ECEC Teachers' Emotional Support During Children's Transition from Home to ECEC

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ABSTRACT

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The present research investigates the role of early childhood education and care (from now on ECEC) teachers' emotional support in smooth transitions for young children experiencing ECEC. Therefore, different strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support children emotionally and children's reactions to those strategies are analyzed in detail to find new ways of reducing the anxiety and stress that children may feel at the time of separating their parents and entering their social environment. The participants of this research were 7 children (4 girls and 3 boys) aged 0 to 3 and 4 ECEC teachers from a Finnish kindergarten. Data was collected qualitatively through observations of children and interviews with ECEC teachers. Thematic analysis was applied for analyzing the collected data.

According to the results, ECEC teachers apply different strategies for making transition smoother for young children. They can distract children from the transition situation or give them feeling of being safe by hugging, stroking or allowing children to bring their favorite toy or picture. Moreover, the proper decisions and behavior of ECEC teachers according to different situations can play a vital role for children's smooth transitions. However, the results show that children may accept or reject the emotional support which they receive from ECEC teachers. The findings of this study can raise awareness of the real need of proper emotional support for young children during their transition from home to ECEC and can be a source of valuable information for daycare policy makers and caregivers.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, smooth transition, emotional support

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

The first experience of socialization for young children is the time that they enter kindergarten and experience being in a group differs from their family members. The moment of leaving loved ones and entering a new environment is a crucial moment for young children even for the ones who have experienced being at kindergarten before (Lucas et al., 2024). According to Elden (2009), children's transitions can be defined as "relational spaces" which is not a pre assumed reality and can be formed by interacting with people and joining with society; therefore, it's ECEC teachers' responsibility to create a safe environment for children and make the transition easier for them. Moreover, happy transitions can lead to better adaptation to the new environment and better participation in everyday activities which provide opportunities for children's learning and development (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007).

According to Colley (2010), transition is a hidden changing process which can be framed positively or negatively by educational and local settings, and it is an obvious matter that young children will feel stress during the transitional stage, however making children feel safe and finding ways to reduce their stress will be so beneficial for their mental and physical improvements and well-being (see Colley, 2010). To confirm the importance of this issue, White et al. (2020), proposed the expression of "smooth transition" and mentioned that it's an important matter for children's long-term learning and development. According to them, for infants who have to move from home environment to the group environment in ECEC setting, continued positive interactions and engagement can be considered as necessity for children's growth. However, the lack of proper transition can affect the infants' involvement, belonging, and wellbeing. Besides, the individual infants, their families, and their daycares can form the children's social, educational, and

emotional expectations and understandings of the transition experience (White et al., 2022).

What had driven me to conduct this research was my personal experience of the difficult transition of my son from home to ECEC. Transition to ECEC was so unbearable for him that I stayed with him at daycare every single day for one month. There, I felt with my heart how transition of young children can be difficult for both children and parents. So, I decided to conduct my thesis about transition of young children from home to ECEC to raise more awareness about this crucial issue.

Moreover, by studying the relevant literature about transition of young children from home to ECEC, I noticed that there are many studies in this field which examine the challenges that young children may face during the transitional stage (Bernard et al., 2015; Dalli, 2000; Datler et al., 2010; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Fein et al., 1993; Harju et al. 2023; Nystad et al., 2021; Pursi & Lipponen, 2022). Among them, many studies pay special attention to proper child-adult relationship for smooth transitions and highlight the daycare teachers' responsibilities for secure attachments and psychological aspects of transition (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Fein et al., 1993; Lucas Revilla et al., 2022; Nystad et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). However, less is known about examining all the strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support young children emotionally and analyzing children's reactions to those strategies. For example, Lucas Revilla et al. (2022), studied only the teacher-child lap interaction for smooth transitions but not all the strategies that an ECEC teacher can apply for a smooth transition of a child.

Therefore, the present research investigates all strategies that ECEC teachers apply for smooth transitions of young children and examines all reactions of children to different emotional supports for producing broad knowledge in young children's transition field. Moreover, this research tries to raise awareness of the real need of proper emotional support for young children during their transition from home to ECEC and can be a source of valuable information for daycare policy makers and caregivers.

1.1 Literature Review

Early childhood transitional stage. Early childhood transition can be the first transition of a child from home to ECEC or transition within ECEC, such as from one group to another or from kindergarten to pre-school, these transitions are considered as educational transitions and they are in relation to other people and environment (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Harju et al., 2023).

Moreover, transition can be considered as a social process which needs children's full participation in the ECEC environment. The mentioned participation can be fulfilled by learning to change in order to succeed in dealing with a new culture, roles, rules, place, people, and new identity (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Nystad et al., 2021; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015).

In this research, transition is considered as children's separation from their parents when they enter ECEC from home, and it is understood as a societal process which can be affected by children's relation to others or their new environment.

There are four theoretical perspectives concerning the transition of young children for early childhood education, which are: developmental, ecological, socio-cultural and critical (Boyle et al., 2018). Developmental perspectives consider childhood as a period for growth and improvement. According to developmental perspectives, the children's progressions during the transitional time, are according to the children's age and developmental features like temperament and adjustment (Boyle et al., 2018). According to ecological theoretical perspective, children's development is according to a system of multiple relationships and transitions can be explained as the interactions of the ecologies of systems. The socio-cultural approaches and the sociology of childhood are about the way that children can construct the meaning of the world in their own minds according to historical and cultural contexts. This perspective considers a shift from the conceptions of "children as human becomings" to children as "human beings" (Vogler et al., 2008). According to Vygotsky's (1935), the children's developmental change can be

considered as a result of children's engagement in the social, cultural and historical world.

