

Pedagogical Small Group Approach in a Day Care Center

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Master's Thesis in Early Childhood Education

Autumn 2016

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ABSTRACT

Lonka, Saana. 2016. Pedagogical Small Group Approach in a Day Care Center. Master's Thesis in Early Childhood Education. University of Jyväskylä. Department of Education. 84 pages + appendixes.

This master's thesis deals with the use of the small group approach in a day care center from educators' point of view. The goal was to reveal educators' definitions for a small group and basis for dividing the small groups. The most important goal was to recover the pedagogical significance of the small group approach which is quite a new but widely used way to organize the early childhood education in Finland nowadays.

This research was carried out as a qualitative research and group interviews were used in the data collection. Five group interviews were held in May 2016 in two different cities in Finland. There were 17 participants, 11 nursery nurses and 6 kindergarten teachers which all I refer with the term educator. The data was analyzed by applying abductive content analysis. The data was collected and analyzed in Finnish and translated in English for the results.

The results show that there are several ways to define and divide the small groups. The educators defined a small group with a certain number of children in a group or by dividing the entire group into smaller groups. The main basis for dividing small groups were age and developmental level of the child, social aspect and the organization of everyday practice. The pedagogical significance of the small group approach had 5 different aspects which were planning and assessment, resources, organization of everyday practices, child-centered practice and co-operation with parents. Despite the challenges all educators agreed there is no return to "the old way of working". The small group approach might be a solution to cope with the changes in the day care centers.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Day Care Center, Grouping, Educator, Group Size, Small Group

TIIVISTELMÄ

Lonka, Saana. 2016. Pedagogical Small Group Approach in a Day Care Center. Varhaiskasvatustieteen pro gradu -tutkielma. Jyväskylän yliopisto. Kasvatustieteiden laitos. 84 sivua + liitteet.

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman aiheena on pienryhmien käyttö päiväkodissa varhaiskasvattajien näkökulmasta ja tavoitteena oli selvittää, kuinka kasvattajat määrittelevät pienryhmän ja millaisin perustein pienryhmiä jaetaan varhaiskasvatuksen kentällä. Pienryhmätoiminnan pedagogisen merkityksen selvittäminen oli kuitenkin tämän tutkielman tärkein tavoite.

Tutkielma toteutettiin laadullisesta lähestymistavasta ja aineistonkeruussa hyödynnettiin ryhmähaastattelua. Kevään 2016 aikana toteutettiin yhteensä viisi ryhmähaastattelua kahdessa eri kaupungissa. Haastateltavia oli yhteensä 17, joista 11 oli lastenhoitajia ja kuusi lastentarhanopettajia. Kaikkiin osallistujiin viitataan termillä kasvattaja (educator). Aineisto kerättiin ja analysoitiin suomeksi abduktiivisen sisällönanalyysin avulla, jonka jälkeen se käännettiin englanniksi.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että pienryhmän määritelmät sekä jakoperusteet vaihtelevat. Kasvattajat määrittivät pienryhmän siten, että ryhmässä on tietty lukumäärä lapsia tai että isoa ryhmää jaetaan pienemmäksi. Pienryhmien jakoperusteiksi kasvattajat mainitsivat iän ja kehitystason, vertaissuhteet sekä päivittäisten toimintojen organisoinnin. Pienryhmätoiminnan pedagoginen merkitys määriteltiin viiden eri ulottuvuuden kautta, jotka ovat suunnittelu ja arviointi, resurssit, arjen organisointi, lapsilähtöisyys sekä vanhempien kanssa tehtävä yhteistyö. Haasteista huolimatta kasvattajat olivat yhtä mieltä, ettei vanhaan malliin ole paluuta ja pienryhmätoiminta voi olla yksi ratkaisu päiväkotiarjen haasteisiin vastaamisessa.

Avainsanat: Varhaiskasvatus, päiväkotitoiminta, ryhmäjako, kasvattaja, ryhmäkoko, pienryhmä

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1 INTRODUCTION

The new Act on Early Childhood Education in Finland (2015/ 1282) defines the child-educator ratio to be 8:1 instead of 7:1 which means the day care centers are allowed to take more children in than before. This has caused a lot of public conversation during the last year about the well-being of the children and the educators and the quality of early childhood education in Finland.

The more children there are in a group the harder it becomes to follow the goals of the curriculum (Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson 2014, 393) so the concern is entitled. According to Sheridan et al. (2014, 393) teachers are concerned that some children become invisible in a large group while the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education emphasis the participation and agency of each individual child (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 15–16). During the past decade there has been changes in the pedagogy of the early childhood education and the use of a small group approach has become a more common way to organize the education in a day care center (Sheridan, et al. 2014, 381; Raittila 2013, 74–77).

A small group approach is a systematic way to organize and manage the large groups in the day care centers by dividing the children into smaller groups. The small group phenomenon as defined pedagogical approach is quite new thing in the field of early childhood education even though educators have always organized the activities by dividing the children into smaller groups (Raittila 2013, 74). The experiences are mainly positive (Mikkola & Nevalainen 2009, 33) and by using the small groups the large group becomes more manageable (Sheridan et al. 2014, 389).

Besides the topicality of the small group approach my own working experience supported my decision to choose this topic. I have worked as a substitute teacher in multiple day care centers and I have seen how the use and the vision of the small group approach varies widely. I got convinced that there is a need to increase the knowledge of this topic.

The aim of this thesis is to sort out the visions the educators have of the use of a small group approach in a day care center environment since Sheridan et al. (2014, 381) state that there is not much research of the small group approach from teachers' point of view. The main focus in this thesis is on the definition and basis for dividing the small groups and in the significance the educators give to this approach.

As an educator I refer to all adults in response to the education and care in a day care center. This includes teachers and nursery nurses and I decided to use one term for both because the occupational group is not significant in this research.

In first two chapters I explore the earlier research. In chapter 2 I will focus on the organization of a day care center exploring the organization of the groups, learning environment and pedagogy. In chapter 3 the focus is on the earlier research of the small group approach in a day care center and in chapter 4 I will present the research questions in detail. Chapter 5 discusses the methodological considerations and in chapter 6 I will explore the results of this study. The last chapter includes the conclusions, trustworthiness and the themes for further studies.

2 ORGANIZATION OF A DAY CARE CENTER

2.1 Organization of Groups

Organization of children in day care centers varies between and within countries (OECD 2012). There are different kinds of day care centers in Finland which divide educators and children differently into groups because all children and educators can't be together all day long especially if it is a big day care center with as many as one hundred children. By a group in this thesis I refer to one organized group of educators and children in a day care center. As an example a traditional way to organize groups is to have three educators and 21 children in one group. (Kalliala 2008, 268; Siitonen 2011, 1.)

The Act on Early Childhood Education (2015/1282) defines the educator-child ratio in day care centers. The definition states there must be one educator to every four children under three years and one educator to eight children older than three years as shown in Table 1. In case there are children with special needs without personal assistance the group size must be smaller. Even though educator-child ratios exist Siitonen (2011, 30) claims that in several day care centers the ratio is exceeded occasionally and Raittila (2013, 88–89) writes the group size varies considerably. The new Act on Early Childhood Education in Finland (2015/5a) also defines that there should not be more than three educators in one group.

TABLE 1. The Educator-Child Ratio and the Group Size Defined in the Act on Early Childhood Education.

Age	Educator-Child Ratio	Maximum Group Size
0-3 Years	1: 4	12 Children
3-6 Years	1: 8	24 Children

There are also other ways to define the ratios in early childhood education. To compare Finnish ratios in the United States one state requires the teacher-child ratio to be 1:7 or 1:8 for three and four year olds and in the other states the ratio is from 10 to 20 children per teacher (Bowman, Donovan & Burns 2001, 146) and in Sweden the ratio is approximately 1:5 (Sheridan et al. 2014, 381). In United States there is a CFOC (Caring for Our Children) standard introduced by Richard Fiene (2002) that includes the ratio and a recommendation for a maximum group size (Table 2).

