Perfect Day At Work - Professional Agency Between External And Internal Factors In ECEC

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ABSTRACT

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Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Finland has faced organizational change in 2013 that has affected the aims, objectives and implementation of ECEC services. The field of ECEC is a mix of official regulations and obligations and the professional's strong sense of agency and autonomy regarding their work. The field has had long lasting challenges with having enough qualified professionals. Additionally, the poor organization of the work and insufficient recourses have been the reason for low job-engagement for professionals in ECEC. In this research the aim is to investigate how professionals in the field of early childhood education would prefer to work with the changed aims and obligations of the domain.

The narrative research method was used to collect stories from professionals working in daycare. ECEC teachers, social pedagogues and caretakers were asked to tell a short story about their perfect day at work. Stories were analyzed using thematic analysis method.

The results show that ECEC professionals would prefer to have time to focus on the pedagogy and the children. This often requires support from colleagues, manager or official level to have time to use their agency in a meaningful way. They would also prefer to have better work-life balance and have influence on their working times. Results also highlight how intervened the internal and external structures of the work are which challenges the professional agency.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care, Professional Agency, Educational Development, Work Structures

CONTENT

THE LIST OF ACRONYMS

MEC - Ministry of Education and Culture (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö)

MSAH - Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö)

ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care (Varhaiskasvatus)

FEEC - Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (Kansallinen kasvatuksen arviointikeskus, Karvi)

FNAE - Finnish National Agency of Education (Opetushallitus)

1   INTRODUCTION

It's another day at work in ECEC. I come in bit earlier to change clothes and to review the day before clocking in. My teammate has been sick for the whole week and finally yesterday we got a substitute. Sadly, they had not been with us before, so we had to look after them as well and tell who is who and where the lockers are and guide them through the day. However, the substitute was nice and quick to learn. Oh, apparently my teammate is still sick at home and… yea, we have another substitute, unfortunately not the same as yesterday. Hopefully kids won't react much. At least we got the substitute. While I'm reading the shift list in the break room another colleague of mine comes in and asks if we are having the pedagogical team meeting today. I have forgotten all about it, wasn't there some material to read before the meeting? Also, apparently two other workers have also called in sick, so we must figure out how we divide adults by ourselves. Seems that we cannot go to the library again since there are not enough adults left here then, but let's see. Maybe we could go with smaller group or postpone the trip for tomorrow? Colleague also tells that our boss is not coming in today, they are required to be in another daycare center but if we need something we can call. I haven't even reached my group and I'm already tired mentally for all the changes that we need to do again… On my way to our end of the building, I take few deep breaths to help myself calm down and focus. We will get through today, as we did yesterday. And the day before that.

Education of the young children has begun as a more social practice and then shifted towards more abstract educational phenomena in Finland. Early Childhood Education and Care as a formal system is strongly linked to the change in the structure of the society. It has begun as a charity work for poor people and evolved with society to eventually ensure the high education of the children. ECEC services have always balanced between the strict guidance from outside and strong autonomy and agency of the professionals. Last period of strong autonomy and agency of the professionals have lasted almost 90 years. In 2013 the focus shifted back to more outside guidance and changed the obligations

and aims for the domain, which has affected the professional identity and the sense of agency of the ECEC professionals. ECEC services are fundamental part of the Finnish welfare society. Providing caretaking for the children promotes equality and trust for the future of the society (Bernelius & Huilla, 2021). However, ECEC has had challenges a long time from insufficient intake of the qualified professionals (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023), challenging work environment (Räsänen et al., 2020; Kangas et al., 2022), lack of leadership and challenges with organization of the work (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). Therefore, to maintain the functioning society as it is, improving the work engagement of the professionals in ECEC must be focused on (Fulla, 2016; Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020; Aabro, 2020). Some improvements have taken place, for example, the clarification on the roles of the professionals and their responsibilities.

ECEC operates in the prevailing political atmosphere that guides the recourses but also the value given to the field. In addition, ECEC has heavy bureaucracy that guides the implementation of the service. Within these structures the professionals of ECEC are providing the high-quality pedagogy and education for the small children. However, since the field has chronic staff shortages and work culture is often discussed in the media, it is necessary to ask from the professionals themselves how they would prefer to work to increase the work engagement and meet the new standards of ECEC. High-quality pedagogy is beneficial not only for the future of the individual, but for the whole society as well. In the end, it would be difficult to work and have a family at the same time if there would not be accessible ECEC services available.

In this research ECEC professionals were asked to imagine their perfect workday, how would it feel and what the day should include. From the stories some common factors were identified to understand what the perfect day consists of for the professionals in the field.

2 Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in Finland considers the institutional education and care for children from 0-6 years of age that is provided for the families by the municipality (Finnish Legislation of Education and Care, 540/2018). ECEC has a long history as a crucial building block of the welfare state that Finland currently is. It has reflected the political and social atmosphere of the society and what is prioritized in it (Urban, 2008; Hjelt, 2023). Before formally organized ECEC services childcare was first just a normal part of everyday life. Children had accompanied their parents wherever the parents go, or someone has looked after the kids at home. Sometimes children were even left home by themselves during the workday. Today childcare has become more abstract phenomena that takes place outside of the home, with the responsibility shared between professionals and the family. In the following chapter the development of the ECEC system in Finland is explained briefly from the late of 1800's till present day to give context to better understand the changes that has happened in the history of ECEC, and how it has affected in the aims and obligations of ECEC today (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Risku, 2014; Karila & Kupila, 2023).

2.1 A brief history of ECEC system

The development of ECEC services occurred in parallel with primary education and industrialization of Finland (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Risku, 2014). Before industrialization majority of the people in Finland got their living from agriculture and lived in the countryside. Family units were big, and overall lifestyle was communal in villages. Children were part of the work forces alongside with other family members, so they also learned the skills for the work that way. This way, it was also possible to look after them during the day since work was done near home (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen, Rinne & Koski, 2021). According the Antikainen et al. (2021) church had first responsibility of the systematic education of the people in Finland. It monitored the reading and

writing skills, and the educational goal was to maintain the coherence of the nation by socializing them under the same values.

The Industrial revolution in Finland began in the mid 1800's and created challenges for care taking of the children. This was true especially in the cities where society structure had changed fundamentally and women were working equally with the men in the factories like they had in the fields (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen et al. 2021). Family units were smaller in the cities than in the countryside and work was most often done outside of the home. In the beginning, children worked in the factories with their parents like they had before in the fields. When the child labor law passed in early 1900's, children under 15 years old could not work in the factories anymore since it was considered dangerous for them. This meant that especially in the city's children had no place to go during the day and nobody to look after them since parents still had to work long days at factories (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen et al., 2021). It was feared that children would be driven to commit mischief and end up becoming lazy and unproductive citizens. The first daycare services and institutional caretaking for children were introduced in 1907 to protect children and the future of society (Antikainen et al., 2021).

The expansion of the compulsory education was slow in Finland especially in the rural areas. However, coming to the 1900's schools had stabilized their position in the society (Antikainen et al., 2021). Childcare services for smaller children were set to be part of the education system from 1917 till 1923. During this time childcare services got financial aid from the government. The educational goal for these services was to provide safe place for children to be if parents could not look after them for various reasons. In 1924 childcare services were transferred under the Ministry of Social Affairs (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen et al., 2021) and administration of ECEC stayed there almost for the next 90 years (Alila & Kinos, 2021).

2.1.1 ECEC as a social service

Internal migration from the countryside to the cities continued and factories employed more and more people. Two world wars and one civil war had left Finland politically and socially polarized as a society (Antikainen et al., 2021). To recover from the wars and rebuild society, more people were needed to educate themselves and join the labor forces (Alila & Kinos, 2021; Risku, 2014). Education and high employment rate were seen as conditions for social development and economic growth. According to Antikainen et al. (2021) political decisions after the second world war concerned high employment rates, securing economic future of individuals, social wellbeing, flexible professionalism and educational opportunities. Additionally, birth rates grew exceptionally at the same time creating more pressure for society to organize ECEC services so parents could continue working and educating themselves but also to ensure the right upbringing of the children (Risku, 2014; Antikainen et al., 2021).

ECEC services were transferred under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in 1924. ECEC services were run and organized locally, giving autonomy to the municipalities. Laws regarding social service, child welfare and other related legislations were applied in ECEC. Main educational focus was to provide safe space for children to be while their parents were working or otherwise unable to care for their children (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen et al., 2021). It was not until in 1973 when ECEC services got their own legislation (Alila & Kinos, 2014). According to this legislation, and in the spirit of equality and equal opportunities, ECEC services were provided for anyone who needed the services, despite their socio-economic background (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Risku, 2014). New legislation also changed the responsibility of administration and regulation of the resources from municipalities to the government. The government was then responsible for creating a coherent and clear structure for ECEC to ensure the equal quality of ECEC services. Some pedagogical emphasis was visible but the focus of ECEC was on caretaking still heavily on the social aspect of ECEC (Alila & Kinos, 2014). This reflected to the pedagogical competences and pedagogical expectations of the professionals (Karila & Kupila, 2023). ECEC teachers' qualifications were based on seminars and courses. Despite this, the education of small children was

not yet in the interest of the research community (Alila & Kinos, 2014). In 1973 ECEC team structure was by law to established to be two teachers and one assistant. In 1980's ECEC caretakers replaced assistants in the team structure. Caretakers had qualification from secondary vocational education focusing on childcare (Karila & Kupila, 2023).

