with challenging behaviour, early childhood education, educational partnership, parent, trust.

### **Introduction**

Trust has been shown to be the foundation of a well-functioning parent-educator relationship (Summers et al. 2005; Kikas et al. 2011, 2016; Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011) and a successful educational partnership (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Keen 2007). Trust in educational partnership is built reciprocally (Keen 2007), and is important not only from the viewpoint of the child and the child's achievement but also from the viewpoint of the child's parents (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010). The processes that hinder the development of trust in the parent-educator partnership are multifaceted. For example, a child's challenging behaviour is a factor that may contribute to a conflictual educator-child relationship (Mantzicopoulos 2005). In turn, a good quality teacher-child relationship is associated with a decrease in a child's externalizing behaviour (Silver et al. 2005). Challenging behaviour, such as that characterizing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (e.g., oppositional or aggressive behaviour), is associated with teacher stress (Greene et al. 2002) and dysfunctional teaching strategies (Kos, Richdale, and Hay 2006). Parents' perceptions of ECEC educators' dysfunctional teaching strategies and a

negative child image and educator-child relationship (Rautamies et al. 2016) are assumed to hinder the development of parental trust in the educational partnership. Thus, family-sensitive ECEC arrangements, which include educators' ethical attitude and behaviour towards the child and his/her parents (Bromer et al. 2011) and educators' professional competence and expertise (Karila 2008), are assumed to be important when collaborating with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour.

This study examined trust in the educational partnership between parents and educators in the Finnish ECEC context. According to Finnish guiding ECEC documents, educational partnership is described as a '*child-centred connection between the partners who share the responsibility for supporting the well-being, growth, development and learning of the child*' (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; FNBE 2014, 2016). In a successful educational partnership, the partners work together and share the responsibility for the child's learning and development (Epstein 2010, 4). In Finland, equality in the parent-educator relationship and an active role and commitment by both partners are emphasized. ECEC educators in Finland have two important goals: to support the child, and to support the parents as the principle educators of their child. The importance of parental support is further emphasized in the case of a child with behavioural and developmental difficulties (Dunst and Dempsey 2007). Parents of a child with challenging behaviour are more prone to experiencing emotional stress and inadequacy over their child's upbringing (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Peters and Jackson 2008); moreover, they face difficulties in finding effective pedagogical methods for the purpose (Lange et al. 2005). Family-sensitive ECEC practices and educational partnership based on trust empower parents (Dunst and Dempsey 2007) by promoting child, parent, and family outcomes; enhancing parenting skills; decreasing parental stress; and strengthening parental confidence and well-being (Bromer et al. 2011). Further, parental trust in educational partnership is also related to involvement of parents, which is an important basis for meaningful child support (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice 2010). Finnish parents are generally satisfied with the commitment and reliability of their ECEC educators, and the level of mutual parent-teacher trust in Finnish preschools is high (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011). However, while parents are satisfied with the manner in which educators work with their children, they are less satisfied with how educators support them as the principle educators of their child (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011).

This research highlights the importance of parental trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context in cases where a child exhibits challenging behaviour -that is, difficulties in behavioural and emotional regulation (Barkley 2004). To date, only a few studies have addressed this specific issue (e.g. Dunlap and Fox 2007), and trust in the parent-educator relationship has mainly been studied in the school context (e.g. Adams, Fortsyth, and Mitchell 2009). Thus, there is a need to investigate parental trust in educators in the ECEC context, particularly from the viewpoint of parents whose child exhibits challenging behaviour.

### ***Trust in the educational partnership***

In this study, educational partnership is defined as *'mutually supportive interaction between families and professionals focused on meeting the needs of children and families'* (Summers et al. 2005, 66). This definition emphasizes both the reciprocal nature of the educational partnership and the importance of successful collaboration in meeting the needs of parents and children. Slightly modifying the definition of trust in the family-school relationship used by Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods (2010, 66), we define parental trust in the educational partnership in ECEC as *'parents' confidence that educators will act in a manner that benefits the relationship, or the goals of the relationship, in seeking to achieve positive outcomes on behalf of the child and the parents'*. Trust is presumed to be enhanced when parents believe in the competence of educators as ECEC professionals (Blue-Banning et al. 2004). Moreover, trust is based on the expectations that people have of other role groups (e.g. educators) (Adams, Fortsyth, and Mitchell 2009), which are linked to prevailing institutional and cultural role expectations. For example, as educators in Finnish ECEC are highly qualified and well-educated professional actors, parents may have high expectations with regard to their competence.