TABLE 2. The Teacher-Child ratio according to CFOC standard.

Age	Teacher-Child Ratio	Maximum Group Size
0-2 Years	1: 3	6 Children
2-2 and half Years	1:4	8 Children
2 and half - 3 Years	1:5	10 Children
3 Years	1:7	14 Children
4-5 Years	1:8	16 Children
6-8 Years	1: 10	20 Children

Small group size is associated with the high quality of early childhood education (Bowman 2001, 144; Munton et al. 2002, 59). The quality and group sizes in early childhood education have been in the public conversation especially among parents and policymakers in both Finland and Sweden lately and the use of small group approach and the more strictly defined regulations of the group size are considered to be one solution to narrowing the group size and the number of children at the same time in the same place (Kiiskinen & Huovinen 2011, 8; Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson 2015; Siitonen 2011, 8).

Especially for young children the smaller the group is the better (Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams 2015, 2; Siitonen 2011, 14). It is more beneficial to have a small group with one educator than a large group with

more educators. Being in a group that is too large doesn't support the optimal development of the child. When the educator-child ratio is high (one educator doesn't have many children) there are fewer dangerous situations and the educator is more active and available for the children. (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2015, 2; Siitonen 2011, 17.)

Economical circumstances affect on the publicly founded day care centers. Most of the early childhood education and pre-primary education in Finland is funded publicly. Due to economically tight times the pressure of organizing early childhood education profitably is emphasized and the municipalities are more concerned about the utilization and the filling rates. Filling rate means the filled educator-child ratio and the utilization rate means the realization of the ratio. In other words filling rate refers to the ratio in the group and utilization rate to the actual ratio in practice. Municipalities are under pressure to have high utilization rates so due to non-attendance of children the filling rates may be higher than they should so that the utilization rate would be high even on the days when all children are not present. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012, 10-12; Siitonen 2011, 14.)

Even though the high ratio is associated with higher quality, it is vital to notice that the quality of early childhood education may be high also in large groups. High quality depends largely on the expertise and the motivation of the staff. The smaller group size doesn't directly assure the higher quality of early childhood education. (Kalliala 2008, 268.) Besides organizing the groups it is important to pay attention on the learning environment that I will review in the next chapter.

2.2 The Learning Environment in a Day Care Center

The learning environment of a child includes all contexts where the child spends time daily (Hujala, Puroila, Parrila & Nivala 2007, 15). From an educational viewpoint it is not enough to focus only on the child but the educator must also take the environment into account. The Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education defines the learning environment as spaces, places, tools, communities and practices that support children's growing, learning and interaction. The learning environment should be flexible and rich and offer children an assortment of possibilities for playing, using creative solutions and studying by using motivational and functional methods that are natural for them. (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 23-24; Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 31.) The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care has a similar view of the learning environment and the definition says the learning environment is formed by physical, psychological and social elements (Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 31).

The learning environment should be safe, ergonomic and positive offering peaceful and unhurried atmosphere where all children can participate actively. Interaction and communal construction of knowledge are important aspects the learning environment should support. A well-planned learning environment should also offer possibilities for small group activities where everyone can take part and interact actively. (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 23-24; Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 31.)

The Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 24) summarizes the goal for learning environment on the following way:

"The goal is that learning environments form a comprehensive learning scenery for the child and encourage him/ her to active, communal and independent learning."

A well-planned learning environment provides a child optimal opportunities to learn on his own developmental level (Hujala et al. 2007, 90).

To keep the environment on the optimal level, planning and developing should be a continuing process in the day care centers. Children can have an active role in planning the environment and the educators should have individual children and their needs clear on mind while planning both environment and activities. (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 23–24.) The learning environment involves pedagogical elements and the pedagogical solutions in the day care center are an important aspect of the learning environment (Hujala et al. 2007, 91). In the next chapter I will focus on the pedagogical solutions.

2.3 Pedagogy – the Organization of Education and Care

The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care defines early childhood education (ECEC) as planned and goal-focused action which includes the aspects of care, education and teaching. The main target of ECEC is to promote children's' growth, learning and development on the best possible way. Every child has a right to attend early childhood education. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012, 14; Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 14.)

Pedagogy refers to how education and care are organized and includes the thoughts of what it means to learn and teach, who has valuable knowledge and how it can be used (Farquhar & White 2014, 822). It concerns teaching upbringing and care and the impacts of those on child's learning, well-being and development (Broström 2006, 395). Murray (2015, 1715) presents an even wider meaning for pedagogy saying it can be seen as leading young children. As noticed already in these two definitions, pedagogy is a complex concept (Hännikäinen 2013, 32) and since it is not the main theme of this research it is covered briefly. According to Mikkola and Nevalainen (2009, 25) who base their opinion on their experience of early childhood education practice, it comes alive in the daily practices, planning and realization in the day care center. Planning and developing the pedagogy should be an ongoing process where evaluation plays an important part (Hujala et al. 2007, 83-84).

The emphasis of both pedagogy and planning should be holistic and focused on the whole rather than on single activities in case of planning single activities the overall image obscures easily (Hujala et al. 2007, 60-61; Murray 2015, 1715). The general view of early childhood education is child-centered. Despite the child-centered approach, the educator must have the goals clear in his mind and arrange the learning environment and activities with the stimulus needed in the group. (Bowman, Donovan & Burns 2001, 215; Broström 2006, 396.) On the other hand Hujala et al. (2007, 27) write that even though educators tend to say they use a child-centered approach, the research and observation reveals that the practices are quite often based on the adult-centered approach.

The child-centered approach and active participation of children has also received attention in the field of early childhood education core curriculums which give the guidelines for ECEC. There is more attention paid to the equal membership of the group and common interaction between all members of the group, meaning both educators and children. It should also be noticed that all children are individual with their own needs, interests and experiences. In pedagogy this individuality should be taken into account. (Turja 2011, 44–46.)

In a day care center there might be clear choices in the pedagogy, for example focusing on the small group approach, long-lasting play, physical activities or immersion course. Educators commit to the area of focus and it should be come true in planning. Pedagogical planning and organization of the everyday practice in a day care center involves each educator and requires a commitment from all. (Mikkola & Nevalainen 2009, 25–26.) In practice participation comes easier true in a small group setting where all children have an opportunity to express themselves and receive responses (Wasik 2008, 518).

In sum. In this chapter I have discussed the organization as a day care center to obtain an overall vision of how early childhood education is organized in a day care center in Finland. First I explored the structure of the groups through different obligations and recommendations for teacher-child ratios and the size of a group. In the second part I defined the learning environment

mainly referring to the guiding documents of early childhood education and care and the third section I discussed the pedagogy. These three combined create the frame for early childhood education in a day care center and to the use of the small group approach. The teacher-child ratio defines the number of educators and children we should have, learning environment creates the physical, psychological and social frame and through pedagogical planning it all comes alive and to action. In the next chapter I will focus on the small group approach.

3 SMALL GROUP APPROACH IN A DAY CARE CENTER

3.1 Basis of Using Small Groups

Small group is a specific, systematic way of organizing activities for children in the environment of a day care center (Raittila 2013, 74). In Finland and in other Nordic countries there has been a change in the pedagogical environment of the day care centers in the 21st century. One of the changes is using small groups and working in pairs (2+2 educators working with 32 children) instead of having three educators per group (3 educators working with 24 children). This approach has become a more typical way to teach early childhood education since some educators find it difficult to work parallel to the curriculum if the group is large. These new ways of working with small groups have shown improvement in the response to the educational work with large and challenging groups of children. (Sheridan et al. 2015; Sheridan et al. 2014, 381; Raittila 2013, 74–77.) According to Sheridan et al. (2014, 389) one aim of using small groups is to make the large group of children more manageable.