2.1.2 ECEC as an investment for the future

Moving towards 1990's the administration of ECEC changed back to the municipalities giving them again more autonomy and agency on the local level. Government had had strict norm guidance and regulations of the resources and content of ECEC. The role of the government changed to provide information and guidance of the content of ECEC (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Risku, 2014). This manifested itself as a wide variation in pedagogical quality across the country. Additionally, leadership formed fragmented with supervisors having more units to lead (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020). Fragmented guidance from organization and administrative level were challenging for the systematic development of the ECEC (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020). According to Karila and Kupila (2023) at the same time with the administration change the number of ECEC teachers was reduced. In 1992 addition to the legislation allowed for municipalities to have one ECEC teacher and two ECEC caretakers in the group. This reduced the pedagogical competence of the teams and affected the systematic development of the work practices.

Professionals of ECEC came from various backgrounds, which made the theoretical background of ECEC scattered. Some coherence was established when ECEC when teachers got their own major in universities in 1995 (Alila & Kinos, 2014). Higher education of ECEC teachers had positive impact on the research about the early childhood and the importance of the high-quality education and its affects to the individual and society (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023). In the 2000s the government continued to pull away from decision making and increased the agency and autonomy of municipalities regarding the ECEC services even further. Role of the government changed to

giver of regulations and guidelines and for development of the field (Alila & Kinos, 2014).

New liberal ideology started to emerge around the world in 2000's and eventually it reached Finland as well (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Hjelt, 2023). According to the Alila and Kinos (2014) the new liberal ideology emphasized the efficiency, customers right to choose and economical arrangement of services. Therefore, also ECEC services started to be treated as business which should make a profit (Antikainen et al., 2021; Hjelt. 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). This was combined with new research about childhood. It was clear that high-quality education and pedagogy in childhood was beneficial for children's social and cognitive abilities. Therefore, high-quality ECEC was seen as an investment for the future of society, and it should be done effectively (Karila et al., 2017; Hjelt, 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). In Finnish ECEC system this led to the growth of private ECEC service providers and strong intensification of the work (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023). In addition, the new perspective of ECEC and the aims of it led to fundamental changes in the administration of ECEC as well. According to Karila and Kupila (2023) the declined level of pedagogical competence was concerning politicians, so the education of the professionals and the aims of the work were started to get re-established. In 2013 ECEC was transferred to operate under the ministry of Education and Culture and in 2018 came the new Act for ECEC (540/2018) and the first National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023).

Importance of ECEC for positive development, holistic well-being and learning of the children has been well understood (Karila et al., 2017; Bernelius & Huilla, 2021; Hjelt, 2023). However, in comparison to other Nordic countries participation in ECEC is lowest in Finland. According to Bernelius and Huilla (2021) this is due to regional differences and socioeconomical background of the families and with the families were at least one parent stays home tend to keep their children home with them. According to research high-quality ECEC is beneficial for all children but especially for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Karila et al., 2017; Bernelius & Huilla, 2021). Therefore,

political decisions have been made to increase the number of children who attend to ECEC (Bernelius & Huilla, 2021; Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023).

2.2   Development of pedagogy

New liberal mindset led ECEC to have the requirement of enhanced work (Hjelt, 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). This meant that ECEC professionals, and especially ECEC teacher's, workload has increased in the past years (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Räsänen et al., 2020). One reason for the increase is the requirement to develop the pedagogical practices of the team and work community (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Räsänen et al., 2020; Hjelt, 2023). The legislation of ECEC (540/2018; FNAE, 2022) requires professionals to assess and develop their pedagogical practices. Legislation and official guidance highlight the importance of the high-quality pedagogy in ECEC, and professionals are expected to meet these expectations (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Hjelt, 2023).

Pedagogy means intentional use of theoretical and practical knowledge in ECEC settings to support positive development and learning of the children. Pedagogical practices and all activities should be based on Finnish National Core Curriculum (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). Additionally, pedagogical approach in Finland highlights the importance of positive interactions between everyone in the group and community (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). Holistic well-being and safety are also seen as an important factor of learning and positive development of the children (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Saari et al., 2023).

In the past the importance of the pedagogy has been diminished in ECEC by the professionals themselves (Kangas et al., 2022) and it is still visible in the language that professionals use. Often these pedagogical tasks are referred as "paper work" and decisions are often not based on pedagogy (Hejlt, 2023; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). While this may be true, Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén (2018) have pointed out that ECEC teachers are capable to meet the new pedagogical demands. Niikko & Korhonen (2021) have agreed on this by

claiming that ECEC professionals in Finland are trusted professional's with high pedagogical competences.

However, pedagogy has not been developed systematically in ECEC before the legislation reform and change of ministry (Karila et al., 2017). This is mainly due to the ideology of ECEC. Since ECEC was seen as a social service it was also developed to answer better to the issues in labor and social politics. Additionally, fragmented leadership style and municipalities' strong autonomy made the systematic development of the pedagogy difficult (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Risku, 2014; Karila et al., 2017; Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020). For example, in 1970's the government focused on developing the educational services but since ECEC was part of social services it was not part of the development plan (Alila & Kinos, 2014). The competence of pedagogy in the teams was also reduced in 1992. Addition to legislation enabled reducing the minimum number of teachers in the team to one instead of two (Karila & Kupila, 2023). Pedagogical competence of the team was also affected negatively by the variation of different professionals and their theoretical backgrounds. Variations in these factors contributed to obscuring the professional identities and professional responsibilities which also created challenges to develop pedagogy systematically (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Kumpulainen et al., 2023). In conclusion, there has not been the requirement of pedagogy and development of the domain in the history of ECEC before the 2010 century (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023).

3   ECEC Reforms in 2010 century

Increased data about early childhood gave eventually pressure to focus more on pedagogical competencies of professionals. In 2007 Ministry of Social Affairs and Health became concerned about the low level of pedagogy among the ECEC professionals. This led to a pressure to develop ECEC. Eventually ECEC was transferred under the Ministry of Education and Culture and legislation of ECEC was updated as well (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Hjelt, 2023). While the benefits of ECEC for the individual and for the society are clear, in Finland the participation of children in ECEC is the lowest in comparison to other Nordic Countries (Karila et al., 2017; Bernelius & Huilla, 2021; Hjelt, 2023). Therefore, there has been a political interest to support children's participation to the ECEC services (Hjelt, 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). Some examples are fees for ECEC being relational for the income of the family (Hjelt, 2023) and restoration of subjective right for day-care (MEC).

In this chapter the ministry reform and new legislation are explained more in detail, since they affect fundamentally to the work of the ECEC professionals (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Karila & Kupila, 2023).

3.1   Change of Ministry

For almost 90 years ECEC services were under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. In 2013 ECEC was transferred under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Change of the ministry shifted the focus of ECEC from being the social service for parents towards the children's right for education (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Karila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2018). Ministry change also transformed the administration of ECEC and the expectations for the professionals (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). With the new expectations of work, ECEC professionals were obligated to systematically assess and develop their work practices for the first time in the history of ECEC (Hjelt, 2023). Development and assessment of the pedagogy is done by documenting the learning and development of the children and

reflecting that to the work of the professionals (Hostyn et al., 2018; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Administration of ECEC moved under the educational institutes and evaluation centers that were targeted to regulate and guide the professionals and their work (FNEA; FNEEC). For instance, National Core Curriculum for ECEC that was published in 2018 became the first legally binding document. It influences directly to the work of ECEC professionals by setting the baseline for pedagogy in ECEC (Hjelt, 2023). National Core Curriculum also guides the local and personal curriculums and all the activities that are planned in day-care must align with it (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021; MEC, 2022).

3.2   New legislation

New Act on Early Childhood Education entered into force in 2018. The main reform concerned the qualifications and responsibilities of the ECEC professionals, how ECEC services should be provided and how information is collected and processed safely (MEC). Professionals in ECEC had had wide variation of professional backgrounds (Alila & Kinos, 2014). New legislation aimed to improve the quality of the ECEC by raising the pedagogical competence and changing qualifications of the professionals to clarify their roles (Karila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). A lot of the professional changes concerned directly the ECEC teachers but indirectly also ECEC caretakers (Karila & Kupila, 2023). ECEC teachers are now required to have university bachelor's degree from Early Childhood Education. Bachelor's in social services have been previously able to work as ECEC teachers. Now they have new profession as social pedagogues of ECEC (540/2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). ECEC caretaker's role has not changed much legally but their responsibilities in practice have decreased (Karila & Kupila, 2023). New job titles distribute the responsibilities of the professionals according to their education aiming to ease the organization of the work (Karila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Adult-children ratio stayed the same from the 1973 (Karila & Kupila; 2023) but upon the legislation (540/2018), two out of three professionals should have higher education degree instead of one.