Reliability, safety and discretion have been identified as indicators of trust in the parent-teacher relationship (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 174; Summers et al. 2005). From the parental viewpoint, reliability refers to consistency in the teacher's verbal communication and behaviour, which is reflected through, for example, statements like *'educators "do what they say"'* (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179). A high level of integrity is evident when one's words match their behaviour, thereby reflecting one's strong moral-ethical perspectives (Clarke et al. 2010, 67). Safety refers to parents' feelings of confidence or peace of mind in leaving their child at the day care centre and trusting that the child will receive education and care that is of good quality (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179.) Discretion refers to the confidentiality of the parent-educator relationship, which implies that parents can trust that educators will maintain confidentiality of the information they have about the child and his/her family and protect their privacy (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179; Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011). Typically, in such a relationship, the partners also have confidence in the responsibility, competence, openness, and honesty of the other party (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 174). Further, the importance of mutual respect in the educational partnership is frequently emphasized (Keen 2007; Minke 2006). Trust between the partners is presumed to be enhanced when educators respect parents as the primary educators of the child, and parents respect educators as ECEC professionals. In educational partnership, both partners recognize the importance of the other partner, and the ideas and perspectives of both partners are given cognisance to and taken into account in discussions and decision-making (Clarke et al. 2010). The educator's ability to view matters from the parents' perspective is also assumed to be important in the development of trust.

Trust is a continuously evolving and dynamic phenomenon (Clarke et al. 2010) that can increase or decrease depending on the partners' interactional experiences (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011; Clarke et al. 2010, 68). Parent-educator trust is developed relationally over time through commitment,

collaboration, and positive interactional experiences (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007; Minke 2006). A child's challenging behaviour may not only test but also strengthen parent-educator collaboration and improve the experience of parental trust in a successful educational partnership.

In the studies cited above, trust in the educational partnership was investigated among parents whose children did not present specific behavioural challenges. Hence, the focus of the present study is on identifying the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership perceived by parents of children who have difficulties in regulating their behaviour and emotions.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and data collection***

The data comprise interviews with 23 parents (18 mothers and 5 fathers) of children who exhibit challenging behaviour that is typical of children with difficulties in self-regulation (Barkley 2004) and ADHD (Cooper and Bilton 2013). A majority of the interviews (n = 21) were conducted in the period 2011–2013 (see Rautamies et al. 2017). The participants were clients of Finnish ECEC services for at least 10 months. The child in question was typically a six- to seven- year-old 'preschooler' boy (girls in three interviews) at the time of the interview. Participation in the study was voluntary. Most (n = 15) of the parents were recruited via the Family School program (for more details, see Rautamies et al. 2016) and the remainder (n = 8) were contacted by informing day care centres, primary schools (first-grade classrooms), and the local ADHD association about the study. Only those parents who had a child with challenging behaviour were invited to participate in the study. Eligible parents were informed about the aims, manner of proceedings, and voluntary nature of the study; moreover, relevant ethical principles were carefully discussed with them before research consent forms were signed. It was emphasized that the anonymity of the parents, their child, the day care centre, and the child's educators would be guaranteed when reporting the study's findings.

The qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted mostly by the first author in a conversational situation in a peaceful room at the university. In line with the narrative research framework (Riessman 2008), attention was paid to the creation of a confidential interview situation in which the interviewer's role was to listen to the parents. The parents were asked to narrate their experiences of the educational partnership as parents of a child with challenging behaviour. More specifically, they were asked to describe the path of their educational partnership and narrate their good and bad interactional and collaborative experiences, such as daily discussions, educational discussions, and discussions on the child's individual education plan with the child's ECEC educators. First, the parents were asked to discuss their child and his/her challenging behaviour in the day care centre; subsequently, they were asked to narrate their experiences of interaction with the child's ECEC educators on matters concerning their child. In addition, the interviewer asked supplementary

or more specific questions when she felt she needed more information on the topic being discussed by the parent. On average, the interviews lasted a little over one hour and ranged from approximately one to three hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