The staff must be committed to the new ways of working because it is important that everyone accepts responsibility and observes common agreements and goals. The working team (educators working in a same group) needs time for common discussions, education and continuing open conversation in how to develop their own work. The need to re-organize some of the duties and shifts as well as the use of the physical environment and how to use the full potential of the team is apparent. (Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 151–152; Koivisto et al. 2005, 147–148; Litjens et al. 2012, 34; Raittila 2013, 86; Siitonen 2005, 158.) Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 152) who refer to their experiences underline that everyone in the team has strengths that should be utilized.

The role of the principle and special education teacher is important according to Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 152). The principle supports and provides the team with opportunities to discuss and take part in the education and planning. On the more practical side special education teachers play important role in dividing children into small groups, recognizing the children's needs and providing advice regarding how to carry out the small group activities. (Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 152.)

Using small groups and working in pairs is seen as an outstanding foundation for both planning and implementing pedagogical activities that require high commitment and mutual trust. To succeed in using small group activities the team must trust each other and their mutual professional skills. (Kivijärvi et al. 2005, 152; Raittila 2013, 83.) All team members should be aware of the activities in every small groups so that each small groups does not totally separate and it is important to define everyone's roles and expectations for working as a team. (Litjens et al. 2012, 34). Besides knowing the activities and goals of another small group, all team members must be committed to a common schedule (Raittila 2013, 83).

The small group format creates the need for precise scheduling of activities for more efficient use of the physical environment which must be divided between multiple small groups. For example, alternating small groups between indoor and outdoor activities for predetermined amount of time means each group must be ready to move on to the next activity when the other group is coming in. (Raittila 2013, 83.)

It is vital to notice that an established practice of using small group activities in a day care center does not exist (Raittila 2013, 92). The variation is quite wide and in the next chapter I will focus on describing that variation.

3.2 The Wide Variation of Small Groups in the Day Care Centers

There is a great deal of variation in organizing small group activities and dividing small groups. Sheridan et al. (2014, 385) state that even to the educators it is complex to univocally define a large child group or a small child group. The small group approach is supported by well-organized practices (Ikonen-Polamo 2009, 41) and according to Raittila (2013, 77) one day care center may have many ways to organize their activities. There may be both "traditional" groups and small groups used in some day care centers (Raittila 2013, 77).

The most typical way to organize small groups is to combine two "traditional" groups (21 children and 3 educators or nurses) and divide those into three groups (of 15 children and 2 educators or nurses). With 15 children and two educators it is possible to use two small groups with one educator in each. Some day care centers define small groups as groups of 1-6 children with one or two educators. (Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 152; Koivisto et al. 2005, 147; Raittila 2013, 77.) Wasik (2008, 516) instructs that the size of a small group should not be more than five children because in the groups of five or less all children can participate and the educator is more available for individual attention.

The small groups may be either fixed or variable. In variable small groups the structure of the group varies. The same children are not with the same educator every time during the small group activities. Alternatively, in fixed small groups there are the same 15 children and two educators for the entire semester. (Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 152–154; Raittila 2013, 77.) Rosenqvist (2014, 21) underlines the benefits of using fixed small groups. In fixed small groups all group members have closer relations and the common trust and safety build stronger bonds. After the child feels comfortable in his/ her own small group it is easier to expand feeling comfortable in a larger group setting as well. (Mikkola & Nevalainen 2009, 34; Rosenqvist 2014, 21.) Later on in the

next chapter I will provide more information about the benefits of the small group approach.

In practice it is not as definite that a small group would be totally fixed or variable. Flexibility is important while using small groups. Sometimes it is necessary to make adjustments to the groups because of a sudden change (for example if one of the educators is ill and there is not a possibility to replace her with a substitute) or as a result of observing and evaluating the small group activities. The primary purpose of using small group format is that it is beneficial for all children. (Kivijärvi & Almqvist 2005, 152–154; Raittila 2013, 77.)

Children may be divided into small groups intentionally or unintentionally. Unintentional grouping means that children are divided into small groups randomly without specific planning. (Wasik 2008, 517.) Intentional grouping may happen by age, for example children who are 5 and 6 years old consist of one group (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2015, 10; Sheridan et al. 2014, 388). According to Kivijärvi and Almqvist (2005, 155) and Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2015,10) another basis to divide small groups is the developmental stage of children and their interests. Siitonen (2005, 157) underlines the importance of testing children to determine their linguistic, mathematic and overall developmental stage as a basis of forming small groups. Tests are supported by active observation. For example children who speak Finnish as their second language may form one small group where the educator can pay special attention to supporting the learning of language. (Kivijärvi& Almqvist 2005, 155; Koivisto et al. 2005, 149; Siitonen 2005, 157–158; Wasik 2008, 517.)

The most important aspect in dividing small groups is that all children should be offered an opportunity to learn on their own level making allowances for their strengths and challenges (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2015, 10; Siitonen 2005, 158). The basis for dividing the small groups described earlier may make the groups homogenous but on the other hand Wasik (2008, 517) reminds that heterogeneous small groups may increase the learning opportunities compared

to a homogeneous small group. Children support each other and varying skills promote learning.

There is variation in dividing small groups but also in using them. Small groups may be used daily or on particular days of a week. In some day care centers small group activities are utilized in the mornings and in some day care centers small groups are used also in the afternoons. (Raittila 2013, 90; Sheridan et al. 2014, 387.) The difficulty of using small groups only in the mornings is that in the afternoon all small groups are combined and there might be more than 40 children with the educators. The educators know the children from their own small group well, so it is challenging to pay attention to individual children when not in the small group setting. On the other hand mixing all small groups gives the children an opportunity to have a wider selection of playmates. (Raittila 2013, 81, 90.)

While the settings of using small groups vary, the content used in small groups also differs. According to Epstein (2009, 6) the content of small group activities may be based on the curriculum or teacher's idea book, children's interests, exploring new materials or local traditions and events. Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 153) also write about the variation of small group activities. All small groups may have the same content but working in smaller groups creates a more peaceful learning environment for all children. Activities may also be differentiated by considering children's individual needs. Using workshops is one way to organize small group activities and having all activities performed in small groups is another way. Working with one child may also be considered as a small group activity. (Epstein 2009, 6; Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 153–154.)

Koivisto, Jaatinen, Pehkonen, Seppelvirta and Virtanen (2005, 148–149) give one example of using small groups. The entire group includes 20 children (5 and 6 years old), three teachers, one nurse and one assistant. The team uses small group activities three days per week in the mornings. In the early morning the children are all together and around 9 am half of the children go out and half stay in to have their activity time. Ten children who stay in are divided to work in three groups with one teacher each. In the particular

example small groups were divided by age and linguistic background. After working for an hour the groups change from indoors to outdoors. Around 11 am all children get together again to prepare for lunch. (Koivisto et al. 2005, 147–149.)

The variation of the small group activities in practice awakens interest and discussion among the educators working in the day care centers (Raittila 2013, 92) so it must be considered useful in field. In the next chapter I will explore the benefits of using small group activities.

3.3 The Benefits of Using Small Groups

Peer group has an important role in effective learning and according to Siitonen (2005, 158) using small groups is a great course of action in pre-primary settings. Also both Koivisto et al. (2005, 148) and Mikkola and Nevalainen (2009, 33) write that the experiences of educators using small groups are mainly positive. It is noted by Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 151) that the child-centered approach of the small group format offers a great deal of professional growth for the teaching staff. The benefits appear on multiple levels and in both child-focused and adult-focused view. Wasik (2008, 519) summarizes from the child-focused view that using small groups offers several cognitive and socio-emotional benefits.