4   Profiling Professionals in ECEC

Changes in society require new kind of expertise from ECEC professionals (Urban, 2008; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). According to Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2018) pedagogical work has become more challenging due to diversity of the families but also because of the changes in society and political decision made regarding the ECEC. While the change in professionalism is necessary and needed for the recognition the importance of ECEC, it does require new skills, knowledge and competences from the professionals (Karila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Aabro, 2020).

In the team, at least two out of three professionals should have higher education eighter from university or from university of applied sciences. One of those professionals must have ECEC teacher qualifications (540/2018). Ideally, team would consist of one professional from each profession, teacher, social pedagogue and caretaker. However, Ukkonen-Mikkola (et al., 2020) have pointed out that if the law states that two professionals should have higher education and one of the should be a teacher, it can leave out social pedagogues altogether. This multiprofessional team structure is ought to be in force by 2030. Currently most of the teams still consist of one teacher and two caretakers (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021; Hjelt, 2023).

4.1   Qualifications of the professionals

Qualifications of the professionals have changed with legislation reform. However, different expectations and responsibilities for each professional are the result of their education and competences it provides for them (Karila et al., 2017) and all are needed in high-quality pedagogy (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al,. 2020; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021; Aabro, 2020). Despite the differences in competencies all professionals are expected to have knowledge and skills to support positive development and learning of the child in their area of expertise, being able to communicate and interact professionally and develop their own work (Karila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

4.1.1 ECEC teacher

ECEC teachers are required to have bachelor's degree from university majoring in Early Childhood Education (540/2018). They are experts in pedagogy, learning and development of the children and they are responsible for assessment and development of the pedagogy (Karila et al., 2017; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Additionally, they have knowledge about National Core Curriculum, other legislation regarding ECEC, leadership competence and multiprofessional network competence. Despite the heavy official regulation especially ECEC teachers are seen to have strong autonomy over their own work. They have for instance possibilities to influence how they meet the pedagogical goals and how they organize their own work (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). Their education allows them to apply theoretical knowledge into practice and make pedagogical decision based on researched data (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Harju-Luukkainen & Kansas, 2021). Additionally, according to the Karila et al. (2017) ECEC teachers with bachelor's degree from university have better opportunities to succeed in their job due to these competences.

4.1.2 Social pedagogues in ECEC

Social pedagogues have been working as a ECEC teachers since the late 90's (Alila & Kinos, 2014). However, new legislation has created new profession for them and changed their professional responsibilities to correspondence better with their education (Karila et al., 2017). Social pedagogue competences relate to holistic well-being of the child and their communities and how to support them. These social competencies are not part of teachers or caretakers' education (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Harju-Luukkainen & Kansas 2021). Social pedagogues' professional responsibilities include multiprofessional networking and collaboration with families and holistic well-being of the child and community. They assess and develop the pedagogy in their team in collaboration with the teacher but are also responsible for development of the whole work community (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Yet the role of social pedagogues has

remained vague in practice and often social pedagogues have had difficulties to adjust themselves in the new team structure (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Karila & Kupila, 2023).

4.1.3 ECEC caretakers

ECEC caretakers job description has also changed significantly due to legislation reform. Previously they have participated actively in everything. For example, caretakers have kept pedagogical discussions with the families and have done documentation tasks. Clarification of the professional responsibilities in new ECEC legislation made those tasks to the teacher's responsibility (Kumpulainen et al., 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). Now caretakers are considered as active members of the team and responsible for health-related matters and basic care of children (540/2018). Caretakers are also responsible for executing the activities with other professionals and participate into assessing and developing the work (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). The legislation reform has therefore reduced the workload regarding the writing tasks and documentation. Nevertheless, ECEC caretakers often are the ones that look after children while teacher is not in the group (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Kangas et al., 2022; Kumpulainen et al., 2023).

4.2 Re-negotiating the professional identities and usage of agency

It is normal that drastic changes in job profiles can influence negatively to the professional's work engagement and their willingness to work in the ECEC (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022). These fundamental reforms and educational innovations have led to need for professionals in ECEC to reconstruct their professional identities to adapt to the new responsibilities (Urban, 2008; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Arbor, 2020; Hjelt, 2023).

Professional identity is individuals understanding on who they are as professional and what is expected of them in that role (Vähäsantanen, 2022). In

ECEC, teacher's workload has increased, social pedagogues have entirely new job description and caretakers act in between their colleagues (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020) which calls changes to all professional's identities. Change of professional identity is strongly linked to the usage of agency. Professional agency refers to the true possibility to influence and make choices at work (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020). Professional agency is power to act, make choices and influence in a meaningful way to the own work environment (Goller & Paloniemi, 2022). Both professional identity and agency are linked to the professional's motivation to learn, their work engagement and development of the work practices (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2022). Learning new competences and developing the work are required from the professionals with the new expectations for ECEC (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). However, professionals have not had to develop their own work ever before as systematically as it is currently required. In addition, they are first time ever required to document their work processes and the pedagogical goals of the ECEC are handed from the administrative level (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Hjelt, 2023).

Professionals' autonomy and agency are seen to be strong in ECEC. For instance, professionals in ECEC, especially teachers, have strong autonomy over their own materials and pedagogical decisions. In addition, there is no external control to manage the work done in the teams (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). While this may be true, heavy bureaucracy also limits the active use of agency of the ECEC professionals. Heavy bureaucracy sets the frames for ECEC services. Professionals have no true influence over the official laws and regulations of the ECEC, for example adult-children ratio (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Furthermore, professionals tend to feel that major decisions regarding their work are done far away from them. Often professionals' personal possibilities to affect to those major decisions are limited (Kangas et al., 2022; Hjelt, 2023). Also, everyday challenges at work, for example staff shortages, require professionals to adapt plans to the current situation. Constant requirement for flexibility and adaptation decreases the sense of autonomy and agency (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola, et

al., 2020; Kangas et al., 2022). This creates unbalance between professional identity and work (Vähäsantanen 2022) creating ethical burden that affect negatively to the wellbeing of the professionals as well as their work engagement (Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022; Hjelt, 2023). Hjelt (2023) even describes that that needed competences for ECEC are nowadays flexibility and ability to reorganize the day and activities as needed.

Professional identity is strongly linked to the motivation to learn (Vähäsantanen, 2022). Learning is essential aspect of reshaping the professional identity (Vähäsantanen, 2022) but also for the development of the work (Hökkä et al., 2019). Professionals' positive identity and positive attitude is also beneficial the work community. According to Vähäsantanen (2022) both the community and individual tend to thrive and develop together when professionals have strong professional identity, and they are motivated to educate themselves to maintain it. In turn, professional agency influences directly to the professional's willingness to learn, how they prefer to educate themselves and how they implement the new knowledge of work practices (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). By using professional agency, professionals can construct meaningful career for themselves and meet the expectations on their own terms (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020). This is relevant currently for the ECEC, where the expectations for work have increased. To maintain positive professional identity, promote learning and development of the professionals, the recourses and supporting professional's agency become vital (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen, 2022).

It is expected that drastic changes influence the meaningfulness of the work (Kangas et al., 2022). Therefore, according to the research, there should be opportunities for professional development and to usage of agency to increase the work engagement (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Arbor, 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Vähäsantanen, 2022). Strong active agency could be for example the possibilities to arrange work tasks to personal preferences. However, the work communities and individual professionals are unlikely able to do this on their own. Active agency and development of the community requires support from

the leadership and organization level (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020; Kangas et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen, 2022) but fragmented leadership style and low quality in leadership seem to create challenges for the providing needed support (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020; Kangas et al., 2022). It is then suggested that leadership should be developed from state level to the day care centers to support the development and unity of the ECEC (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Karila et al., 2017; Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020; Kangas et al., 2022). Support from the leadership and from the organization are vital to develop work practices, shaping the professional identities (Kangas et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen, 2022) and active use of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Hökkä et al., 2019). On the other hand, ECEC professionals themselves should be participating actively in renegotiating their work environments to form new professional identities for themselves (Arbor, 2020; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020).

5   Work structures

ECEC has very communal working culture and it's done in teams (Karila et al., 2017; Kumpulainen et al., 2023). Everything is done in interaction with coworkers, children and other stakeholders. The aim of the ECEC is to provide high-quality pedagogy and care for children. According to Hjelt (2023) structures of the work are vital for achieving the high-quality pedagogy but structures alone are not enough for it. She claimed that pedagogical competence alone is not enough for ensure the high-quality pedagogy in ECEC, but structures and pedagogical competence both complement each other. Additionally, Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2018) and Kangas (2022) have both pointed out that structures of the organization determine the pedagogical practices in day care centers. Organization might promote flexibility and support the usage of agency of the professionals, or it might be visible as a social support from the community. Therefore, good structures are not enough on their own for high quality pedagogy and high-quality pedagogy needs good structures to be able to exist. In this chapter formal and informal work structures of ECEC are explained and how these structures affect to the mundane work.