### *Data analysis*

In this study, as we were particularly interested in parents' narrated experiences regarding factors that were crucial in developing their trust in the educational partnership, we employed a narrative approach (Squire 2008; Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2008). The analytical process began with careful reading of the interview transcripts to identify and extract all the narration considered relevant to the issue of parental trust in the educational partnership. These narratives (i.e., small narratives reflecting parents' experiences of trust) most typically revolved around interactional situations with specific educators or educators' pedagogical activities with their child. They ranged in length from a few sentences to larger textual entities. First, parents' descriptions of interactional episodes with descriptions of related experiences with specific educators were extracted bearing in mind that parent-educator trust is developed particularly through positive interactional experiences (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007; Minke 2006). In addition, all aspects of the parents' narration of experiences that they considered or described as significant in the educational partnership were of special interest, which included when they were talking about 'trust' or 'confidence'. Finally, the parents' descriptions of educators' pedagogical activities with their child and their attitude towards the child were extracted, since child-centred ECEC practices are related to parental trust (Kikas et al. 2016). The interviews mostly contained narrative accounts which reflected parental trust in educational partnership; however, they also included some narrative accounts with low or missing parental trust.

After identifying and extracting the smaller narratives (Squire 2008; Squire, Andrewe, and Tamboukou 2008) relevant to the issue of parental trust, they were analysed (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998) in three phases. First, they were named according to the main content. After comparing their similarities and differences, four categories were identified: respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship; fair and meaningful pedagogical practices; supporting parents as capable mothers and fathers; and encouraging parents to be active partners in the educational partnership. Finally, in order to describe the main elements of parental trust, the four categories were grouped into two main categories based on their content: 1) Child well-being in the day care centre and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration.

## **Results: The elements of parental trust in the educational partnership**

This study examined trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of the parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Here, the elements of parental trust identified as critical in the educational partnership will be described.

### *Child well-being in the day care centre*

The well-being of the child in the day care centre was identified as the first main category of the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership. It was also the primary concern of all the interviewed parents. As one mother said, 'It is so important he (the child) can feel safe and well in the day care centre'. The parents gained understanding of their child's well-being in the day care centre by talking to the educators and listening to their child's experiences. For parents to feel safe, it was important to receive sufficient information from the educators regarding their child's day and their peer relationships. Trust was not present when parents were worried about their child's wellbeing in the daycare center. Below, the sub-categories of a child's well-being are described in greater detail.

### *A respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship*

Educators' attitudes towards and conceptions with regard to the child were the dominant themes in parents' narratives on their child's well-being. The parents extensively discussed whether or not the educators understood, accepted, and liked their child. From the viewpoint of developing trust, as it was critical that 'educators saw the child as a good and not as a bad or challenging child', as one mother stated. It was also important that 'the child's difficulties were not magnified by the educators'. Further, the parents emphasized the importance of educators having a holistic and realistic understanding of the child, including the child's strengths as well as challenges, as described by one mother:

They (educators) know the child and they accept the child, and they see him in a realistic way as he is... Both the child's strengths and challenges have been shared and discussed with the educators. Because there are two sides to him. (Mari)

For the parents, it was important that the educators' saw their child as a unique being and accepted the child the way he/she is. According to the mother cited above, 'more important than all the educational tricks in the book like how to get the child to dress, is to trust and believe in the child'. Educators' trust in the child and in the parents was emphasized by the parents, and this was interpreted to promote the feeling of hope; this was evident from one mother's statement:

It was so important to notice that she (the educator) believed in our child and she believed we can cope as parents. I don't know what had happened, if she would have said that it can't be helped. (Anna)

For the parents, it was important that educators did not see the child 'as a bad child' or 'the wrong kind of child' by 'seeing only the negative features of the child', in the words of one mother, Johanna. A child's experience of 'being stigmatized as a bad child' or as 'a teaser' was typical while discussing missing trust. One father was relieved, when after communicating with the educators, he realized that 'the behaviour of his child did not result from his daughter being mean, but there was a reason why she behaved challengingly'.

Parents who expressed trust in the educators typically described the educator-child relationship as a warm or caring relationship with mutual positive emotions and attachment. For example, one father said,

We and our child were important to her (the educator), and our daughter liked her so much (the educator) too. (Max)

These parents were relieved when they felt the child's challenging behaviour did not negatively influence the educator-child relationship or the educator's image of the child. In contrast, in interviews where the parents described the educator-child relationship as conflictual or dys-functional indicated the absence of trust. For example, as Jaana said,

He was just a wrong kind of child, who was not understood neither liked nor accepted by the educator of the child group' (Jaana)

Thus, parents' experiences of respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship was perceived as one of the most critical elements in developing parental trust in the educational partnership.