High teacher-child ratio (one educator with not that many children) is associated with more positive teacher-child interaction (Bowman et al. 2001, 7; Munton et al. 2002, 59) and individual attention (Fiene 2002) which is especially beneficial for the younger children (De Schipper, Riksen-Walraven & Geurts 2006, 871). In the small group approach one educator works with his own small group and so he can focus on getting to know the children of his small group well on an individual level. It is easier to focus on 10 children than 20 and pay attention to their individual strengths and needs. Each child receives more attention from the educator. The interaction between children and also between children and educator increases while using small group activities. This can be

seen as beneficial for the child but also for the educator. The fewer children one educator has in his group the more time he has for specific observation, evaluation and planning. (De Schipper et al. 2006, 866; Epstein 2009, 6; Fiene 2002; Raittila 2013, 79–80, 89; Sheridan et al. 2014, 385; Wasik 2008, 515-516.) De Schipper et al. (2006, 871) also highlight that teachers express greater amount of supportive presence in a smaller group setting.

Small groups help educators to create closer and more meaningful relationships with children (Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 155; Litjens & Taguma 2010, 43). They have more time to spend observing and interacting which increases their knowledge and familiarity of each child. When the educator knows children in his small group on an individual level it makes it possible to plan activities that provide competent experiences and practice new skills in safe environment. This knowledge and a positive atmosphere support the self-esteem of the child which is highly valuable. (Koivisto 2007, 42; Sheridan et al. 2014, 385–386; Wasik 2008, 520.) Individualizing the activities (Bowman et al. 2001, 7) and the supporting children's autonomy (De Schipper et al. 2006, 868) is easier in the small group settings.

In the small group settings, the individual child is able to express his opinions and receive a response. The atmosphere is unhurried and more interactive on both a qualitative and quantitative level. (Hujala et al. 2007, 159; Ikonen-Polamo 2009, 41; Wasik 2008, 515.) Hujala et al. (2007, 161–162) underline that the interaction between the educator and the child is highly valuable and by sharing feeling, reciprocal communication and being sensitive to the child's needs increases the intellectual development of the child. In a small group setting the educator is more available for the children which improves the mutual attachment (Koivisto 2007, 125).

In an unhurried and engaged environment, the teacher can provide optimal opportunities for children to learn (Wasik 2008, 518). Language development is more effective when the child can express himself and receive a response with feedback from the teacher. Having conversations and interacting enables the growth of the child's vocabulary. (Bowman et al. 2001, 7; Wasik

2008, 518.) Sheridan et al. (2014, 386) pay attention to teacher's ability to observe how children interact and communicate with each other when the group is smaller.

In a smaller group setting it is easier to recognize the possible needs for special support among the children earlier. Measures of support may be easier to organize in a smaller group setting and the children with need for special support tend to participate more actively than in a large group. Both participation and achievements are typically higher. (Asplund Carlsson et al. 2001, 60–61.)

Epstein (2009, 6) writes about the high engagement of both educators and children while using small groups. Children are more active and they tend to co-operate intensively in a small group setting (Fiene 2002; Hujala et al. 2007, 159; De Schipper et al. 2006, 871; Litjens et al. 2012, 33). The same attribute appears among educators, when everyone on the staff has their own field of responsibility the engagement increases. Teams using small groups have more common trust because they learn from each other and work together closely. They are able to more effectively cope in their work and have higher levels of motivation. (Epstein 2009, 6; Litjens et al. 2012, 33; Kivijärvi & Alhqvist 2005, 155; Koivisto et al. 2005, 150.)

High teacher-child ratio improves the working conditions and it is less stressful for the staff (Asplund Carlsson et al. 2001, 71; Litjens et al. 2012, 33). The educators working with small group approach tend to have higher job-satisfaction which improves the engagement and effort put into the work and they tend to have less days of illness (Asplund Carlsson et al. 2001, 71; Goelman et al. 2000, 76–77). Using small group approach provides educators with an opportunity to sufficiently attend to the needs of children with different developmental characteristics which supports the engagement of working together (Litjens et al. 2012, 33).

Sheridan et al. (2014, 386) highlight that while using small group approach the educator has time to listen to children's ideas, interests and thoughts taking these into consideration. When the educator knows the interests of the children

he can involve those themes into planning activities and making it more meaningful for the children (Sheridan et al. 2014, 386). It is also said by Fiene (2002) that smaller group size typically enables more developmentally appropriate activities.

During small group activities it is possible for the educator to focus more on teaching and meeting children's needs than managing the children (Hujala et al. 2007, 159; Wasik 2008, 520). In the small group settings there is less need for educator's controlling behavior (Bowman et al. 2001, 7) and the environment in small group is less stressful for children (Litjens & Taguma 2010, 43). Fiene (2002) argues that the smaller group size improves the safety of the children and the care giving behaviors of the staff. There are also fewer conflicts and more time to solve problems in a small group compared to a larger group (Sheridan et al. 2014, 385). In addition, the verbal participation of the children is higher in a small than in a large group setting (Fiene 2002; Phillips & Twardosz 2003, 461). Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2015, 4) state that in a large group the interaction and verbal participation tend to follow certain learned routines.

While using small groups the physical environment is typically divided and activities are staggered so that there are fewer children in the space at the same time and the use of the environment is more suitable. When there are fewer children the environment is more peaceful, less noisy and so the peace of working and focusing is optimal. (Ikonen-Polamo 2009, 41; Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 155; Koivisto et al. 2005, 150; Raittila 2013, 79–80, 89; Sheridan et al. 2014, 393.) Sheridan et al. (2014, 388) highlight the aspect of using space both inside and outside with children.

Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 155) claim that the discussion with parents and multi-professional teams is deeper and more specific while using small groups. As a result, using small groups has improved the educational partnership with parents. On the other hand Raittila (2013, 80–81) writes that the educational partnership and co-working with parents has become less structured with the small group approach. There are fewer daily encounters with parents when they bring or pick up their children as a result of shift

planning. Educators of their child's small group might not be working in the late afternoon so educational partnership isn't ideal in all cases. As we can notice some aspects may be seen as both beneficial yet challenging. Next I will review the challenges of a small group approach.

3.4 The Challenges of Using Small Groups

There are not only benefits but also challenges in using small groups and working in pairs. Team member's absence from work is challenging especially in the model of working in pairs and using small groups. Day care centers are not well prepared to manage the absence of a team member and it is typical that the staff adapts their activities accordingly. In practice this adaptation may mean re-organization of the small groups so that a child is transferred to another small group for a day or two. (Raittila 2013, 83–85.)

Planning the shifts may also be problematic. The weekly working hours are planned in advance and there may arise situations where one of the working pair leaves work around noon and the other one has the responsibility of all children in their group for the rest of the afternoon. Dressing 15 children for going outdoors can be challenging for one educator especially if other resources and help are not available. (Raittila 2013, 85.)

According to Raittila (2013, 83) the missing educator in the working pair might also affect the ability of remaining educator to focus on teaching and on the needs of the children especially if they are not replaced by a substitute. It is hard and stressful but it might also be illegal especially if one of the pair is absent without a substitute for more than one day. The absence of a teacher or a nurse directly affects the classroom environment for children and to the pedagogical work.

The use of small groups often lacks planning and identification of the purpose. Small groups are randomly organized and this model is used from the educator's point of view, and it is not based on children's needs. From that approach the use of small groups is more of a management tool than a

pedagogical manner organizing in early childhood education. (Wasik 2008, 515.)

According to Sheridan et al. (2014, 393) the use of the small group approach mainly takes place before noon for a short period of time. In their research the teacher-organized small group activities took approximately 0,5-2 hours of an entire day and the rest of the day was organized by children's own grouping. Also Raittila (2013, 94) has found that children's own grouping (in the afternoons) during the play time in a large group of 30–50 children has become more common.