5.1   External structures

External structures refer to official legislation, guidelines and other regulations that affect the implementation of ECEC in Finland. Act on Early Childhood Education (540/2018) and National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2022) are structures coming from outside of the day-care center that lay the ground rules to the municipalities and other stakeholders that provide ECEC services. For example, the adult-children ratio in day care centers is stated in the Act on ECEC. External structures also cover political decision such as salaries and qualifications for professionals (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022). They therefore illustrate the value that is given to the profession from the society, for example the aims of the ECEC and how it is placed in the system (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Berzelius & Huilla, 2021; Hjelt, 2023). Professionals themselves

are not able to influence these structures in their mundane work (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020).

ECEC has been viewed as a place to 'store' children while their parents are working for most of its history whereas now ECEC is educational service for children (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Antikainen et al., 2021). This change of aims is connected into New Liberal mindset and the way of looking at the society, services it provides and how those services should operate (Hjelt, 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). ECEC is heavily influenced by the political atmosphere of the society. New liberal political mindset started to spread in Finland in the 2000's and it has continued to stable its position in politics. This mindset stresses the families right to choose their services and all services should be provided as economically as possible (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Hjelt, 2023). This has manifested in ECEC as a requirement of enchanted work were increasing amount of work is required to be done with same resources than before (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Kangas et alk., 2022; Hjelt, 2023; Karila & Kupila, 2023). In addition, investment mentality has led to effectiveness of ECEC services being measured by occupational rates of day care centers rather than the level of pedagogy (Hjelt, 2023). Kangas et al. (2022) points out that while the focus of ECEC changed from social service to education, there has not been given enough recourses for ECEC to implement the ideological change properly due to this investment structure . Investment mentality has also affected the buildings and spaces for ECEC. Day care units tend to be bigger and connected to the school units to maximize range of habitant area and making academic path more united for the children (Ahonen & Pulkkinen, 2023).

Since ECEC has been a part of social services longer than educational institutions, it is still seen partly as a social service (Karila et al., 2017). This is still visible for example on attitudes of the professionals (Karila et al., 2017; Kangas et al., 2022) and how ECEC is operating under the prevailing work culture. ECEC is open during work hours since ECEC services must be provided according to need and there must be minimum number for adults per number of children (540/2018). In contrast, primary education has its lesson and vacation times

despite the work schedules of parents. Additionally, ECEC has had a reputation as a job that anyone can do (Kansas et al., 2022). This is most likely due to the minimized pedagogical aspect of work as it has not been emphasized before (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Karila & Kupila, 2023). ECEC's reputation in the society might also be affected negatively by the vague qualifications for the ECEC professionals and their multiple educational backgrounds (Alila & Kinos, 2014; Karila et al., 2017).

5.2   Internal Structures

Internal structures refer to things that ECEC professionals can influence directly, for instance social atmosphere and how to organize work tasks (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022). Internal structures are also heavily influenced by formal structures since formal structures set the expectations for the pedagogy and implementation of ECEC (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). However, the attitudes of the work community have also a significant impact on the internal structures and how they are developed (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021).

The structure of the day is often very similar in all Finnish day care centers. Day is divided into various routines that repeat themselves every day (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018), for example when to eat and when to sleep. These routines are often set and hard to change (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018), but they are also part of learning and pedagogical approach. Set structure for the day promotes the feeling of safety for children by providing a consistent and predictable environment. It also enables breaks of professionals and provides to time to have meetings and planning time for teachers. All these daily routines however include a lot of additional staff members (Kumpulainen et al., 2023). For example, food and cleaning services are mostly subcontracted and the schedules of these workers need to be considered as well during the day.

Work culture in ECEC is communal (Kumpulainen et al., 2023) and it's based on intensive team work (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). The teams are multiprofesisonal, referring to the collaboration between differently qualified

ECEC professionals (Karila & Kupila, 2023). All the planning, activities, assessment and development happen in the teams and cooperation with colleagues, children and their families (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). Intense teamwork has its benefits and challenges. On the other had it provides a lot of social support, knowledge and skills for the team. Well-functioning team increases the job satisfaction, job engagement and over all work-wellbeing of the professionals. It also increases the level of pedagogy (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Karila & Kupila, 2023; Kumpulainen et al., 2023; Havisalmi & Raunamo, 2023). But on the other hand, if team members have conflicting values or attitudes and cooperation is difficult it affects negatively to the social atmosphere, work well-being and the quality of the pedagogy (Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Karila & Kupila, 2023). Well-functioning team and good teamwork requires recognition of different competencies of the professionals, clear definitions of responsibilities and professionals themselves to act upon those roles (Kumpulainen et al., 2023).

Distribution of the job responsibilities by the education of the professionals is relatively new. Before the legislation reform in 2018, ECEC had not have strong pedagogical goals and obligations. Therefore, the professional roles had not been clear in the team and in addition, ECEC has had strong everyone does everything- work culture (Karila et al., 2017; Karila & Kupila, 2023; Kumpulainen et al. 2023). This type of organization of the work has often based on work shifts and traditions, not educational competences of the professionals (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Havisalmi & Raunemo, 2023). Unclear professional roles are likely to increase work related stress and create hasty and fragmented work atmosphere. It also makes the efficient organization of the work more difficult (Feldt et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Kansas et al., 2022).

Having enough recourses affects the daily structures as well. Recourses can be for example materials to do activities, having enough staff members or appropriate and safe environment. Recourses can also refer to the education of the professionals, counseling and things related to work well-being like balanced

work and free time (Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). These last-mentioned recourses can be partly internal, like negotiating the work shifts with team members, but they still are affected by the external structures. For example, staff recourses are a part of formal structures and there must be enough number of adults present in daycare. Another example could be that to work remotely professionals would need support from the leadership level to be able to do so. Therefore, professionals are not able to influence in it and it affects directly to the mundane work (Räsänen et al., 2020; Kangas et al., 2022; Hjelt, 2023).

6 Research questions and research implementation

ECEC has a long history of staff shortages. A lot of professionals are exiting from the field of ECEC. Some exit from natural reason, like retiring but there is also growing number of professionals that change careers entirely (Räsänen et al., 2020; Karila & Kupila, 2023). Common reasons for career change are often related with the work conditions, organization of the work, atmosphere and workload (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022). Since the high quality of ECEC and development of the field relays on the high pedagogical competence of the professionals and positive interaction between the adults and children it is vital to keep educated professionals in the field and focus on their work well-being (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Hjelt, 2023). The aim for this research is to find out how professionals in ECEC would prefer to organize their mundane work and what are the structural factors that affect the quality of the work from their perspective. Their objective of the study is to understand the amount of effect the professionals themselves feel that they can have on their workload and what kind of support they might need to be able to use their professional agency actively. Research questions are following:

- How the perfect day at work would look like for the professionals in ECEC?
- What are the suggested improvements towards maintaining the well-being of the professionals?

Potential hypothesis for the research is, based on other studies e.g. Hjelt (2023), Kangas and others (2022) Räsänen and others, (2020) and Ukkonen-Mikkola, Yliniemi and Wallin (2020), that there is not much difference that professionals themselves can make to improve their mundane workday. Change would often need support from the supervisor, leadership level or from the administration or official level. This would indicate that professionals in fact do not have strong agency over their own work since professionals themselves are not able to make

those decision directly. Active usage of professional agency is vital for work engagement, the development of the work and for the successful organizational change of ECEC (Fullan, 2016; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020; Aabro; 2020).

6.1 Research Context

The research participants for the study were recruited from the daycare centers in Finland by utilizing social media and personal networks . The criteria for selection was that the participants worked in ECEC center so they could imagine what their perfect workday would look like. Since the research questions are concerned about the experience of the ECEC professionals, the qualitative research approach was selected as a method of this research. As a researcher and ECEC teacher myself, I was interested to understand how other ECEC professionals experienced their profession and how they described the perfect workday. Therefore, the epistemological approach of the research and ontology both are bounded in constructivism and relativism that highlight the personal understanding about the reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014). All the imagined workdays are taking place in a similar historical and cultural context. Therefore, the specific city, municipality or neighborhood was irrelevant for the purpose of the research.

6.2 Research Participants

Research participants were all ECEC professionals, who worked in private or public day-care center during the data collection. ECEC professionals in this research referred to teachers, social pedagogues and caretakers of ECEC. Most often team consist of teacher and two caretakers. However, other team structures are also possible, for example personal assistant for the child with special needs. However, according to the Act of ECEC (540/2018) teams in ECEC should be multiprofessional and consist of one professional from each profession. By the 2030, every team in ECEC should have teacher, social pedagogue and caretaker, which is referred as multiprofessional team structure (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Therefore, the participants were selected to be from that team structure.

Additionally, for me as a researcher was important to have all three professionals included, since the ECEC is based on teamwork. Well-functioning team is vital for organization of the work and high-quality pedagogy but also for work related well-being and work engagement (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021; Karila & Kupila, 2023). In addition to this, the ECEC caretakers have been neglected in the research for long time (Karila & Kupila, 2023) which confirmed my decision to include all three professionals in the target group. In the end, everyone is influenced by the structures of the work.