This research applied developmental and socio-cultural perspectives regarding the transition of children from home to ECEC, because according to this study childhood is considered as a phase of mental and physical growth and improvements, moreover, children's well adjustment to their new society can be in relation to others and environment (Boyle et al., 2018). Therefore, ECEC teachers' emotional supports can play a vital role for children's transition and can vary according to different children's personality features for their better adjustments (Bernard et al., 2015; Datler et al., 2010)

According to Warren and Harden-Thew (2019), there are lots of research investigating early years transitions according to the educators, children's parents' points of views, or according to the combination of both views (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Fein et al., 1993; Lucas Revilla et al., 2022; Nystad et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). However, recently children's views are highlighted more (Clark and Moss, 2011). Like the research by Lucas et al. (2024), which examines transition from children's initiations and actions towards their environment and teachers.

Considering the present study, transition is considered as a reciprocal process, therefore, both ECEC teachers' emotional support and children's reactions to the received supports have been examined.

Another perspective considering the transition period for young children focused on the challenges of transitions relating to education for young children and it was mentioned that these challenges happened because children need to become a member of an unknown and diverse environment and the successful early educational transitions can affect children's future success and personal wellbeing (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Warren &Harden-Thew, 2019). Beside the mentioned perspectives, there have been researches that have paid special attention to the influence of the social context and inclusion, rather than the scholastic skill set or maturational determinants. According to these studies, a strong sense of belonging

and a positive identity can be resulted from successful early childhood transitions (Warren and Harden-Thew, 2019).

Furthermore, according to the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), there is a mismatch between developmental needs of children and their new school environments. Besides, emotional engagement of children is according to their interactions with teachers and peers, and it is argued that children should be psychologically prepared for the transition stage as well as encountering and adapting to the new and unknown environments. As a result, preparation of children for transition is a crucial matter which should be fulfilled by their parents (Symonds and Hargreaves, 2016).

As the mentioned studies examine only the role of adults or only the role of children in transition process, the present research tries to examine the role of ECEC teachers' emotional support and children's reactions to the received supports to make a more wholistic view about children's transition to ECEC.

Transition in Finnish ECEC Context. The data of this research has been gathered from a kindergarten in Finland so it's worthwhile to consider transition from Finnish ECEC culture. One of the main goals of early childhood education in Finland is providing equal opportunities of learning and growth for a successful future (Salminen, 2017). According to The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2022), each child has the right to well-being, care and protection, and the best interest of the child always should be the priority for decision making.

Regarding children's transition, The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2022) states that the ECEC service should organize some practices for cooperation to ensure the flexible transitions of children. These transitions are the children's transition from home to ECEC or during early childhood education. According to chapter 5 of the curriculum, the child's guardian can collaborate at the transition phases, and it should be according to the best interest of the child.

Teachers' emotional support for young children. Transition from home to ECEC can be so difficult for young children and it can lead to children's separation

anxiety and negative emotions (Fein et al., 1993; Klette & Killén, 2019). Therefore, children need continual adaptation and learning for better adjustment to their new society (Bernard et al., 2015; Dalli, 2003; Datler et al., 2010; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Lucas Revilla et al., 2022; Thyssen, 2000). Regarding the importance of receiving enough emotional support for young children, some studies (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Fein et al., 1993; Lucas Revilla et al., 2022; Nystad et al., 2021; Tebet et al., 2020; White et al., 2020) focused on the role of daycare teachers and mentioned that during the first days of transition of a child at daycare environment, it's the responsibility of the teachers to pay special attention to young children and their families, which can be fulfilled by permitting the presence of a child's family member during the child's stay at daycare, or asking help from an elder sibling who is attending the same daycare. Another way is giving the child the permission to bring a personal object like, pacifier, toy, pillow, photo or a cloth, as a calmness during the transition period (Tebet et al., 2020).

For more resilience and coping with stress during transition for young children, Bailey et al. (2022), noted that the daycare teachers' warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions with young children are essential for children's cognitive and emotional improvements and reducing the stress that they feel during the transitional stage. Furthermore, the children who receive consistent warm emotions from their teachers can trust others more and can feel safe without the presence of their family members and this matter can make the transition time easier for them (Bailey et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the results of the study by White et al. (2020), revealed the fact that all infants experienced levels of distress and anxiety which should be overcome by sensitive and emphatic behaviors of caregivers. Besides, Traum and Moran (2016), examined the parents' beliefs and values during the time of children's drop off and pick up. According to them, the values, behaviors and concerns of parents can affect the emotional well-being of children during their transition, therefore the

outward appearance of both parents and caregivers in everyday transitions affect the emotions of infants (Traum and Moran, 2016; White et al., 2020).

Moreover, Lucas Revilla et al. (2022) stated the importance of infant–teacher lap interactions for smooth transitions of children at early ages. According to them, transition from home to ECEC is considered as a period of intense change and development in socio-spatial worlds. This study applied a relational approach for highlighting the social and contextual nature of interaction. According to this approach, actors, context, and situation are considered as completers of each other which their inter relations can cause the emergence of interactions. Therefore, transitions are considered as relational processes which can develop by passing time and are formed within a network of temporal, agentic, situational and contextual aspects (Lucas Revilla et al., 2022).