#### *Fair and meaningful pedagogical practices*

Fair pedagogical practices, including equity and equality, were identified as the second critical element in developing parental trust in the educational partnership in relation to the well-being of the child. Parents felt that it was important that their child 'was treated the same as the other children in the group', and that 'the educators made an effort to keep the child from standing out in the group'. All the parents considered it important that educators attempt to prevent their child from being 'stigmatized as a bad child' and being 'falsely accused', which were typical while discussing missing trust.

The parents also felt relieved when they did not need to be apprehensive of whether or not the educators could cope with their child's potentially challenging behaviour:

The educators always emphasized that they will cope with the situations with our child, that we don't need to be worried. (Anna)

The educators were objective and committed and they could cope with different kinds of educational challenges presented by the child... the educators dealt with the specific challenges of the child neutrally by working professionally. (Max)

The objective and professionally competent behaviour of the educators and their commitment to their educational work were both emphasized by the parents. Perceiving the behaviour of educators and their pedagogical methods as meaningful was a critical element that constituted parental trust. Parents found it helpful that educators focused on supporting the child in difficult situations and not on the child's challenging behaviour. For example, one mother narrated that an educator told her that she supported her son, who had daily difficulties in dressing, by putting the child's clothes in a separate room and standing patiently nearby until the child managed to get dressed.

In general, for parents, it was important to know that the educators showed professional expertise and took responsibility for dealing fairly with the child in challenging situations, as the following contrasting extracts reveal:

The educators worked so well, for example, in challenging situations or when dealing with tantrums. We have not noticed any kind of injustice; our daughter is very sensitive in such situations, and they (the educators) described her and her activities always with respect. (Max)

The educators did not show any professional competence at all... they did not know how to cooperate with him, he was a big trouble for them... and I feel so sad because he did not have any friends there at all. (Sara)

It was important for the parents that the educators took pedagogical responsibility for their child's well-being in a day care centre. The parents felt relieved when they noticed that educators actively supported the child's peer relationships and play activities, and when they did not need to be apprehensive that the child would be teased by the other children. This confirms that fair and meaningful pedagogy based on high-quality ethical principles were identified as critical in developing parental trust in educational partnership.

### **A supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration**

The second main category of the critical elements of trust was parents' experience of being supported by their child's educators. This experience was perceived by parents as rather important. One mother said that as a stay-at-home mother, she would have felt as if she were 'alone in a dark forest' without the support of the educators. She was 'so relieved to have the educators as educational partners' and stated that without their support she and her husband 'would have been lost'. In the trust narratives, parents mentioned that the possibility of sharing the educational responsibility of a child with challenging behaviour with childcare professionals brought them a feeling of relief. Next, the two sub-categories of parental experiences of support from educators are described.

### *Supporting parents as capable mothers and fathers*

Parents typically related to themselves as being unsure parents with low self-confidence who needed encouragement in the parenting process. They described educators as supportive of them, for example, through positive feedback such as telling them, 'You have done well with your child in this matter'. Parents emphasized the importance of 'their capability as parents not being questioned by educators', as one mother put it. Further, several parents expressed their need to be accepted and respected as parents and as educational partners despite all the difficulties that they may have with their child. In addition, most parents highlighted a feeling of not being blamed and judged by educators because of the child's challenging behaviour. The experiences of 'being blamed' and feeling guilty were typical while narrating missing trust, as stated by Jaana:

It made me think that incompetent parenting was the reason for the challenging behaviour of our son...And I felt I caused the sick leaves of the staff. (Jaana)

Thus, it is evident that the lack of attributions of blame and being negatively judged were essential in the development of trust in the parent-educator relationship. One mother considered the reporting of her child's challenging behaviour as making demands on parents and stated that 'parents' concerns got buried under these kinds of demands'.

Further, parents emphasized the importance of a respectful attitude toward the parents and neutral and positive everyday communication, particularly in pick-up situations.