Participants were guided to write a story about the perfect workday in detail. 18 ECEC professionals participated in the research and provided a requested story. All participants were contacted by using Instagram or Facebook. Two participants were contacted by the researcher directly, since they fit the main characteristics of the wanted participants. Rest of the participants contacted the researcher themselves as was requested in the post about the research. Stories were given a number in a random order between one to 18 when saved for the analysis, so the number cannot be linked to the original narrator.

6.3 Data Collection

Research data consisted of 18 stories. Two stories were given as a voice note and those stories were transcribed. 16 stories were given in written format. Length of the stories varied from half a page to two pages. Data was collected at the end of 2023 by using social media platforms Instagram and Facebook. On those platforms the post was made about the aims of the research and the requested characteristics of the participants. The post was spread in researchers own social networks but also in the public groups that were targeted for ECEC professionals. The post was public which allowed anyone to repost it if they wished to do so. Reposting was also encouraged in the post.

Social media platforms were selected as data collection method since it reaches potential participants economically and efficiently (Valli & Perkkilä, 2018). Additionally, Instagram and Facebook have options to form public groups to certain groups of people, like ECEC professionals. The public pages where the

post was shared were selected to have more than 100 followers to ensure that many potential participants could see the post. One anticipated challenge for data collection was the low number of participants. Understanding the job requirements in the ECEC field, the aim was to develop methods to collect data that would not burden the research participants. ECEC professionals tend to have a lot on their plate and according to Lewis and Graham (2007) formal consent for participation could turn down potential participants. Therefore, the consent of the participation was asked to be given to me in a written form after potential participant had familiarize themselves with the aims and objectives of the research. The consent of the participants for the research and the day the concent was given were recorded by the researcher. This was viewed as possible solution since the nature of the data was not personal nor sensitive and participation was one-off. In addition to this the participants were not contacted after they sent the story if they agreed to participate.

Narrative method was used in the data collection. Aim of the research was to understand how ECEC professionals would prefer to work. However, the research question was indirect, asking the participants to imagine the perfect day. Narrative method promotes re-thinking, imagining something new and inventing new approaches (Eskola, Virtanen & Wallin, 2018) and therefore it was selected as a data collection method. Narrative method also aims for understanding (Heikkinen, 2018; Syrjälä, 2018). According to Syrjälä (2018) reforms in education happen thought people. Fullan (2016) has been on the same lines. He has said that during the organizational development and the change people tend to act upon their emotions. If something feels good, then people are more likely to try towards the wanted outcome. In conclusion, to understand the phenomena of working in ECEC in the 2020s with changed aims and obligations of the work, it must be looked thought the experiences of the professionals who work in ECEC. Those experiences and perspectives are visible in the stories that professionals tell themselves and others (Syrjälä, 2018).

6.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis is flexible analysis method that can provide detailed answers from multiple types of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and it can be used in various research designs (Nowell et al., 2017). Since the narrative data collection is basic method for understanding how people think or view their realities (Heikkinen, 2018; Syrjälä, 2018) and thematic analysis aims for understanding (Attride-Striling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006) it was decided to be used as analysis method. Thematic analysis was also best choice for data analysis since the stories varied in length and participants answered research questions indirectly. Therefore, the stories difference in details of the "perfect day" which required analysis method to be useful for all stories to get enough information out of them. Data analysis was done by the author and following the guidelines of thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Approach to analysis is both data and theoretically driven. Two main themes, external factors and internal factors of the work, were formed based on the research done by Kangas and other (2022) that has similar research interest. Sub themes have arisen from my data and placed under these two main themes according to how ECEC professionals are able to influence directly to the factor. If professionals can influence to the factor directly it has been placed under the internal factors and if not, it has placed under the external factors. Sub themes have formed from the similarities of the factors that have been placed under the main themes. For example, if in the story was told that salary would increase, it was placed under the external factors and placed in group together with factors that held similarities, which in this case is societal factors.

First, I familiarized myself with the data. The stories were read few times before taking notes, as it is advised to do in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two stories that were send as a voice note were transcribed word to word by using first the Word own Office Voice Recorder and Transcribe tool and then manually correcting any spelling errors or other issues with the transcribe. After reading the stories few times, I started to form codes and place the codes under the two main themes, eighter external factors or internal factors. Coding in this

case was deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some codes that I formed were "administration", "leadership", "emotions at work" and "organization of the work". Coding had some challenge, since some codes could first fit into both main themes. For example, the "organization of the work" was looked at in the stories from mundane work perspective but also from the educational point of view. In these cases, the main theme was chosen by the wording of the narrator. If the story told that the organization of the work would improve by the right education of the professionals, I interpreter it as external factor, since the quality and the standard of the education of the ECEC professionals is coming from the outside of the day-care centers.

When this split had been made, I looked at the similarities of the codes that had been highlighted and placed under the main themes. From these similarities and overlaps the sub themes were formed. For instance, codes "preferred work shift", "enjoying free time" and "possibility of remote work" were combined into the sub theme "time" and into another sub theme "agency over work time". Sub themes that were formed under the external factors were "human resources", "societal value of ECEC" and "educated professionals". Under the internal factors formed the sub themes "work community", "appropriate space" and "time". Sub theme "time" was especially challenging, since there were a lot of codes under it. This was indicating that "time" was really important factor in the structures of ECEC and therefore relevant for the validity of the results. "Time" got separated into three sub-sub themes to ease the analysis. These sub-sub themes were "time as environment", "time for pedagogy" and "agency over work time".

6.5   Ethical Solutions

Ethical solutions and safety of the research participants are vital part of conducting the research. In this research I had to consider the most efficient and ethical way to reach out to the potential participants. I wanted to reach out to them without third parties, since the actual workplace or organization was not important for the results. However, I still had to consider the safety and anonymity of the participants and make sure no harm would come to them if

they chose to tell their story for me. Therefore, the nature of my data was decided to be fictional. Stories would take place in the realm of day care and ECEC, but the participants would decide the rest. Municipalities, organizations or other details were not required in the stories, and I had a plan to delete personal information in the stories if there would be any. Additionally potential participants were required to contact me via direct messages in Instagram or in Facebook for further information before agreeing into participation. All the stories were also anonymized by giving them a number from 1-18 in a random order. All the stories are referred as these pseudonyms.

Additionally, I had to consider the translation of the stories in the results. Narrators choose to write and tell their stories in Finnish. Finnish is the spoken language for the researcher and for all the participants. However, for to be eligible to used in the results section, parts of the stories had to be translated to English by the author. This creates the possibility that some information of the stories can be lost in the translation.

It is important for the potential participants to know why they are approached, what is expected from them and what they can expect from me as a researcher (Lewis and Graham, 2007). Aims of research and obligations were explained in the post made for Instagram and Facebook. Participants were informed prior their possible consent how their stories are handled by the researcher and highlighted that they had right to withdraw their participation at any time of the research if they wanted. The consent for the participation was asked to be given in a written format after possible participants were familiarized themselves with the notification of the research, privacy notice and consent form. Consent, the date and social media platform it was given were then documented by the researcher.

Another ethical consideration was to minimize the potential research bias. My professional identity is ECEC teacher, but I have graduated from University of Applied Sciences. This means my professional qualification is Social Pedagogue of ECEC. However, since I have graduated in 2018, I'm able to work as ECEC

teacher since the qualification of the degree is based on curriculum prior of legislation reform (Karila & Kupila, 2023). Additionally, I have work history in the capital area of Finland where the issues of the ECEC are the most visible (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Karila et al., 2017). This personal history and relation to the field required me to be sensitive to my own feelings, values and pre-assumptions to minimize their affect to the results. I believe that decision to collect fictional data was helpful, since they are not based on research or on-going reality and therefore one cannot really agree or disagree with them. Stories are just one way to understand how people see their world around them (Valli & Perkkilä, 2018). This helped me as a researcher to focus on the participants views and to look past my own values, ideas and beliefs.

All data was stored on my personal computer with password access. The folder is not uploaded into the cloud services. Two voice notes that I received were deleted after the transcription. All the stories are deleted after the research is published.

7   Results

In this chapter the results of the data analysis are presented and explained. based on the research questions. The results are presented as a table and then discussed more in detail. Results are divided in two main themes inspired by previous research and sub themes that arise from the data. However, themes were found to be overlapping and repeating themselves often. This highlighted the complexity of the external and internal structures of ECEC system in Finland. The results suggest that while professionals have an opportunity to influence their work, the most important changes require support from their colleagues, day-care managers or politicians.