Moreover, according to White et al. (2022), early transitions to ECEC are stressful for infants, caregivers and parents. This stress is more severe, especially for mothers who have to return to work after twelve months of the infants' birth. Therefore, transitions are emotional moments for families and especially mothers and the families' reactions and tensions can make transition more difficult for infants and affect their emotional well-being and improvements (Fein et al., 1993; Klette & Killén, 2019; White et al., 2022).

Furthermore, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) suggested some practices to connect children, their families, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers with the aim of making adaptation easier for children and their families. For this purpose, spending some days visiting kindergarten classes and environment before the real transition were suggested for familiarizing children and their parents with the ECEC environment. Besides, some orientation programs for children and their parents, or individual meetings between caregivers, parents and children can be so beneficial for easier transitions (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Therefore, transitional stage can be considered as a sensitive moment for every young child and receiving a proper

interaction from daycare teachers can reduce children's stress and motivate them for a better ECEC participation (Fein et al., 1993; Klette & Killén, 2019).

1.2 Research Task and Questions

The present research specifically explores different emotional support of ECEC teachers for young children when they separate their parents and enter kindergarten and analyzes the children's reactions to different ECEC teachers' supports for producing broad knowledge in young children's transition field. Moreover, this research tries to raise awareness of the real need of proper emotional support for young children during their transition from home to ECEC. According to the aim of the research, the research questions are:

1. What kind of strategies do ECEC teachers apply to support children emotionally during their transition from home to ECEC?
2. How do children react to different strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support them emotionally?

2 RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Methodology

Ontological and epistemological perspective of the research. It is a very crucial matter that the researchers are aware of the principles and assumptions which are appropriate for their disciplines because it can lead to the validity and integrity of the research (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Moreover, according to Berryman (2019), choosing the right philosophical stances can lead to the researcher's self-awareness for obtaining the knowledge of reality about the content of the research for writing

proper research questions and choosing right methods which suit the researcher's topic.

Ontology which is one of the important philosophical stances that affect the whole process of research, means the philosophy of being and knowing. Ontology deals with our belief about the existence of something, or what is fundamental or basic for our research and it means understanding the origin and nature of the issues that the researcher is going to conduct the research about it (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Another important philosophical stance is epistemology which is used for describing different ways of knowing a phenomenon (Berryman, 2019). In other words, epistemology means how knowledge can be studied regarding its validity, scope and the methods which can be applied to discover the knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Therefore, according to Mason (2007), epistemology can be described as the ways that a social phenomenon can be known and demonstrated.

Regarding the present research, my ontological and epistemological commitments are grounded in constructivism. Constructionist approach believes that the reality exists with the engagement of the humans' activities; therefore, human beings can form and interpret knowledge based on their engagement with the reality and different researchers may construct meaning of the same phenomena differently (Moon & Blackman, 2014). I have applied constructionist approach for conducting the present research, because I have gathered data through the interactions and interviews of ECEC teachers and observing and interpreting the emotional status of children during their transition from home to ECEC.

Research paradigm. The paradigm which is adopted for conducting the present research is interpretive paradigm, because the aim of this paradigm is not only reporting and explaining the reality, but also constructing and reproducing the reality and knowledge by interactions, communications and practices (Tracy, 2013). According to interpretive paradigm, it is an important matter to examine the situation from the participants' point of view, therefore, the researchers by putting themselves in the place of the participants and engaging in the examined situation,

not only can imagine the cultural, experimental and motivational factors of the participants but also can gain a deep empathic understanding of the participants emotional conditions (Tracy, 2013). Beside considering the reality from the participants' point of view, qualitative methodology in interpretive studies considering morality and values and paying enough attention to ethical and political consequences. Therefore, according to interpretivists, knowledge can be constructed by use of interaction and language, and reality which can be identified by categorizations of social cultures and ideologies can be considered as a "text", which gives the researcher the possibility of interpreting, deconstructing and analyzing (Tracy, 2013). Considering the present research, I conducted qualitative research based on observations of children and interviews with ECEC teachers; therefore, the data has been collected through the interactions of the researcher and participants as well as conveying the emotional status of children during their transition to ECEC.

2.2   Research Context, Participants and Data Collection

For gathering data, I have applied a qualitative approach based on observations and interviews which are considered as field work. Fieldwork includes materials gathered, recorded, and compiled during the study and purposeful sampling is an important matter because in this way the research questions and the goals of the research can complement each other (Tracy, 2013). The participants of this study were chosen from a Finnish kindergarten which I have passed my ECEC course there, so I was familiar with the environment and some teachers. Regarding the observation, first I planned to observe 5 children, but I only received 4 consent from parents; however, during the first day of observation, I talked to more parents and I could get more consent, therefore, I observed 7 children (4 girls and 3 boys) during their transition from home to ECEC, all children were chosen from the age population between 0 to 3 years old. 4 of the participants were chosen according to

convenient sampling as their parents eagerly signed the consent form and they were easy to access (Tracy, 2013). Moreover, 3 of the participants were chosen according to extreme instance sampling because during the first day, I noticed that they cried a lot and they were restless during the transition. Extreme sampling applied the participants who are valuable and interesting as well as time consuming because the participants are the most, least, best or worst ones of a certain group (Tracy, 2013). I applied observation because I could gain genuine information of the observed situation. Moreover, being more interpretive and critical as well as being in a position of sympathy and identification with study group could be beneficial for noticing the emotionality of the situation (Tracy, 2013).