They never had a disrespectful attitude toward us, and we just talked neutrally in pick-up-situations, what had happened, and we discussed how these kinds of situations could be prevented. (Max)

Positive communication also included being able to share positive emotions with the educators. Experiences like 'rejoicing together when the child had succeeded in coping with his tantrum' were considered to strengthen parents' experience of hope and trust. For several parents, it was important not to be afraid of receiving excessively distressing daily reports regarding their child's behaviour. One mother described the daily reports as 'gentle and kindly meant information about the day's challenges', while another mother said that 'the pick-up situations were so frightening' for her, when she was told about the happenings of the day. It was important for parents that, when communicating with them, educators emphasized 'the positive features of the child'. One mother made an agreement with an educator that the latter would not report the entire day's negative events in pick-up situations. Mostly, however, the parents emphasized the importance of open and honest parent-educator communication, as one father said,

They (educators) have been sincere and honest, and they have never tried to hide anything. If they have had a challenging day, they have said that honesty to us, as well as when something has gone very well. (Markku)

A priority in the educational partnership for all the parents was the experience of being heard by the educators.

I feel it is so important, that (as a parent) you can feel you are being listened to and heard with all your concerns, and it is not purely that your child is a bad child... The child's difficulties and the parents' concerns were not magnified or dismissed by the educators. For me, the most important thing is that the educators take us seriously, and that they look kindly on our son. (Mari)

Parents felt that it was important that all kinds of thoughts and emotions could be discussed with the child's educators, particularly their concerns regarding the child's well-being and peer relations. Finally, positive, open, and honest communication along with being respected, accepted, and heard by the educators appeared to be critical in the development of parental trust in the educational partnership, while also enhancing parents' perceptions of themselves as capable mothers and fathers.

#### *Encouraging parents to be active partners in the educational partnership*

Several parents stated the importance of confidential discussions, and they appreciated having the possibility of actively influencing the educational partnership. For example, meetings in which the child's individual educational plan was discussed and evaluated by both parents and educators were highly valued by all the parents. This is because such meetings made it possible to discuss the child's behaviour and the special support needed by the child in the day care centre and at home, as well as to discuss and agree on deeper educational principles. The importance of confidential discussions was highlighted by two fathers in the following extracts.

We always have had a common time to discuss with the educators. And whenever we have had any worries, there has always been an educator with whom to discuss... They have listened to us and they have listened to our daughter too. (Max)

Because we have been thinking together, and we have made agreements, so we have not had any difficulties in educational partnership. It has been important to have a common understanding of the situation. (Max)

Important and commonly agreed goals have been achieved...and it was so important for us to notice how much his self-confidence was strengthened. (Markku)

Parents felt that confidential discussions must be arranged in an appropriate physical context, which strengthened the feeling of safety, as one mother stated. Most parents stated that a low turnover of educators was a prerequisite for confidential parent-educator relationships and discussions. According to Sara, 'it was simply impossible to create a relationship with the educators when they changed too often'. According to her, a high turnover of personnel was one reason for an increase in her child's challenging behaviour and associated difficulties.

Further, dialogical discussions were a prerequisite and a sign of active parental influence in the educational partnership. The importance of both

partners sharing their thoughts about the child's personality and behaviour before constructing the child's profile and the child's challenging behaviour was emphasized by the parents. They felt that it was important that educators took into consideration not only the parents' knowledge of their child but also their understanding of the particular methods and parenting practices that worked with the child. Parents' active influence in the educational partnership produced a shared understanding of the child and his/her behaviour, which was emphasized by the parents as being important:

I felt that the educators had a similar understanding of the child's behaviour in certain situations as we parents did, which generated strong confidence in everything going well at the day care centre. (Mari)

Unfortunately, all parents did not reach a common understanding of the child with the educators' despite several initiatives, as Jaana said, which can be interpreted to be a critical experience of developing missing trust.

Some parents reported relief at having the possibility of influencing how their child's transition to school was implemented. Giving parents the possibility of making decisions in educational meetings was also evidence of the trust that educators placed in them. Experiences of successful collaborative activities were considered to strengthen the mutual trust between the partners. This happened, for example, when educators and parents supported the child together in the handling of difficult emotions. In such situations, both partners played an important role in supporting the child. The importance of the connection between parental trust and active parental influence in educational partnership is summed up in the following extract.