In sum. In this chapter I have explored the research on the small group approach to obtain a view on how does the phenomenon show in the light of the earlier research. The first two sections focused on defining the small group approach and revealed that the definitions and the use of the approach vary widely. The benefits and the challenges were discussed in the last two sections. The earlier research has found multiple benefits of the use of the small group approach but also some challenges have appeared. Since the small group approach as an specific, defined approach is quite a new phenomenon it is important to obtain more knowledge in the context of Finnish day care center and to define the pedagogical significance of it. In the next chapter I will present the research questions of this thesis in detail.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to clarify and obtain more information about the use of a small group approach from the educators' point of view. I am interested in obtaining both basic information and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. On a basic level I am interested in knowing how the educators define a small group and how the small groups are divided. In other words what is considered as a small group, for example how many children can there be in one small group.

Another interesting point is the significance of the small group approach to the pedagogy of early childhood education. So which are the reasons for using small groups and how does it effect on the pedagogy. Since the small group approach is commonly used in present it is also interesting to know which are the benefits and challenges of this model from the educators' point of view.

The research questions were formed as follows:

1. What educators define as a small group and what kind of small groups they are using?
2. How are the small groups organized and what is important to consider while dividing the small groups?
3. What is the significance of small group approach to the pedagogy of early childhood education?

5 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 Qualitative Approach of Research

This thesis represents a qualitative scientific approach. It is characteristic for qualitative research to have the goal of data collection and to obtain descriptive information about the chosen topic. While in quantitative research the goal is to create generalizations and construct theory in qualitative research all data is valuable and according to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 66) qualitative research strives to deeply understand a specific phenomenon. (also Patton 2002, 8–10)

The most typical data collection methods for qualitative research are interviews, observations and document analysis. Interview clarifies people's opinions, feelings, experiences and knowledge while observation aims to describe people's behavior and actions. Analyzing documents consist the viewpoint of written documents as reports, official publications and personal diaries which product descriptive information about the wanted topic. (Patton 2002, 4; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 71.) In this thesis I used group interview as the data collection method. In the next chapter (5.2) I describe the participants of this thesis and in the chapter 5.3 I will focus on the data collection method. I will first discuss about the interview in general and later on the group interview in detail. In the chapter 5.4 I will discuss about the data analysis and in the chapter 5.5 about the ethical considerations of the data collection.

5.2 The Sampling and Participants of This Thesis

In research the election of the participants needs to be carefully considered and there are different strategies to accomplish this (Patton 2002, 230). According to Patton (2002, 230) purposeful sampling is typical for qualitative research. Purposeful sampling means selecting the information-rich participants strategically. Since the goal is to acquire a lot of relevant information about the

topic, information-rich participants are more valuable for the research and especially in group interviews it is important that the participants are involved with the topic. (Morgan 2002, 151; Patton 2002, 230.) In my case I wanted the participants to be educators who work in a day care center that uses the small group approach since they would have valuable information to share. Valtonen (2005, 228) states that the group in a group interview should be gathered purposefully considering the research questions.

The sample in qualitative research may be rather small because the goal is to attain deeper information from the participants and not to make generalizations. There is no universal rule about the size of a sample in qualitative research but the sample has to be large enough to achieve information needed to answer to the research questions. (Patton 2002, 230, 244.) I decided to carry out five group interviews with ideally three participants in each group. I ended up with this solution after reading literature about the group interview as a method and consulting with my professor. In a group of three all participants have more time and space to express their opinions than in a larger group.

Because of the difficulties in scheduling the interviews during May 2016 some groups had four participants. Both Barbour (2007, 50) and Warren (2002, 90) remind that to maximize the participation and the motivation of participants it is important to consider where and when to organize the interview. In my case either the principle of the day care center or the group itself chose the appropriate and suitable time and place for the interview. All interviews were held at the day care centers during working hours and recorded with a tape recorder.

I had 17 participants in five different interviews. 11 of the participants was nursery nurses and 6 kindergarten teachers. All interviews were held in Finnish since that was the native language of all the participants. Two of the teachers were undergraduates and finishing their degree within the next six months of the interview. There was a wide variation in the working experience of the participants varying from 5 months till 38 years.

There was also variation in the structure of the groups in which the participants were working in as seen in Table 3. The structure of the group creates the frames for using small group approach. Two educators stated exactly how long they have used small group approach in their group and most of the educators stated it has been used several years.

TABLE 3. The Groups the Participants Work in.

Structure of the Group (Child-Educator Ratio)	Age of the Children	Special Needs and Assistants	Use of Small Groups
11 + 3	Less than 3 y	-	Less than 2 months
11 + 4	3-5 y	9/ 11 Children have Special Needs	Several Years
21 + 3	5-6 y	Personal Assistant	Several Years
21 + 3	3-4 y	-	Unknown
21 + 3	2-5 y	Group Assistant	Unknown
24 + 3	3-5 y	-	3 Years
26 + 4	6 y	-	Several Years

In the chapter 2.1 Organization of Groups I explained the change towards reorganizing the traditional groups by combining two traditional groups of three educators and working in a group of six educators using small groups. In this sample all educator were working in traditionally organized group settings.

5.3 Data Collection by Interviewing

The main idea of an interview is simple; it is reasonable to ask a person himself about their behavior, feelings, opinions, actions etc (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 72; Warren 2002, 83). Interview as a data collection method is flexible and it provides the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings and repeat the question when necessary. The goal is to collect as much relevant information about the topic as possible and that is why it may be wise to let the interviewee review

the questions or the themes of the interview in advance. (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 85; Patton 2002, 341; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 72–74.) I sent the main themes of the interview to all participants a few days before the interview so that the participants were able to orient their thoughts towards the themes. Some of the participants said they had not had time to read my e-mail before the interview so I repeated the main themes in the beginning of each interview.

The ideal interview is a discussion-like dialogue led by the interviewer. The role of the interviewer is to keep the focus on the topic that the interview acquires relevant information and the role of the interviewee is to offer his own knowledge. Research interviews may be divided into three groups which are unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews. (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 86; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 74; Warren 2002, 83.) Johnson (2001, 106) states that the appropriate interview approach for the research depends on the research questions. Next I will focus on the semi-structured interview which I used in this thesis.

In *Semi-structured interview* the themes are predetermined and the interviewer has questions of the themes but during the interview it is possible to add more questions or skip some so there is both flexibility and structure (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 75). Despite the level of structure in an interview it is always mainly an interactional situation and the data is produced in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005b, 29–30). I chose the semi-structured offset for the interview since I found it the most relevant for this research because of the mixture of flexibility and structure and I carried out the interviews as group interviews. All main themes (definition of a small group, basis of dividing the small groups and the significance of the small group approach), which I created after exploring the literature, were dealt with in each group and the main focus was in the significance of the small group approach. Some of the groups paid more attention and deepened the conversation towards the benefits of the small group approach while others focused more on other things such as the role of educators working as a team.

I chose to carry out the semi-structured interview in a group setting. *Group interview, focus group interview or group discussion* all refer to an interview where several people are interviewed at once. All those terms have their own emphasis (Barbour 2007, 3) but in this thesis I am referring to Smithson (2000, 104) who writes that the group interview may be seen as a controlled group discussion. The goal in a group interview is to collect data from multiple people at the same time revealing the opinions of the individuals by creating a conversation between the interviewees of the research phenomenon. (Bloor & Wood 2006, 99.)

Group interview may be used individually or in parallel with individual interview or other data collection methods (Barbour 2007, 17, 31; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 94; Valtonen 2005, 223). In this thesis group interview was used individually. In other words group interview was the only data collection method used in this thesis. Group interview fits best to the research which aims to clarify the opinions of a group about certain phenomenon (Heikkilä 2008, 293–294) and to reveal the decision-making process of a group (Barbour 2007, 26).

One benefit of a group interview is that it may produce a wider range of information than interviewing all participants separately (Bloor & Wood 2006, 100; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 94). Barbour (2007, 43) underlines that group interview may include the aspect of support. I noticed that in this case the group interview gave the participants a chance to reflect on their work and share good practices.