External Factors of work structures	Internal Factors of work structures
Human Resources - having enough staff would improve the flow of the day - changed adult-children ratio	**Community atmosphere /Work community** - familiar, positive and supportive community - having enough staff members, substitutes included - Good teamwork
The Social Value of ECEC - importance of ECEC would be acknowledge - better salary, more opportunities for career advancement - seeing ECEC professionals at the same level as another professions with same level of education	**Appropriate space** - Versatile play and pedagogical activities - Safe and inspirational spaces - Calm environment?
Education of the Professionals	**Time**

	Time as environment
- Education that matches the work description - Clear job descriptions - Supporting professional development	- Time to be present - Needs of the children vs convenience of the adults - breaks, planning and preparations - all staff members being present long enough *Time for pedagogy* - pedagogical aims comes from the group - day goes a s planned - time for spontaneous play - more the for planning and documenting tasks *Agency over work time* - Where and when to work (preferred shifts, remote work) - Balance between work and free time

Table 1

7.1 External factors

External factors refer to official guidelines, regulations and laws that determine the implementation of ECEC. These factors reflect the value of ECEC in the society (Urban, 2008; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fosnén, 2018; Kangas et al., 2022; Hjelt, 2023) and professionals in ECEC are not able to directly influence in them (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Kangas et al., 2022). Avaa tässä vähän miten olet organisoinut tulokset suhteessa tutkimuskysymyksiin. Nyt ne vaan tupsahtavat tuohon.

- How the perfect day at work would look like for the professionals in ECEC? / How they would prefer to work

- would it provide new ways to arrange the ECEC so the new requirements could be met while maintaining the well-being of the professionals?

Human Rcosurces

> *That you could come at work and see, that, ok these co-workers are off today but it's fine and everything works out and day goes on (14)*

> *At work I would be greeted by nice co-workers and lovely children. That day there would be no sick-leaves and no need to think about substitutes. We could run the day with our own, familiar staff members (9)*

Challenges with having enough professionals was visible thought the data. It was mentioned both as external and internal factor. The consistent wish for the perfect workday from external point of view was to have enough adults for a whole day. This was seen to have positive influence on the flow of the day and meeting the pedagogical goals. Having enough resources for the sufficient staff was seen to have a positive impact to the level of pedagogy and professionals' sensitivity towards children but also to each other. Especially children who would need extra support from professionals were seen to benefit from having enough adults for whole day.

In many stories were voiced that adult-children ratio should be changed. Current adult-children ratio, especially with children aged 3 and under, was in the stories often seen as too big. In a perfect day at work, adults would have fewer children to look after. Also, adult-children ratio was counted differently in the few stories. Ratio numbers were seen as group specific instead of daycare center specific as they are counted currently. Additionally, getting substitutes if they are needed was easy and effortless in the stories. Having smaller adult-children ratio was seen also helpful in the absence of professionals since there would not be so much pressure for getting a substitute.

The Social Value of ECEC

Its Thursday morning. Alarm goes off early, but I feel well rested. Rest of my family stays home today since children are having flu and they stay home with their dad today. It was so easy for him to arrange this since his supervisor also understands that his spouse's career is also important. Also, this supervisor values high quality early childhood education and how important it is for the children to have familiar adults in day care. (8)

Value from society was voiced in the stories to ECEC as a domain to be seen as an important part of the functioning society and professionals themselves as experts of their field. Professionals wanted to see that their careers would be respected same as other domains. Like in the story number 8, the narrator could easily go to work and leave their children whit their father since his manager would see her job as equal. Additionally, in the story, the manager understood how the presence of familiar adults affects the structure of the day and the quality of the pedagogy. Another way to society and people outside of the ECEC to show respect for the field was to provide spaces to share information. For example, ECEC professionals would be asked to share their experiences at work to students and work in ECEC would have reputation to be inspirational and good place to work. Additionally, other fields would acknowledge how important it is that their workers can come in every day since their children are in day care. Other employees would also see the importance of professional's permanence in ECEC and, as in the quote above, would support equal parenting.

Insufficient salary was also mentioned in the stories. Professionals voiced that the low value of their domain was visible in the low salary. Current salary was seen insufficient to cover work clothes that professionals must often buy themselves. Especially different type of outdoor clothes were seen as a big expense. In the stories professionals in ECEC were paid the same salary as other professionals with same level of education were paid. With the better salary professionals would enjoy more of their free time and vacations, have hobbies and maintain themselves. In one story was also told how salary could increase

when professionals educate themselves with additional courses and expand their professional skills or knowledge. Better salary was linked in the stories not only to the value of their work but also more stress-free life. More balanced work life was also mentioned in a form of having set vacation times so one could plan their vacations well ahead.

> *Today is conveniently payday and I'm heading to the hairdresser after work. Nowadays an ECEC teachers are paid the same level as an engineer with the same degree. Various possibilities have also been created to increase the salary, for example through specific expertise and skills, which can be verified by a certificate of additional training. My plans for today also include booking a trip for the summer holidays. Nowadays we ECEC teachers have the same holiday periods as schoolteachers. No more waiting until the last minute to find out when I'm able to take my vacation! (18)*

Another form of appreciation from the society was seen to come from the parents. Professionals wished that, in a perfect day at work, parents would have time to discuss whit them and would not be in a hurry. Wish for having time was visible in the stories were parents had time to stay for a bit and discuss with the professionals or even participate spontaneously in the activities, like singing a song with the children. Also, simple "thank you" from the parents was seen firmly as a part of the perfect day.

Education of the Professionals

Education and qualifications of the professionals were seen to be associated with good teamwork but also to safety at work. Safety would come from everyone knowing their role, responsibilities and flow of the day. Another aspect of safety that was mentioned was having common language to speak with the colleagues and sufficient vocabulary to be able to understand one another. In a perfect day at work professionals would collaborate with other team members who all had the proper education to match their professional responsibilities. Well educated professionals were seen more trustworthy as a team member. In the stories this

was also linked to more organized work and well-functioning teamwork. Having a trust between the team members and within the whole work community allowed professionals to focus on their own responsibilities and help to solve any possible issues in the team. Trust in team members and their professionalism was seen helpful for example in the cases where pedagogical approaches or values would differ. Also, these disagreements would be solved quicker.

To start with my perfect day at work, I would need my own job description to become more specific and I would be more familiar with my responsibilities. Job descriptions for social pedagogues are still very different around Finland but they also differ from each other even inside the cities. My own work well-being, organizing my work and distribution of different tasks would be easier and less stressful if my job description would be clearer. (7)

[On a perfect day at work] everything would go smoothly with in the team, everyone would know what they are supposed to do and when to do it without someone needing to remind them or do it for them (9)

Moreover, a wish to have clear descriptions to match professional responsibilities was especially voiced in the stories where the narrator identified professionally as an ECEC social pedagogue. There were also wishes for being able to advance their careers by getting additional education that would be recognized. In conclusion, in a perfect day at work professionals would be able to communicate effectively and professionally with each other and could rely on their team and coworkers.

7.2   Internal factors

Internal factors are referring to those factors that professionals can directly affect. Some examples of internal factors are social atmosphere, organization of the work and pedagogical solutions (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Ukkonen-

Mikkola et al., 2020; Kangas et al., 2022). Internal factors that raised from the data are work community, usage of appropriate space and time. Time is divided into three themes as well, since it got too broad otherwise. Subthemes for time concluded to be *time as environment*, *time for pedagogy* and *agency over work time*.

Work community

Challenges with sufficient staff were also visible in the stories from the point of internal factors. Having familiar work community, positive atmosphere and supportive leadership was mentioned consistently in the stories as essential part of a perfect workday. This also included the substitutes. Having familiar and supportive community as linked in the stories with good social atmosphere, decreased stress levels and positive feelings towards the work. Having a good relationship with colleagues was said to increase trust in the team, improving the organization of the work and improving the functioning of the team. These things were linked to the professional's own ability to anticipate the flow of the day and adjusting themselves accordingly which was also seen as part of the perfect workday.

> *The white board is empty, which means all my colleagues are coming*
> *to work today. The planned activity (today, for example, a trip) will*
> *happen (1)*

Work community, in the stories, included also personal assistants for the children whit special needs, day-care assistants and other members of the day-care that were not part of the immediate team. They were also seen important part of the day structure and were given responsibilities to ease the flow of the day. Especially day-care assistants were given the tasks of cleaning, sorting damp clothes to the driers and bringing the food trolley to the classroom. In the stories these tasks were seen helpful. Having day-care assistant to take care of these tasks would allow the pedagogical activities to continue without interruptions but also ease the transitions from action to another.

> *I work as a ECEC teacher I the group of five-year-olds, there is 14*
> *children in the group. I work together whit ECEC caretaker and there*

is one child with special needs in my group, that has personal

assistance to meet her needs. We work closely whit another group of

five-year-olds with the same child and staff structure. My working

day is from 8 to 15.39. We have quiet breakfast together whit the other

group. My co-worker (ECEC caretaker) greets the children in the

hallway while I serve breakfast to the children, I am assisted by a day-

care assistant who brings the breakfast trolley to us, wipes the tables

and takes the trolley away. My teacher colleague sists with the

children at the dining table, chatting and directing the children. The

personal assistants are both with their own children. (2)

The day-care assistant comes in the afternoon to help us whit dressing

up the children to go outside. I take a quick look in the dryer and find

it empty. Päivi, our day-care assistant, who is dressing up the

youngest child of our group, smiles and says that she emptied it while

she was cleaning the hallway, because she knew it would make it

easier to get out for the afternoon. I grin and thank her. (18)

Additionally, the day-care assistants were aware of the structures of the day and were able to act independently. This could indicate their high level of professionalism from everyone, shared trust and having clear communication between everyone in the work community, so all professionals working in there would know their role during the day.