Regarding the interviews, I interviewed 4 ECEC teachers who picked up children when they separated from their parents and entered ECEC. These ECEC teachers had emotional interactions with the participants whom I observed. The ECEC teachers were selected according to convenient sampling as all of them signed the consent forms and they were the only teachers who picked up the children for that age range and I recorded the interviews for transcription and more analysis. I have applied interactive and unstructured interviews to enable interviewees to share their own ideas and emotions about the observed transition situation (Tracy, 2013). After observing the transition of the participants, I asked open-ended questions about the observed situation from the ECEC teachers to add more clarity to my observations. The unstructured and interactive interviews encouraged participants for more discussion which led to more understanding and clarification (Tracy, 2013).

In order to gather data, I was present at the kindergarten from 7 to 9.30 am during 6 days from 2nd to 9th of August 2024 (7th and 8th were weekend). Each day I spent 2.30 hours at kindergarten because the children whom I aimed to observe entered ECEC at different times. When each participant entered ECEC, I wrote down all my observations during the transition of that child without interfering to the transition situation and totally I wrote down 43 pages of draft writing for my observations. Moreover, I interviewed 4 ECEC teachers when I needed more

clarification for better understanding about the observed transition situations and I also asked them open-ended questions about the emotional supports of ECEC teachers for smooth transition of children. According to the observed situations, I interviewed two teachers one time and two teachers two times, so in total I had 6 interviews from 4 teachers. The duration of each interview was about 15 minutes, and it led to 48 pages of transcription.

2.3   Data Analysis

For conducting the present research, I have applied thematic analysis which is a comprehensive way of analyzing qualitative data based on categorizing the themes of similar meanings. It is a very useful method which can be applied for different research frameworks and paradigms, and for conducting research according to thematic analysis, researcher plays a crucial role in coding and generating themes out of the discovered codes (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The most important aspect of thematic analysis is its flexibility that can be applied for different ranges of sample size, data collection methods and research questions. Moreover, the main aim of the thematic analysis is not just summarizing the qualitative data content, but it aimed to identify and interpret the key aspects of data in a comprehensible way for proper answering of the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

According to Thompson (2022), thematic analysis can be deductive (hypothesis-driven), inductive (data-driven), or abductive (finding a middle ground between inductive and deductive methods). Regarding the present research, I have applied abductive thematic analysis because as a researcher, I did not enter the field of this research with an open mind, I have studied lots of theoretical background which were relevant to the field of research and according to my theoretical

understandings, I tried to find the most logical solutions as well as useful answers for the research questions (see Thompson, 2022).

For conducting the present research, I have applied Thompson's 8 step prescriptive approach for abductive thematic analysis (Thompson, 2022). The first step is transcription and familiarization, for this step regarding my interviews, I not only transcribed the audio recordings by using Microsoft word, but also listening and comparing to the transcriptions to be sure of its accuracy. Moreover, regarding my observations I have my handwriting field notes, and I categorized them into 7 sections (each section for each child) and in each section I had six categories (each category for each day of observation). Then I read all my transcriptions and my notes carefully and marked the key words and important contents.

The second and third steps are generating codes and codebook, for these steps I reviewed the marked parts of my transcriptions and notes and found some codes based on the similarity of the marked contents. For naming each code, I used abbreviations as C1, C2, C3, etc. for (code 1, code 2, code 3, etc.). Each code was used for the same content and by using a codebook, I recorded the key to the mentioned codes in a notebook and by using Microsoft Excel, I could organize my highlighted notes for the coding process. I chose a short name for each code which best defined the content.

The fourth step is creating themes, for this step according to the similarities of discovered codes, I created some themes. For this purpose, I created two table graphs in a separate Microsoft Word document. Each graph represented the codes and themes for each research question. Each table had three columns for codes, categories and themes. Moreover, I used abbreviations for illustrating the participants (T1, T2, etc. for Teacher 1, Teacher 2, etc. and C1, C2, etc. for Child 1, Child 2, etc.).

Table 1

Example of codes, categories, and themes for illustrating the strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support children emotionally during their transition

Codes	Categories	Themes
C2 entered kindergarten, ECEC teacher approached her openly and asked her immediately, "what beautiful hair you have today, who made your hair so beautifully?"	Starting a friendly conversation with the child	Distracting child from the transition situation
"…. For calming down the children, we can sing for them like 'twinkle, twinkle, little star…', also we can take them to playroom, sit beside them, read books or play on the floor." T1	Changing place/ Singing/ Reading books or playing immediately	
C5 cried restlessly and didn't want to separate from his mother. The ECEC teacher hugged him, held him in her arms and started to talk to him softly.	Hugging/ Speaking softly	Giving the child feeling of being safe
C6 entered kindergarten with his father, he cried when his father said bye to him, ECEC teacher, hugged him, put him on her lap while stroking his back and talking to him.	Child-teacher lap interaction/ Stroking the child	
"…. Sometimes, we should be determined that children understand the situation and sometimes we should be flexible…" T2	Determined behavior/ Kind and flexible behavior	The proper ECEC teachers' behavior according to situation

Table 2

Example of codes, categories, and themes for illustrating the children's reactions to different strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support them emotionally

Codes	Categories	Themes
C2 entered kindergarten with her father, ECEC teacher opened her hug for her and C2 hugged the teacher and from her teacher's hug waved her hands to say bye to her father.	Opening arms to accept teacher's hug/ Saying bye to parents	Acceptance
ECEC teacher kept C7 in her hug and stoking her back, she became calm but still she was sad, ECEC teacher took her to the playroom and started to play with her, after a few minutes C7 started to play with other children.	Starting to play	
When C6's mother left, he cried even more, called his mother and stretched his hand towards the door. ECEC teacher wanted to hug him, but he refused. The ECEC teacher took him to the playroom. C6 didn't stop crying and occasionally he checked the main door to see whether his mother had left or not.	Refusing the teacher's hug/ Refusing to play/ Crying and refusing to say bye to parents	Rejection

The fifth step is theorizing, for this step I tried to find similarities between my theoretical understandings of the research phenomena and my data set for better explanations of the themes of my research. For example, according to Elden (2009), children's transitions can be defined as "relational spaces" which is not a pre assumed reality and can be formed by interacting with people and joining with society. Therefore, I tried to find themes which can describe the children's relations with ECEC teachers during their transitions from home to ECEC.