In group interview settings participants may talk about things that would not mention in an individual interview because of the truism or other reasons (Alasuutari 2011, 155). In a group interview interviewees may memorize together, support, encourage and inspire each other to deepen the conversation and share their knowledge and opinions (Alasuutari 2011, 152; Barbour 2007, 34; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 94–95). I noticed this in the comments such as "*Hei tosta tulikin mieleen...*" (*Hey that reminds me...*) in several situations during the interviews. The interviewees also memorized together and sought support from

other participants saying "*Eikös meillä joku vuosi ollu jaettu neljään?*" (*We have divided the group into four small groups some years, didn't we?*).

On one hand it may be easier for people to participate to a group interview than an individual interview. (Alasuutari 2011, 152; Barbour 2007, 34; Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 94–95.) But on the other hand sensitive topics may be difficult to share in the group interview settings (Bloor & Wood 2006, 101). The use of a small group approach is not very sensitive topic since it is part of the educators' everyday work. It is important to notice that the nature of a group interview depends on the participants and their interaction (Heikkilä 2008, 301).

The aim of a group interview is to be informal and based on common conversation rather than on a great deal of structure (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 97). Always while using an interview as a data collection method it is vital to notice and pay attention to the fact that *the interviewer has an effect on the interview* and the quality of the obtained data (Barbour 2007, 52; Patton 2002, 341). There were differences between the groups in how much I took part in the conversation. Some of the groups had a good conversation about the topic deepening it by asking questions from each others but in some groups the participants were less talkative and I had to give more questions and themes to get deeper information of the phenomenon.

The interviewer offers and deepens the themes of a discussion but allows the group to talk freely without structure and the conversation is always created in the interaction (Morgan 2002, 150; Valtonen 2005, 233). The interviewer also needs to keep in mind to create the frame for the interview by opening and closing the interview (Ruusuvoori & Tiittula 2005b, 24). Especially in the beginning of each interview I reminded all participants that there are no right or wrong answers and that I am interested in hearing all of their thoughts and opinions. I also aimed some of my questions to the less talkative participants to also receive their opinions.

Heikkilä (2008, 294) reminds that especially in a group interview it is important to pay attention to the atmosphere and the interviewer needs to observe the discussion as well as the behavior of the participants. I noticed that

the conversation between interviewees developed on its own during each interview. In the beginning my role as an interviewer was more important as the participants were responding to my questions but as the interview progressed my role became less significant and they were having an open conversation. There was also variation between groups in how actively they took part in the conversation. In each group interview there was one or two participants leading the conversation but in one group I had more of a leading role giving the participants more questions to support the conversation.

My goal was to create an open atmosphere for the interviews and make sure everyone had a chance to attend to the discussion. Valtonen (2005, 223) writes that the role of an interviewer is to create good atmosphere for open discussion and guide the participants to stay on the topic. A couple of times I as an interviewer had to remind the participants to stay on topic but mainly they were quite disciplined to stay on the topic. During the interviews I noticed that in each group there were participants who did not take in as much part of the conversation and in three out of five the more quiet participants were nursery nurses while kindergarten teachers took more of a leading role. For me this seemed that maybe some of the nursery nurses were not willing to share their opinions since they had lower educational background and kindergarten teachers have the pedagogical responsibility over the child group. In one group there was a good example how the kindergarten teachers encourage the nursery nurse to share her thoughts as seen in the next quotation:

H: miten teidän mielestä näyttäytyy
tämmöinen pienryhmätoiminta erityistä
tukea tarvitsevan lapsen kannalta?

Interviewer: What do you think about
the significance of the small group
approach for a child with special
needs?

Hiljaista, ja LTO6 viittaa LH11
suuntaan, jotta tämä vastaisi välillä

Quiet, Teacher 6 points towards
Nursery Nurse 11 so that she would
answer

LTO6: Sanokaa vaan

Teacher 6: You (all) just say

LH11: No helpompihan semmosessa pienessä ryhmässä on tämmöstä erityistä tukea tarvitsevaa lasta niinku ohjata ja sit pystyy vähän kahtomaan mitä se ossaakin siinä ja antamaan sitä tukkee eri tavalla. Ja siihen ku sitte kahtoo että ottaa niitä kavereita sitte jotka on, saattaa olla vähän taitavampiakin niissä sitte nii sitte ottaa malliakkii siitä ja ja ja

Nursery Nurse 11: It is easier to teach and instruct a child with special needs in a small group setting, You are able to observe the child and notice what he/she is able to do and give the support needed. And then we can choose the other children in the small group so that they have a little bit better skills and it's possible for the child with special needs cues from the other children and and..

LTO6: Vertaistukkee silleen tullee

Teacher 6: Peer support appears

There are many benefits in using group interview but there are also challenges. At times the group has a collective voice, common for all participants and at times individual voices are more dominant (Smithson 2000, 117). On the one hand group interview may encourage participants to talk but on the other hand there may be talkative and dominant members in a group and others are not able to fully express their opinions. (Heikkilä 2008, 301–302; Smithson 2000, 107.) The insecurity of expressing the opinion showed up clearly in the quotation above. It is also possible that the other participant influence on what other people say during the group interview (Morgan 2002, 151). The influence of other participants became clear in several groups and it showed for example as a toning down of their opinion after someone else expressed the opposite opinion. I also consider the silence and glancing other participants as signs of being unsure about giving their real opinion.

Smithson (2000, 108) claims that the solution to reduce the effect of the dominant voices is to create homogenous groups in the first place. In this case all participants were professionals in the field of education with experience in the small group approach so they had somewhat similar background but there was considerable variation in the length of working experience (from 5 months till 38 years as told in chapter 5.2). According to Valtonen (2005, 229) it is generally considered beneficial that the participants in a group interview have

similarities so that they have the ability to participate in the common conversation.

A natural group where the participants are connected for example through work or a common activity is good for the group interview since the participants already know each other and have similar offset (Heikkilä 2008, 295). In this data collection groups were natural since in each interview all participants were working in a same day care center. The other challenge of using group interview is also the difficulty of generalization. The data is bound by context, therefore a specific group would not produce the exact same data if interviewed on a different day. (Heikkilä 2008, 301–302.) Barbour (2007, 117) reminds that it is beneficial to have a topic guide or broad themes outlined for the group interview in order to create some sort of structure. I had my notes with some questions with me so that I was able to offer more topics and questions to talk about when needed. I created the questions and conversation themes by keeping my research questions in my mind and I had also read the survey answers about the small groups approach collected by my professor in 2014.

5.4 Data Analysis

The main goal of data analysis in qualitative research is to organize the data into clear and compact form without losing significant information and to create new knowledge about the topic (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 138; Patton 2002, 457; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 108). I performed the analysis in this thesis by applying abductive content analysis.

Abductive content analysis uses the existing research of the phenomenon and tries to extend it. While inductive analysis refers to discovering all themes in the data and in contrast, deductive analysis refers to finding the themes from the existing framework. Abductive analysis is in between these two methods capturing the benefits of both the data itself and the existing framework (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281; Patton 2002, 543; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 117.) I had

written the theoretical frame before carrying out the data collection and analysis because I wanted to receive the benefit of the findings from the earlier research but at the same time I wanted to be open to new findings from my own data.

The first task after the interviews was *transcription*. The average duration of one interview was 44 minutes (the shortest 33 minutes and the longest 61 minutes) and the combined duration of all five interviews was 221 minutes. I recorded all interviews by using a tape recorder. I listened the interviews carefully and wrote down the content word by word. The process of transcription is very important while using group interviews. It is vital to transcribe all speech as it is spoken and identify different voices and other type of verbal communication such as long pauses and laughter (Lloyd-Evans 2006, 161.) I paid special attention on the transcription taking the previous things into account. Average length of one transcription was 17 pages using font Calibri, size 11 and spacing 1,15 (the shortest was 11 pages and the longest was 20 pages) and the combined length was 84 pages. All interviews were held and transcript in Finnish.