Appropriate space

Usage of space and having space for versatile play and pedagogical activities was also often mentioned as a part of perfect workday. Appropriate spaces were seen from the perspective of the children but also from the adult's perspective. Common themes for the usage of space were inspirational, safe, logical and appropriate for playtime and activities but also for breaks, to have meetings and do the planning. Appropriate space was linked in the stories to the calmer environment, uninterrupted playtime and support of pedagogical planning of the day. For instance, pedagogical planning referred the different ways to divide the children into smaller groups. With appropriate spaces, children could also

leave their plays or toys to wait for the next day. Another example of logical usage of space was to that the materials would be arranged so that one could easily found them when needed.

Safe spaces also allowed professionals to focus more on enrich the play of the children rather than worrying about possible injuries. This was linked in the stories to promote positive interactions and atmosphere in daycare, since professionals would not have to forbid the activities or playing of the children. Therefore, having the safe environment for play would create more positive atmosphere for the whole community.

A few kids are keen to get on with the building games that were left from the morning, but a couple of other kids are running around so the castles can't stand up. I suggest the speedsters move elsewhere, where we'd have room to run together. I get a few friends to join us in the hallway, we take off our socks and here we go! Cheers fill the hallway, and the kids are specially amused when I come up with a song that fits the occasion.

Sometimes we run with our toes flapping back and forth, sometimes we float giggling on the floor. The kids laugh when I go lie down too and one of them manages to get half on top of me for a cuddle. Soon we're giggling huddle and everyone passing along the corridor are joining our laughter. How refreshing that I did not have to deny and justify, but allowed the kids to run with permission (8)

Diverse possibilities for activities were also part of the perfect workday in some stories. Trips to the museum, cafes nearby or to the forest were mentioned. Common themes for these tend to be that different places were accessible and nearby the daycare so it would be easy to go whenever the group wanted.

Appropriate space was difficult to place to be eighter external or internal since it is a bit of a both. Facilities for day care are given or build and the physical place can set some limitations for the day. For example, how professionals can divide

children into play areas. Preferred location for day-care center was also often mentioned in the stories, which is something that professionals are not able to influence directly. However, appropriate space is analyzed as internal factor, since the research question is asking about the actions of the professionals in ECEC. Additionally, usage of space is something that professionals are able to discuss among themselves and alter the spaces in a meaningful way.

7.3   Time

Time occurred in the stories so often it had to be divided into three subthemes. Time was also often on the background or mixed with other themes that arise from the data Themes that were formed under the "time" are time as an environment, time for pedagogy and agency over work times.

Time as an environment

In the afternoon, you could go out when it makes sense, so not too early with children who have long hours. In the afternoon there would be time to talk to parents in peace and catch up without having to be constantly watching out for children. Work colleagues would be in a good mood too and it would pass on the children as well. (6)

Perfect day would be calm according to most of the stories. There would not be rush anywhere, professionals could do things with the phase of the children and overall, the atmosphere would be calm. A lot of other factors at day care were seen to influence in the environment. For example, professionals often wished that there would be enough adults per group all day. Often was mentioned specific time wish how long the professionals should be present. Requested time was till 3pm, probably because then all meetings have been held, children have had their snack time and some of them might have been collected by their parents by that time.

At no point during my dream working day would I feel rushed, unsatisfied or incomplete. I would actually have time to take care of all

the children and sort out all the situations with them from start to finish. I wouldn't have to prioritise things so that I can't play a board game with the kids because I have to do something more urgent. (7)

Additionally, calm environment would enable professionals to focus fully on the interaction with the children. This would promote spontaneous moments for play since there would be no rush or interruptions by colleagues or other children. In a perfect day at work, professionals would have time and mental capacity to be fully in the moment with the children. According to the stories, professionals are often mentally occupied with various work tasks that prevent them to be present for the children. In the perfect day at work, professionals would have time to focus on one thing at the time and no pressure to handle everything right away. Calm environment would also enable the time for conversation with parents and attending fully to them promoting good co-operation with the families. Calm environment was linked strongly in the stories with sensitivity and enabling to structuring the day based on the children's wishes and needs rather than the adult's convenience.

Time for pedagogy

My perfect day at work in ECEC center would include being present for the children, talking with them, I could change the plans of the day according to the wishes and feelings of the children. The day would start off together with the children, having the time to sit together and sense the mood for today. Group sizes would be much smaller as they are now. (15)

A wish to have time for pedagogy was also visible in the stories. On a perfect day at work, professionals would have time to have their breaks, documenting and time for plan and prepare the activities. Day would often go as planned and professionals would have the time to attend the children and take their individual needs into consideration during the day. Clear structure for the day was seen to provide opportunities also for the spontaneous moments for play and professionals to have positive interactions with the children. Number of

professionals at work was also seen to effect on the professional's ability to have time for pedagogy. Having enough professionals was seen to enable the breaks and planning time for teachers but also to plan the day according to the needs of the children. For example, in the afternoon those children who are collected later could go outside later.

> *The teacher of the group goes to have one-to-one session with the children who has some need for extra support. A few children ask about puzzles, so they go to the table and, with adult guidance, learn a slightly more difficult puzzle. (8)*

> *Of course there have been many arguments between the children today, but they have been sorted out and they are natural part of learning how to live the life (1)*

On the perfect day at work the pedagogical aims and objectives would arise from inside the group and from the needs of children. Planning time and documenting tasks were seen important and part of the teacher's job-related responsibilities. However, the wish for perfect workday was that there would be enough time for those work tasks and that time would not burden rest of the team. Additionally, the to-do lists of the professionals would stay minimal and there would not be pressure to take work home. Having organized a manageable job-related responsibility was linked to decrease stress levels of the professionals and create more positive working environments for all.

Agency over work times

> *Perfect day at work for me would definitely be morning shift. Not the earlies one necessarily, but 6.30-14 would be great for me. Then I'd have time to do something else in the afternoon. I wished I could do only those shifts. (9)*

Factors around work times and being able to influence in them was also common trend in the data. Often was mentioned, as a part of perfect workday, the wish to work in a certain shift that would fit the life situation or personal preferences of the professional. For instance, some wish to work only early morning shifts since it would benefit them to attend to their children better or have time and energy for the hobbies. Some wish to work only evening shifts since they do not like to wake up so early in the morning. The work shifts should be anticipated and have enough time between them to recover from the workday. This was linked to the improved energy levels and feeling motivated and rested the next day at work. In one story was also wished that they could work remotely sometimes since at home they could concentrate on the documenting tasks better.

Balance between work and free time was often mentioned as a part of perfect workday. For example, professionals wished not to feel guilty after the workday and feel pressure to take work at home. Pressure to take work home might come from the long to-do lists that get never done. Also set vacation times and enough time to rest between the days was seen important for the work-life balance. Professionals wished to have energy and time for their families and hobbies after workday.

8   DISCUSSION

Aims for this research was to find out how the perfect day at work would look like for professionals in ECEC and would it provide information how the new requirements of the work could be met while maintaining the well-being of the professionals. According to previous research the active usage of agency is vital for the work engagement and well-being at work (Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020; Aabro, 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2022) and especially when organization is facing changes and professionals are required to re-negotiate their professional identities and job-related responsibilities (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Fullan, 2016; Hökkä et al., 2019; Kalliola & Mahlakaarto, 2020). However, professionals' usage of their agency is difficult in ECEC due to complicated bureaucracy and the nature of the job being intensively communal (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Kumpulainen et al., 2023). Despite this, professionals have good possibilities to influence their materials and pedagogical decisions at the workplace (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). On the other hand, day cares are operating under the laws and official regulations and the importance of social support of the work community plays huge role in ECEC professionals' possibilities to develop their work practices (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018; Räsänen et al., 2020; Niikko & Kohrhonen, 2021; Kangas et al., 2022).

8.1   Examination of the results

The complicated relationship of active usage of agency and the structures of the work in ECEC was also visible in the stories. Themes about too big child groups and challenges with human recourses were mentioned almost every story. These issues have been recognized in previous research (e.g. Räsänen et al., 2020 or Kangas et al., 2022). It was clear, that professionals in ECEC would prefer to work in smaller groups of children or have more adults in the group. In many stories there were suggestions on smaller adult-children ratio compared the current ratio. However, the number of adults in the group is not by research the only thing that affected the professional's capability to handle their responsibilities.

For instance, Karila and others (2017) and Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2018) have both concluded that the right education is essential especially for ECEC teachers to be successful in their profession. This view was also visible in the data. In few stories were directly mentioned that professionals would prefer to work with other professionals who have needed qualifications for the work. It was seen to help in the organization of the work and enabling the safety of the children. In the stories the right qualification also would improve the reputation of the domain in the society.