Trust in the educators is the be-all and end-all of the educational partnership....If you can't trust the educators when communicating with them, you can't talk to them. (Mari)

A successful educational partnership which produces positive outcomes – such as a common understanding of the child, shared educational goals, and commonly agreed upon educational principles and meaningful pedagogical methods – was regarded as critical from the viewpoint of developing parental trust, while also enhancing parents' experience of empowerment.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This qualitative study identified the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of the parents of a child with challenging behaviour. The following two main categories were identified as critical in developing parental trust: 1) Child well-being and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration. The first contained two sub-categories. The first sub-category comprised parental confidence in educators as ECEC professionals whose pedagogical practices were meaningful and fair and who coped with the challenging behaviour of their child. The second category also contained two sub-categories: one comprised parents' experience of being supported by their child's educators; the other sub-category involved

collaboration, which produced a shared understanding of and support for the child. Moreover, in line with the studies by Laakso and colleagues (2011) and Peters and Jackson (2008), parents' experience of being supported by educators in bringing up their child with challenging behaviour was also important. Supporting parents by treating them as being good mothers and fathers was found to be critically important in developing parental trust in the educational partnership, thereby enhancing parents' belief in themselves as capable parents and educational partners empowering the parents, which is in line with Laakso et al. 2011 (see Dunst and Dempsey 2007).

Next, the findings of this study are discussed in relation to three main indicators of trust: safety, reliability, and discretion (Blue-Banning et al. 2004). The implication of safety and reliability to parents was emphasized in the first trust element. The importance of their child's well-being in a day care centre can be interpreted to be the basis for the parents' feeling of safety. In addition, parents' perceptions with regard to good-quality educator-child relationship and fair and meaningful ECEC practices were interpreted to enhance parents' experience of safety, thereby also reflecting educators' professional competence and expertise (Karila 2008). Further, discretion played an important role in the second trust element. Parents emphasized the implication of respectful and gentle communication from the educators. It was important from the viewpoint of trust that parents were actively able to collaborate on an equal and respectful footing with their child's educators and share their educational responsibilities with them. Moreover, parents' experiences of being accepted, respected, and heard by the educators were not only critical in developing parental trust (see also Keen 2007; Kikas et al. 2011) but were also related to parents' active influence in the educational partnership (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice 2010; Keen 2007). Collaboration in which the parents were heard resulted in a shared understanding of the child and the child's difficulties as well as in the development of pedagogical practices to support the child. Enabling parents to share educational responsibility with the ECEC educators appeared to be related to parental trust (see Adams, Forsyth, and Mitchell 2009; Dunlap and Fox 2007).

This study also has certain limitations, which must be considered. Critical elements of trust in the educational partnership were investigated only from the viewpoint of parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Because of the relational nature of trust (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007), this phenomenon must also be investigated from the viewpoint of educators. Further, most of the participants in our study were mothers (18 mothers vs. 5 fathers), who are typically the more active participants in the educational partnership. Moreover, most of the children were boys, who more typically exhibit challenging behaviour and have conflicts with educators (Buyse et al. 2008; Doumen et al. 2008). However, the data are rich and the findings contribute to educators' understanding of the critical elements in gaining parental trust. Parental experiences of the educational partnership tended to be positive, although a few narratives also reflected a low level trust or no trust. The narratives of all the

parents were utilized in seeking to identify the critical elements of trust. The reliability of the research was strengthened by using direct quotes from the interviews in this report, thereby leaving the reader free to evaluate the analytical process and the conclusions drawn. The quotes were selected in a manner that would represent the variety of views revealed by the collected data.

Finally, we highlight and discuss the following main results. First, it was important for the parents that their child's challenging behaviour did not negatively influence the educator-child or parent-educator relationship or an educator's approach towards the child and the child's parents. High-quality teacher education, in-service training, and the possibility for educators to receive guidance when faced with the child's challenging behaviour are assumed to be prerequisites for the professional behaviour of ECEC educators. Second, we highlight the importance of parental support in the educational partnership. Feelings such as inadequacy, irresolution, and stress are typical for the parents of a child with challenging behaviour (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Lange et al. 2005; Peters and Jackson 2008). Despite the need for educators' support, the parental support seems to be, unfortunately, insufficient in the case of parents in such a situation (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Peters and Jackson 2008). This study revealed a high level of parental trust and parents' satisfaction with parental and child support, which were interrelated (Poikonen, and Kontoniemi 2011; Kikas et al. 2016). The high level of qualification required of ECEC practitioners and child-centred teaching practices as well as high teaching status in Finland may be one reason for these findings (see Kikas et al. 2016). The results of this study can be utilized in preservice and in-service training of ECEC - educators. This study provides self-assessment tools for ECEC students and educators to reflect on their behaviour, attitudes, and approaches, which is important in family-sensitive and confidential educational partnership (Bromer et al. 2011). Further, the findings emphasize the importance of listening to parents' experiences of their educational partnership when building a relationship of trust with them.

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