The researcher needs to *explore and organize the data* before analyzing (Ruusuvuori, Nikander & Hyvärinen 2010, 10) and it is important to pay attention to the individual voices within the group interviews (Barbour 2007, 33). I listened the interviews twice, once before transcribing and another time while transcribing. After transcribing the data reviewed all data by reading before analyzing.

While getting to know the data I noticed some similarities that appeared in most of the interviews. For example in the conversation over the basis of dividing small groups each group of educators mentioned age as a factor to consider. The same theme had also appeared in the earlier research so even before officially beginning the analysis I had a strong feeling that age would be one of the themes under the second research question. Later on during the process of analysis the age ended up being a subtheme under age and developmental level.

Besides similarities I also noticed some differences in the data within the same topic. For example while educators were discussing about what they do when there are only one or two children present in the small group. In one interview educators agreed that they would combine two small groups since having only two children in one group is not enough. While in another group educators considered it as one of the benefits of small group approach that sometimes there are only two children in a group. Later on in the analysis these two different views ended up under different subthemes. One was under not having enough resources and the other was under taking advantage of staff and space resources. After getting to know my data I began analysis by applying content analysis.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1277), Payne and Payne (2004, 52) and Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 91, 108) *content analysis* is one of the most typical method of analysis in qualitative research especially on the field of education add Graneheim and Lundman (2004, 105). It is a flexible process which begins with *condensation*. Condensation means simplifying the data by identifying the relevant information for the research questions (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 175; Graneheim & Lundman 2004, 106; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 108.) It was not always easy to decide if the data was relevant or not and I tried to keep the research questions clear in my mind during the process of condensation.

In a couple of unclear cases I decided to remain the data with clearly relevant data so that I would not lose important information. In these unclear cases the educators were for example talking about field trips they had to cancel because of the lack of educators. This had to do with the staff resources in general within their group but it did not clearly apply to small groups. In the end I decided to keep this part in the relevant data since it revealed how staff resources affect on the organization of everyday practices in that group. The unit of analysis in this thesis was a meaning unit, a coherent whole. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004, 106) a meaning unit refers to a unit of words or sentences which relate to each other through common content.

I organized all relevant information and transferred this to another document so that I did not lose any of the data. Later while analyzing I noticed some irrelevant parts. Mainly I considered to be irrelevant the data in which the participants were talking about something totally out of topic as the wind blowing outside the window or if the coffee would be done after the interview. I moved those irrelevant parts to another document. In the transcription I wrote all "hmmmm"s separately and while condensing I mentioned it for example as "Hmmmm" x3. I did not want to completely remove all "hmmm"s since it expresses that the person is thinking or is unsure about what or how to answer.

The next step after condensation is *to find the core meanings* or themes that define the research questions (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 175; Graneheim & Lundman 2004, 107; Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1277; Jayanthi & Nelson 2002, 110; Lloyd-Evans 2006, 162; Patton 2002, 453, 457; Tuomi & Sarajarvi 2009, 108.) I arranged the relevant data in three different documents according to the research questions. It was quite simple to identify the parts of the data that answered the first two research questions (definition of a small group and basis of dividing small groups) and rest of the relevant data I added into the document that addressed the third research question (pedagogical significance of small group approach). One of the characteristics of content analysis is that it is systematic and detailed (Payne & Payne 2004, 53). After having the data divided systematically into three documents I moved the similar parts of the data close to each other so that similar comments were on top of each other.

In each document I organized the data by the similarities or themes as Jayanthi and Nelson (2002, 110) recommend to be done. So basically I moved all data where the educators discussed peacefulness next to each other, and all data about anticipation next to each other. These two parts of data (all data about peacefulness and anticipation) I organized next to each other since they were often mentioned together and I considered these as having a connection.

After I had the similar parts of the data together I created *titles for the similarities*. Some titles or themes came directly from earlier research. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1283) point out the fact that abductive analysis supports and

extends the earlier research. Some of the themes I used particularly in the first and second research question came straight from earlier research and some themes I created from the data itself by making clear the main content of each statement within the theme. For example age and developmental level as the basis for dividing small groups also appeared in earlier research so it was easy to name those themes but the organization of everyday practices came from the data.

In creating the themes from the data I first underlined the core or main idea of each comment and compared the underlined parts. In some cases it was easy to name the theme since the educators had mentioned clearly for example co-operation with parents by using that term but in some cases I created the term describing all content under the theme. For example when the educators were talking about giving children individual attention, adding child-specific goals into the practice and supporting children's agency I named it all child-centered practice.

According to Barbour (2007, 127) some themes may overlap and sometimes it is hard to place statements under one theme. I changed the themes multiple times until I was satisfied with them. It was simpler to create the themes for the data in first and second research question but for the third question it was more challenging and I modified the themes several times. In the first two questions most of the themes came from earlier research and in the third I mainly created the themes from the data.

The challenge of abductive analysis according to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1283) is that researchers tend to find supportive evidence within the data and the earlier research may blind the researcher to contextual aspects. Knowing this fact I paid special attention to being open to what the data itself presented. In Table 4 the process of data analysis is shown collectively.

TABLE 4. The Process of Analysis in This Thesis (partly retelling the model of Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 109).

	Sample 1	Sample 2
Transcription of the interviews	Sillon ku toimitaan pienissä ryhmissä (naurua ja muut hmm / mm) Elikkä tehdään lasten kanssa asioita niinku pienemmissä, jaetaan niinku lapset pienempiin ryhmiin ja on ollaan niinkun -- eri tiloissa niitten pienien ryhmien kanssa. Mä sanoisin et se vois olla niinku pienryhmä tai sit sitä vois niinku sanoa pienryhmätoiminnaksi.	Et se luo semmosta niinku rauhallisuutta ja niinku semmosta niinku ennustettavuutta siihen päivään. Niin. Pystyy lapsiki ennakoimaan et mitä tulee tapahtumaan siinä päivässä seuraavaksi.
Familiarizing and dividing the data according to the research questions	Applies the first research question about defining small groups (into document 1)	Applies the third research question (into document 3)
Simplifying and highlighting the valuable data	toimitaan pienissä ryhmissä -- jaetaan lapset pienempiin ryhmiin ja ollaan eri tiloissa niitten pienien ryhmien kanssa	Luo rauhallisuutta ja ennustettavuutta päivään. Pystyy lapsiki ennakoimaan et mitä tulee tapahtumaan siinä päivässä seuraavaksi.
Organizing the data into (sub)themes abductively	Jaetaan lapset pienempiin ryhmiin	Rauhallisuutta Pystyy ennakoimaan
Naming (sub)themes	Ison lapsiryhmän jakaminen pienemmiksi ryhmiksi	Rauhallisuus Ennakointi
Creating main themes /typologies		Arjen organisointi
Translating concepts and reporting the findings	Dividing a big group into smaller groups	Organization of everyday practice -Peaceful environment -Anticipation

I first analyzed the data and created the themes in Finnish and then *translated* everything to English. Pietilä (2012, 412) recommends the entire analysis be conducted in the original language the data was collected, in this case the data was collected in Finnish. The difficulty in having the data and report in different languages arises especially in quotations. The most common way to use quotations is to have both the original and translated version in the report even though this benefits only the readers who have the knowledge of both languages. (Pietilä 2012, 421.) I chose to present all quotations both in

Finnish and English since most of the readers of this report will likely to be able to read both Finnish and English.

5.5 Ethical Solutions

The ethical commitment in qualitative research guides the research process and effects on the quality of the research so in other words good qualitative research is also ethical research (Farrimond 2013, 18; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 127) which is conducted according to the responsible conduct of research offered by Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012–2014). The responsible conduct of research includes recommended guidelines for the researcher. Important aspects to consider are for example honesty, meticulousness and accuracy as a researcher in each step of the process. (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012–2014.)