At the end, it seemed that all structures in the analysis process came together as time. Time is only recourse we can't have more, and it is very essential part of agency. To use active agency, is to decide how to use the time one have. Agency over our own time and ability to use it in a meaningful way is necessary for the good life quality. However, time needs structures to be efficient and meaningful. Work time is externally structured time but ideally one has chosen the career by themselves and is internally motivated to work in said structures. In the case of ECEC, this could be for example to agree with intensive teamwork and to work under the prevailing work culture of the society. Work culture for example sets the expectations for work times in ECEC. Issues arise when professionals feel that they have no influence at all on how they spend time at work. For instance, Hjelt (2023) has claimed that all the activities and work of the professionals are dependent on the number of adults present in the day-care. She also added that the required skills of the professionals in ECEC seem to be flexibility and ability to adapt their plans accordingly. This was also visible in the stories, where the perfect day at work was said to follow the premade plan and then having little time for spontaneous activities, like singing. In other words, professionals have the true ability to use their time at work as they want and be the professionals they want to be.

Time in the stories could be also discussed as time for work and time after work. Time at work is regulated by both external and internal structures that seem to be in a complex relation to each other. However, external structures are necessary since they provide the frame for the work and help in a usage of time. For

example, on a perfect day at work professionals would have clear organization of the work tasks. This is regulated externally, by stating the job-related responsibilities for each professional in ECEC. Additionally, the set standard for qualification of the professionals aims to ensure that they indeed are capable of successfully handle their responsibilities. Without this external structure the time used at work would not be efficient and professionals would have to use their time to figure out the organization of the work tasks on their own.

Another example of external factor indirectly addressing time was having the space and time for professionals to act as they would want. Professionals told in the stories what kind of pedagogical decision they would prefer to do, and these were affected significantly by the number of adults present and the facilities. For example, one professional wanted to provide possibilities for all the children to play as the children wanted, some wanted to run, some wanted to build, and this professional wanted to support both. However, the possibility of doing so would require the day-care center to have space for running, the social atmosphere to allow running inside, and enough professionals to be able to go run with the children. Therefore, the true agency of the professional was dependable of quite many factors. The external factor in this case are human recourses. Internal factors were social support for allowing running inside and having agreed place for it. Somewhat in the middle is the factor of having appropriate space, since to be allowed to run, there must be safe place to do so first. However, safe place could be agreed on inside the work community and professionals can make the place safe for the activity at some extend. Having the social atmosphere to support running inside is internal factor. However, it also would require the support from the colleagues and possibly from the day-care manager which affects the true agency of the professional. In the story they had the support for their pedagogical decision to allow running and embrace the play of the children which was then part of the perfect day at work.

Other aspect of the time and perfect day at work was to have time off from work. On the daily scale, it meant that professionals would have time for their hobbies, and they would not have to think about work related things during their free

time. This could be part of bigger change in the attitudes and values of the life. New generation of professionals seem to value their free time as much as their professional life, which is different from the generations before (Gerson, 2010). Additionally, ECEC has changed to be more demanding for the professionals, since the complex issues of the society are visible there as well (Urban, 2008; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020; Hjelt, 2023). Clear division of the work and free time is essential for preventing the burn out. Additionally, the agency over the free time was also present it the stories. Professionals wished to have an influence over their work time daily but also for vacations. They wished to have enough vacation time and it to be known or predictable. That would allow professionals to plan their free time, in other words, use their agency to craft their life as they please.

To answer the research questions, on the perfect day at work, professionals would have time to do their job as they want to do it, and they would be appreciated for it. For being able to do so, they would need stable teams and work communities with qualified professionals. These would require support from the organizational or political level. In the results, the support from the management was mentioned only briefly, but indirectly it was visible for example in enabling the preferred work shifts and being able to work remotely. Answer to the research questions seemed to be obvious. Also, the issue of time in ECEC has been mentioned in previous research too, for example Hjelt (2023) and Kangas and others (2022). In each research was concluded that time is essential factor for professionals and the lack of it causes issues with work engagement and over all well-being at work. Karila and Kupila (2023) have also pointed out that the development of the work practices needs time and the issues with staff shortages affect negatively to the mental capital of the professionals. So, the time that goes into figuring out how to get through the day with minimal recourses is taken out of the time for assessing and developing the work practices, in other words, creating new ways to meet the expectations of the work. In conclusion, answer to both research questions of this study seems to be time and support. Time for doing the job and time for learning about the new requirements and how to meet them but also to have true influence over the time

that one has. Support is needed from the politicians, upper levels of management or from the colleagues due to nature of the work.

8.2   Evaluation of the research

There are some limitations to be found from the research. The number of participants could have been higher, since the quality of the stories varied. The number of the participants is not big enough to draw generalizable experiences regarding the work in ECEC. Also, stories varied for their length, the number of details and the type of language that was used. In some stories the language used was rich and vivid, and in others the story was told in very direct language. This affected when analysis method for the data was chosen.

The data analysis could have been done as narrative analysis as well. Narrative analysis could have provided very in detail results and open different perspectives. However, the indifferences and variation in the stories led the researcher to go with thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is known for its flexibility and accuracy it can provide form various types of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the clear divination of the themes was a challenge during the analysis process, since often the factors for best day at work were overlapping each other. For example, the organization of the work could be looked at from external and internal point of view. Too much overlap between the themes is one possible weakness of thematic analysis that could affect the reliability of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the data analysis this indeed was a challenge, and I did my best to minimize the effect some themes overlapping by exploring both views. Additionally, the analysis was conducted by the author only, which could have increased the risk of overlooking other potential themes during the analysis process.

Another limitation for the research is the researcher's own personal biases that could have affected the research. To minimize the risk, I have done my best to be as transparent, sincere and openminded as possible thought the data collection process as well as in the conduction of the research. Ethical issues were also

considered during the research process, and I have addressed them in detail in the section 6.5.

Lastly, I wrote a story about the perfect day at work that has been concluded from the data. It is written from the ECEC teachers' point of view, since it is my own professional identity and therefore most familiar to me. However, I have tried my best to conclude all the aspects of the whole team, and I have used my data as a base of this story. All the points and factors in this last story are taken from the stories used in the data of this research.

"I love to come in early in the morning, I feel so much rested for having the set work times and I get to go home on time for my kids coming home from school. Also, in the morning I have time to review the day, see if someone has called in sick and that sort of things. Seems that only one adult is sick today, I send the text to our substitutes group to ask if anyone is free today. Otherwise everything seem to be fine.. Oh, that's the said group's teacher coming in, let's ask what their plan was today. Love to talk to her anyway, she is so funny!

But now I have to go, my group is probably waiting for me and my colleague probably wants to go to have his break. When I walk past our day-care assistant, I tell her what time we are going out, so she knows when to come down to help us. It is so much easier with extra pair of hands, especially in the fall when kids have to put on all the rain clothes as well. I noticed that some kids are running up and down the corridor, it seems so fun!

When I get into my own group, all kids have had their breakfasts and are playing. I chat a bit with my teams caretaker and then he goes for a break. Couple of kids come to say hi to me and we talk about how their morning has gone. Then I go to greet the rest of the kids and tell them that play time is over in five fingers time. It is one way to teach self-management and assessing time for kids, I learned it last week in the course! It has been very helpful tool, and some parents have already told us how it has worked well at home too.

After the five fingers have passed, and caretaker has come back, we have the morning circle. We go over the plans for today with the kids. Out with half of the group and other half stays in for big roleplay day that kids have designed themselves earlier this week. Those who go outside have games there and tomorrow we switch. Kids are excited! I guide those who go outside to the corridor where the day-care assistant is waiting with our social pedagogue who is today responsible for outdoor games. I'm starting the play with the kids who are with me today and we have a blast! Morning just flies by and soon rest of the group comes in. They also had fun and kids tell my all about their football game. Rain did not bother them at all apparently! The day-care assistant helps to put wet clothes away to dryer and we get to sit down with the kids to sing songs before lunch. Our social pedagogue had found some song about emotions, and she is teaching it for us. Our caretaker is setting the tables with two children who are assigned as helpers this week.

Nap time used to be a hard since some of the kids are not sleeping anymore during the day and it was so hard for them to be still and silent for almost an hour. I'm so glad we get to make arrangements with other groups to have common space for those who do not sleep where they can now rest for a bit and then move to have some silent activities. It's also helpful for us, since now only one adult is needed to be with those kids and it frees time for the planning or breaks. Today we have in-house meeting, so all teachers and day-care manager are there. After the meeting I'm coming to the group for a bit to help with snack and to let social pedagogue to have a break. She reminded me that one family had requested to have meeting with her and special education teacher next week. We need to have a chat about it, so we are both on the same page about the situation. We agreed to talk about it tomorrow during the nap time and caretaker said it's alright for him since our team meeting is after the families requested meeting. But also, since on Friday I'm off from the group. I have whole day dedicated for planning time and familiar substitute comes in instead. She is great, she is most often in our group of Fridays when I'm working off the group. But now my day is over and it's time to go home. I have to do some laundry today and cook.. maybe we could eat pasta today, my kids have asked that for a couple days now "

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