The sixth step is comparing dataset, which I compared the data from the observations of young children and the data from interviews with ECEC teachers to reach comprehensive answers for research questions. The seventh step is displaying data, which I have used networks for clear displaying of themes and how they were generated from different codes.

Figure 1

Example of a network for one of the themes and codes for ECEC teachers' emotional support

The eighth step is writing report which I explained my findings of conducting the present research by expressing the connections between the analyzed data and relevant theories.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues is a crucial matter and can lead to credibility and validity of the research, according to Tracy (2013), credibility means showing true picture of the examined phenomena; therefore, credibility refers to dependability, trustworthiness and expressing a true reality and for reaching credibility, research should be conducted in a way that not harm the participants, avoiding deception, getting informed consent and ensuring privacy and confidentiality (Tracy, 2013).

As the present research conducted based on observations and interviews, the important matter is considering ethics from the research participants' perspectives and understanding their requirements during their participation in research process (Lewis & Graham, 2007).

The ethical considerations for conducting the present research are according to the following factors:

- The rights of participants

- How to get informed consent (from whom and how)

- How to report the data

- Correct citation

- How to destroy the data after conducting the research

For fulfilling the mentioned ethical considerations, I explained the data collecting method in a transparent way to all the people who took part in gathering data. As I gathered data from one of the daycares in Jyväskylä (a city in Finland), first I got permission for gathering the data from the municipality of Jyväskylä, then I asked permission from the daycare's manager and sent the "Research Notification" and, "Privacy Notice and Consent" forms to the ECEC teachers who took part in collecting data and also to the parents of children whom the data was collected from them and after the agreement of all parties I started gathering the data. Moreover, it's worthwhile to mention that, as the observation data aimed to gather from very young children (0-3 years old) during sensitive moments of transition and children

were not familiar with me, I was so careful that I didn't interfere to their transition to ECEC and I did not approach the children closely.

In the research notification, the method of gathering data as well as the aim of the research was explained completely to make the participants familiar with the research process. Moreover, in consent forms participants had the right to cancel or withdraw from the research whenever they wish to do so and it was mentioned that no name or identity will be mentioned in the research and instead of the names, the researcher will use codes or numbers. Furthermore, participants would have access to the researcher's contact information for more clarifications before signing the consent form. In addition to consent forms, ECEC teachers' permission for recording the interviews was asked orally by the researcher and it was recorded by an empty cell phone device from the researcher which is password protected. The files of recorded data were only accessible to the researcher, and they were allocated code names to protect the participants' identities. Moreover, the process of transcription was done only by the researcher that no one can access to the collected data.

Regarding the literature section of the research and theoretical citations, they are according to scientific and reliable sources and the references are correctly mentioned. After completing the research process, the audio recordings, the handwriting drafts from observations and the transcribed materials and notes will be deleted or destroyed according to the research policies of JYU and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

3   RESULTS

In this section, the results from data analysis are illustrated by 2 figures, each figure is organized as a network for clear illustration of themes and relevant codes for answering each research question. Therefore, Figure one shows the themes and relevant codes for answering the first research question while figure two shows the themes and relevant codes for answering the second research question. As explained in the data analysis section, I have used the abbreviation codes for illustrating the participants.

3.1 The strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support children emotionally during their transition from home to ECEC

Figure 1

Thematic map for answering the first research question
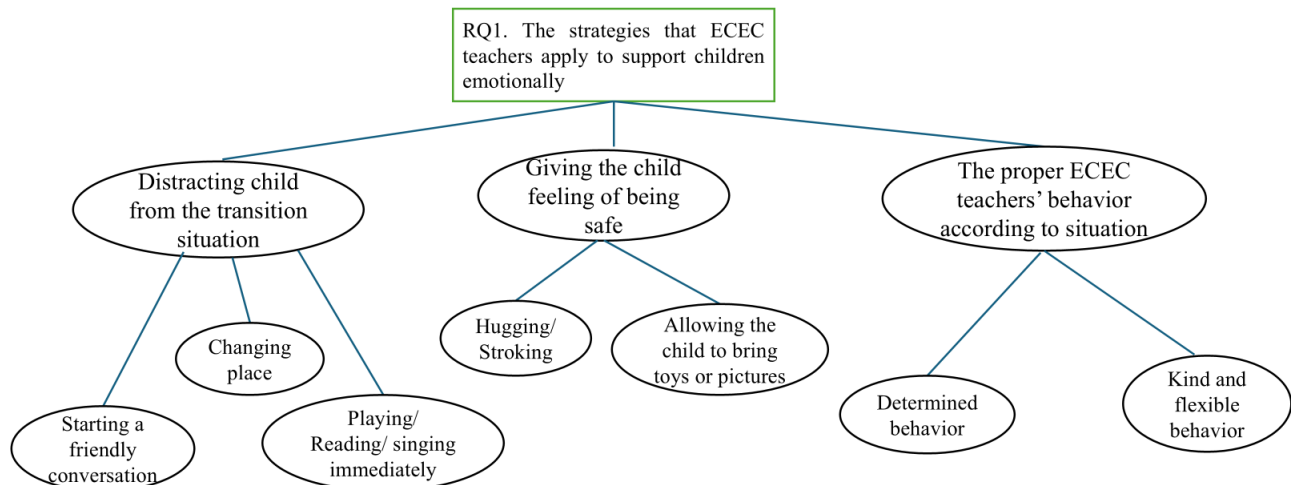
Transition is a very crucial and sensitive moment for children (Lucas et al., 2024); and during my observations of young children's transitions from home to ECEC, I noticed that ECEC teachers can apply different strategies for supporting children emotionally which are mentioned in this chapter.

Distracting the child from the transition situation. According to my observations, I noticed that ECEC teachers tried to distract children from the transition situation through different ways, like starting an immediate conversation.

> When C2 entered kindergarten, ECEC teacher approached her openly and with a smile on her face, asked her immediately, "what beautiful hair you have today, who made your hair so beautifully?" C2 also smiled and said, "My mom made it", then C2 said bye to her dad and ECEC teacher accompanied her to playroom.

As mentioned in this example, ECEC teacher by starting an immediate conversation, tried to distract the child from transition situation and by complimenting the child's hair style, she made her feeling good. This ECEC teacher's strategy, made transition easier for the child. Another example is changing the place of the child and starting immediate activities like reading books, playing or singing.

> When C7 entered kindergarten, she was restless and didn't want to separate from her mother. ECEC teacher approached her with smile and opened her arms to hug her and although C7 didn't want to accept ECEC teacher's hug, she hugged her and took her to playroom and started to read a book for her while showing and explaining the pictures of the book.

In this example, ECEC teacher by changing the place of the child and reading books for her, tried to distract the child from transition situation and by hugging her, made her feeling safe. This matter repeated for many children, many of them went for breakfast immediately after entering ECEC or starting to play or sing with friends or ECEC teachers.

Moreover, according to my interviews, almost all ECEC teachers who participated in interview mentioned that immediate play, reading books or immediate friendly conversation can be so helpful for smooth transitions of children, according to T1:

> For calming down the children when they enter kindergarten, we can sing for them like 'twinkle, twinkle, little star…', also we can sit beside the child and read books for child or playing on the floor.

Giving the child the feeling of being safe. According to my observations, I noticed that ECEC teachers by giving the child feeling of being safe, can make transition easier for young children. This feeling of being safe can be given to a child by hugging, lap-interaction, speaking softly, stroking or allowing a child to bring their favorite toy or a family photo. Here is an example of C5 and C6 who were brothers, and their age gap was only one year, they started ECEC recently and still they were not used to their new environment.

> C5 and C6 entered kindergarten, C5 in his mother's arm while C6's father hugged him. Both cried restlessly and didn't want to separate from their parents. Two ECEC teachers approached them with smile and openly welcomed them, the children still cried while ECEC teachers hugged them and started to talk to them softly, one teacher hold C5 in her arms for about 10 minutes and stroking his back while talking to him, and another teacher put C6 on her lap, stroking him and showing the pictures of a book to him.

The mentioned children only felt safe with the presence of their parents, and they were not used to their new environment. In this example, ECEC teachers tried to give the children the feeling of being safe in their new environment by hugging, stroking and talking to them softly and kindly. Another example is C1 who always entered kindergarten with her favorite toy.

> C1 entered kindergarten with her father. Her father put her bag in her locker, when she wanted to say bye to her father, she remembered her toy, she called the name of her toy, the father

opened her bag and took her toy out of her bag and gave it to her. C1 hugged her toy and said bye to her father.

This example showed how children can feel safe when they have their belongings with them in their new environment. Transition was a difficult moment for C1 and hugging the toy that she loved, made it easier for her to say bye to her father. Moreover, T4 during the interview mentioned that:

> We should just hold children in our arms, and we should talk to them quietly, tone of the voice is so important, we should talk in a calming voice because many of kids are immigrants and don't know the language, so tone of the voice is so helpful.

In this example, the ECEC teacher highlighted the importance of the tone voice specifically in international daycares. As many children are not familiar with the new language, the soft and kind voice can convey the feelings of being loved and safe.

The proper ECEC teachers' behavior according to situation. According to my observations and interviews with ECEC teachers about the observed situation, I noticed that in some cases, ECEC teachers showed flexible behavior and allowed parents to stay with their child for a while, however, in some cases, they were more determined and serious about leaving parents although the child was crying. When I asked the reason, T2 answered me that:

> The time of saying bye to parents is a very important time for children, for newcomers it is fine that parents stay with their child till the child get used to the environment but after some days, children should know that they should stay without parents and it is important that they say bye to parents even if they are crying, when they say bye, they know that parents will come back again for picking them up, but if without saying bye we just separate them from parents, it has bad impact on them. Also, after saying bye, parents shouldn't return back again at the same time even if the child is crying unless in some extreme conditions that we will inform parents to return. Sometimes, we should be determined that children understand the situation and sometimes we should be flexible according to the situation. After leaving parents, we try

to calm the child down, holding and talking to them softly and by passing time, the child will separate easier from the parents.

As T2 mentioned in this example, it is very important matter that children say bye to their parents to know that the parents go and will come back to pick them up in the afternoon. Moreover, parents' collaboration in children's transition is also an important matter. Sometimes ECEC teachers are flexible and let parents to stay with children, however, for children who are already used to the new environment, ECEC teachers are more determined for leaving parents after saying bye, because children should know that they stay at daycare without the presence of their parents. Therefore, sometimes kind and flexible behavior and sometimes determined behavior of ECEC teachers can help children's transition from home to ECEC.

3.2 The children's reactions to different strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support them emotionally

Figure 2

Thematic map for answering the second research question
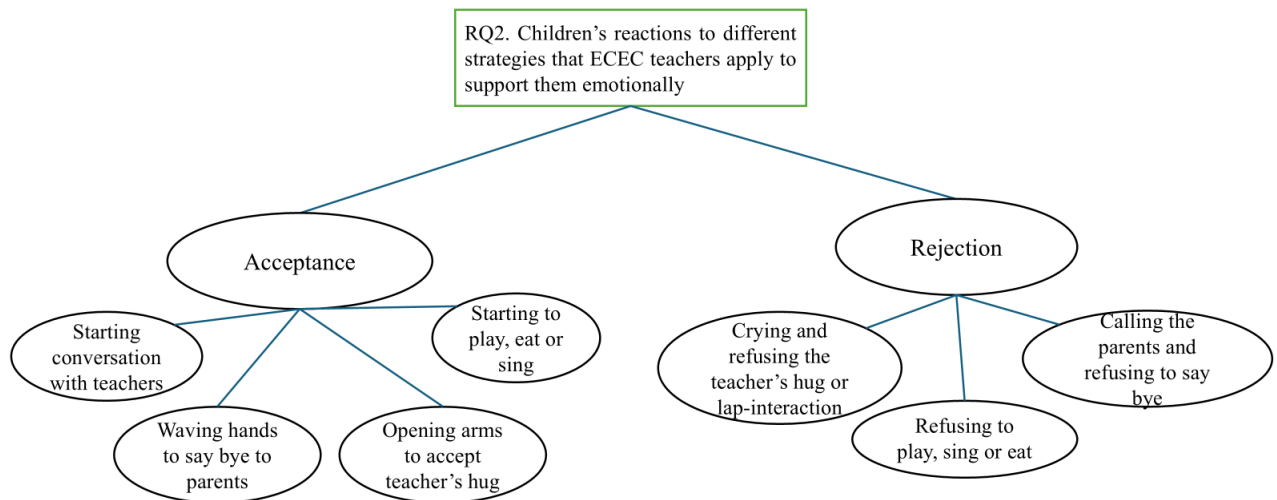
According to my observations of young children during their transition from home to ECEC, I noticed that they either accept or reject the emotional supports which they received from ECEC teachers.

Acceptance. Four of the children who participated in the present research, accepted the emotional supports from ECEC teachers.

> C1 entered kindergarten with her father and her older brother while she had her favorite toy in her hand. Father stood at the entrance door and her brother accompanied her inside. The ECEC teacher approached and welcomed her warmly with kind, soft voice. C1 said bye to her brother and walked to join other children in playroom.

In this example, C1 entered ECEC with her favorite toy which gave her the feeling of being safe, moreover, the soft and kind voice of ECEC teacher who welcomed her, could give her a good feeling. C1 by saying bye to her brother and starting to play, accepted the emotional support which she had received from her ECEC teacher.

> C2 entered with her father while she was holding her father's hand. ECEC teacher approached her kindly and with a smile, told her that her hair style is so beautiful, C2 touched her hair and smiled. ECEC teacher opened her hug for her and C2 hugged the teacher and from her teacher's hug waved her hands to say bye to her father.

In this example, ECEC teacher distracted C2 from the transition situation by starting a friendly conversation, and by complimenting her hair style, tried to give her a good feeling. Moreover, approaching the child kindly and with a smile could be so helpful, so C2 accepted her teacher's hug and said bye to her father.

The children who accepted the ECEC teachers' emotional supports, have been in kindergarten for a while and they were familiar with the environment and teachers, however, they still needed emotional supports and kind welcoming to make it easier for them to say bye to their parents.

Rejection. Three children who participated in the present study rejected the emotional supports that they received from ECEC teachers and remained restless and cried even about 20 minutes after their parents left.

> C5 and C6 (3- and 2-year-old brothers who started kindergarten about two weeks), entered kindergarten, one of them in his mother's hug and the other in his father's hug, two ECEC teachers approached them kindly, welcomed them and tried to get them from their parents' hug. They refused the teachers' hug and turned their heads. Finally, teachers got them from their parents and hugged them. They waved to their parents to say bye while they were crying. When their parents left C6 cried even more, called his mother and stretched his hand towards the door. Daycare teachers kept them in their hug, talked to them softly and took them to the playroom. C5 became quiet after a while but there were no signs of happiness in him. C6 didn't

stop crying and occasionally he checked the main door to see whether his parents left or not even 20 minutes after his parents left.

This example showed how transition can be difficult for young children. These two brothers were from an immigrant family who recently came to Finland, so their new society was completely unfamiliar to them even faces and language. So, after about two weeks still they were not used to their new environment and although ECEC teachers welcomed them warmly, they could not feel safe without their parents. Moreover, another child who didn't accept ECEC teachers' emotional support (C4), started kindergarten recently and she was also from an immigrant family. I asked T3 about the reason that the mentioned children didn't accept the teachers' emotional support and remained restless, she answered that:

> These children started kindergarten recently and are still not used to the environment and teachers, still they don't feel safe without the presence of their parents. It takes time for newcomers to get used to their new environment and it is very important to support them more, it's important to keep them in our hug for long time and talk to them softly, by passing time they will be better.

As the teacher mentioned, it is difficult for the children to start kindergarten recently to feel safe without their parents, because still they are not used to their new environment. However, continuous kind and warm support can be so helpful for these children.

4   DISCUSSION

Transition from home to ECEC is the first experience of socialization for every young child. Entering a new environment and facing new and unfamiliar faces is a stressful and crucial moment for young children (Lucas et al., 2024). Even the children who participated ECEC for a while, still need enough support to leave their parents and enter kindergarten happily (Klette & Killén, 2019). According to White et al. (2020), early transitions to ECEC are so stressful for infants, caregivers and even parents.

The present research tried to explore different strategies that ECEC teachers apply to support young children emotionally during the time that they must leave their parents and enter kindergarten. Moreover, the present research explored the children's reactions to different emotional supports which they receive from ECEC teachers to figure out different ways of making transition smoother for young children.

According to the results, ECEC teachers can apply different strategies for making transition smoother for children. One of these strategies is distracting them from transition situation which can be so helpful for starting kindergarten happily. When children feel nervous to separate their parents, distracting them from that situation even by praising the child's appearance (their hair style or the way they dressed up) or by immediate playing, reading books, singing or going for breakfast, can make transition easier for them. Another strategy is giving the child the feeling of being safe which can help children a lot to trust their ECEC teachers. According to my observations, ECEC teachers tried to give children the feeling of being safe by speaking softly, stroking and holding children in their arms, and in this way they tried to make transition easier for children. According to Bailey et al. (2022), daycare teachers' warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions with young children are essential for children's cognitive and emotional improvements and reducing the stress that they feel during the transitional stage. Moreover, allowing them to bring their favorite toy or a family picture can be so helpful for calming the children down

and making them feel safe during transition (see Bailey et al., 2022). Furthermore, Tebet et al. (2020), mentioned that during the first days of transition of a child at daycare environment, daycare teachers should pay special attention to young children and their families, which can be fulfilled by permitting the presence of a child's family member during the child's stay at daycare, or giving the child the permission to bring a personal object like, pacifier, toy, pillow, photo or a cloth, as a calmness during the transition period (see Tebet et al., 2020).

Another strategy is the proper ECEC teachers' behavior according to the situation, according to this strategy ECEC teachers can play a vital role for making transition easier for young children and reducing their stress by applying the right strategy at the right time. Sometimes they should be serious that children comprehend that they have to say bye to their parents, however, sometimes they should be flexible and consider the child's preferences. Moreover, it is important that ECEC teachers figure out the different preferences of different children. For example, one child can be calmed down by taking him/her to the playroom and starting to play, while if the same strategy applied for another child, he/she won't calm down and continue crying, because that child prefers to stay in ECEC teacher's hug for long time. Therefore, it's ECEC teachers' responsibility to apply correct strategy for each child for making transition easier for them. According to Elden (2009), children's transitions are not a pre assumed reality and can be formed by interacting with people and joining with society; therefore, daycare teachers can play a fundamental role to create a safe environment for children and making the transition easier for them.

Based on the results, children may accept or reject the emotional supports which they have received from ECEC teachers. For the children who accepted the emotional supports, the ECEC teachers' strategies led to smooth transitions of those children. However, most of the children who rejected the emotional supports from ECEC teachers, were not used to their new environment. Therefore, consistent warm emotions can help them to trust their teachers and over time, they can feel safe

without the presence of their family members (Bailey et al., 2022). Moreover, applying different strategies like connecting children, their families, and kindergarten teachers can make adaptation easier for children and their families. For this purpose, familiarizing children and their parents with ECEC environment before children's real transition can be so helpful. Moreover, arranging some orientation programs and individual meetings between caregivers, parents and children can be so beneficial for easier transitions (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

The findings of this study can raise awareness of the real need of proper emotional support for young children during their transition from home to ECEC and can be a source of valuable information for daycare policy makers and caregivers for arranging supporting strategies for young children during their transitional stage.

To mention the limitations of this study I can note the number of participants and time limitation. I could get consent form for seven children and there were four ECEC teachers who picked up the children in the mornings. However, I got enough data from the mentioned participants during 6 days, I could record six interviews from four daycare teachers and I observed seven children during six mornings from 7 to 9.30 am. Both observations and interviews provided me with detailed data and enabled me to answer the research questions properly.

The present research can be considered as a valid and reliable study because the results are understandable and reflect the reality of the analyzed data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I reviewed my data several times to understand the data completely and connect to the statements and situation. Moreover, I tried to provide a transparent analysis of data by presenting the analysis process through networks and figures. Furthermore, I analyzed data from my observations and interviews objectively and I did my best to report the results as close as possible to the source of data because according to Tracy (2013), for fulfilling a reliable study, the potential interpretations and reporting of results should reflect the data source. However, the findings of the present research are not generalizable because of limitation of

number of participants and limitation of time of observing children. For example, if I could observe more children for some months, I may gain more findings and insights about different emotional supports which children receive and how they react them during longer period of time.

Further research can be done about some programs for familiarizing children with ECEC environment and teachers before their participation at ECEC, like parents-teachers orientation programs for children's transitions. Moreover, other research can examine the impact of emotional support of ECEC teachers for transition of children within ECEC environment or for different age groups. As transition is a crucial moment for children and stressful transition can affect children's performance and well-being negatively, conducting research regarding smooth transitions can be so worthwhile and beneficial for mental and physical improvements of children and making ECEC a more enjoyable experience for them.

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