The ethical consideration associates with the entire process of the research and the first consideration and it applies to everything from choosing the topic for the research to what one can achieve with the findings of the research (Farrimond 2013, 59; Kuula 2006, 27; Patton 2002, 408). The goal of this thesis is to gain more information about the use of the small group approach in a day care center from the educator's point of view. This phenomenon is quite new in the field of early childhood education so adding new information to the existing knowledge of the small group approach is the achievement of this thesis.

There are several ways to define the ethical principles but the core of meaning these different definitions is the same. Here I refer to Farrimond (2013, 25) who defines the core principles to be autonomy, justice, doing no harm and being trustworthy. *The first principle*, autonomy includes the point that people are treated as individuals and are for example allowed to decide about their participation in the research (Farrimond 2013, 26; Kuula 2006, 61). Throughout the entire data collection process I underlined that the participation is voluntary and the participants were able to cancel their participation at any time. Kuula

(2006, 107) writes it is very important to give the participants the possibility to cancel the participation any time. From the first email to the actual interview situation I made sure all participants had enough information about the purpose of this research and they were allowed to decide about their participation by themselves.

The second principle, justice refers to the opportunity to participate in the research (Farrimond 2013, 29). In this case I chose the day care centers that I contacted but the educators had the opportunity to either participate or not. All members of the team had an equal chance to participate despite the educational background. My first thought was that I would invite only the teachers to participate in to the interviews but soon I realized that the nursery nurses are carrying out the small group activities as well as the teachers so I made the decision to invite all members of the team. I am satisfied that I also included the nursery nurses since as Farrimond (2013, 66) writes it is unethical to exclude a group of people without a good reason.

The third principle, doing no harm seeks balance with beneficence. Beneficence refers to the potential benefits of the research. For example increasing the knowledge of the benefits of the phenomenon should be reached without harming the participants. (Farrimond 2013, 27–28; Kuula 2006, 62.) The small group approach is quite a new phenomenon in the field of early childhood education so there is room for more knowledge about this subject and especially about the significance of it. As I mentioned earlier the topic is not highly personal since it has to do solely with the participants work. I also noticed that it provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their own work with other participants.

The fourth ethical principle to consider is trustworthiness which includes expressing honestly of the purposes of the research to the participant and reporting the results as they are but also respecting the earlier research (Farrimond 2013, 30; Kuula 2006, 64; Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005a, 17). I have paid attention to respecting the earlier research by making references to it and marking the references as clearly as possible so that the reader of this report is

able to find the original source. Mäkinen (2006, 130) reminds and Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012–2014) underlines that the appropriate referral is vital in the research.

Besides the ethical principles there are also more practical things to consider. The consent for the research is a common practice in the Western research. It informs of the research and gives the participants an opportunity to know what they are considering to participate. (Farrimond 2013, 109–110; Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012–2014; Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005a, 17.) The process of consent for my research began by contacting a couple of principals in two medium-size cities in Finland. After discussing and receiving their approval for my research I contacted the city councils to obtain the official consent for the research (Appendix 1).

Farrimond (2013, 110–111) points out that the consent may be either oral or signed. I received the signed forms from the city councils. After attaining the official permissions I contacted the day care centers again and the principals sorted out which educators wanted to take part on the group interviews. The participation was on a voluntary basis and all educators had the opportunity to either take part or decline the interviews. At this point I received the oral consent from each participant. Ruusuvuori and Tiittula (2005a, 18) remind that the written or oral consent from each participant is necessary.

In the context of research it is important to assure the anonymity of the participants. The best way to do this is to collect unidentifiable data in the first place. (Farrimond 2013, 129; Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005a, 17.) My aim was to collect as unidentifiable data as possible and I asked them to introduce themselves for example by saying nursery nurse one instead of using their full name. In some groups the participants gave their full names anyway and used for example the name of the city or the day care center in their speech. Farrimond (2013, 129) says the researcher can collect personally identifiable data and remove it from the results and Kuula (2006, 111) also recommends to remove the identifiable parts of the data as soon as it is not needed anymore. In this thesis I do not reveal in which city and which day care centers the

interviews were carried out to assure the anonymity of the participants. Already while transcribing the interviews I removed the identifiable data since it was not relevant for the analysis. I replaced the full name with XX and used codenames of the participants as both Mäkinen (2006, 115) and Ruusuvuori and Tiittula (2005a, 17) recommend. The codenames were LTO 1-6/ LH 1-11 depending on the educational background (teachers LTO and nursery nurses LH) and the actual name of the city by typing "name of the city".

I take the data confidentiality seriously and make sure that the data is used as it is intended. Shortly, the confidentiality means that the data will not get shared beyond agreed limits (Farrimond 2013, 133; Mäkinen 2006, 115). While receiving the consent agreement for my research and also in the beginning of each interview I repeated that the data will be only for my use which is intended for this research and possibly for my professor's use after it is unidentifiable. Mäkinen (2006, 120) underlines that it is important to make the data unidentifiable before sharing it with other researchers. I have stored the data only on my laptop which is protected with a password. After the report is written the data is deleted from my laptop and given to my professor by using a memory stick.

6 RESULTS

In this chapter I will describe the results of this research. The first section focuses on the definition of a small group while the second summarizes the basis of dividing small groups. In the third section the pedagogical meaning of the small group approach is discussed further. Every section includes figures or tables summarizing the main content and there are also quotations with translations from the interviews. In the end of each section there is a discussion section in which I compare the results I received to the results of earlier research.

6.1 Definition of a Small Group

It was not simple for the participants to define the term "small group" and there was variation in the answers within and between the groups. There were two main categories in defining a small group. Small group was seen as *dividing big group into smaller groups* and it was defined by a *certain number of children in a small group*..

In the first category of *dividing a big group into smaller groups* the educators simply stated that they consider a small group to be a smaller group than the entire group. This was typically the first comment in the conversation in the groups about the definition of a small group and in two groups the educators agreed on that definition and moved forward with defining the small groups they used. As teacher 3 said after I asked what they considered to be a small group:

Teacher 3: Lapset niinku jaetaan aikuisten kesken pienempiin ryhmiin niin sillen se mun mielestä on sitä pienryhmätoimintaa

When children are divided among the adults into smaller groups I consider that as using small group approach.

Six educators defined a small group by a *certain number of children in a group*. There was variation in the size of a group of children the participants considered a small group. The variation was between two and twelve children in one small group so the difference in these two views is that one educator considers a small group to be six times larger than the other one. Most of the educators defining a small group with a certain number of children underlined that having five or six children in one small group would be ideal but quite rare.

Some educators said that the *definition of a small group depends on the age and the skills of the children* as the teacher 13 says in a quotation below. This theme is discussed more in the next chapter that focuses on the basis of dividing the small groups.

Teacher 13: Ja iästä riippuen tietenki jos on vielä pienempiä on nii sitten vaikka kolmen lapsen ryhmää tai riippuu mitä opetellaan että -- minkälainen tuentarve on siinä

And also depending on the age so the younger the children are it can be a group of three children or depending on what we are about to learn -- and what kind of need for support exists.

There were different definitions for small groups and there were also different kinds of small groups in use. The main difference was the stability of the small groups, they were either *fixed or variable*. Fixed small groups were divided considering the age of the children or the need for support (small groups for rehabilitation). There will be more about the basis of dividing small groups in the next section.

As described earlier there was considerable variation in how the educators defined a small group. This result is in line with the earlier research of the topic. Sheridan et al. (2014, 385) found that it is quite difficult for preschool teachers to define a large or a small group with a exact number of children. In this thesis most of the educators defined a small group either as dividing a large group into smaller groups or with a certain number of children in a small group. The variation of the size of a small group was between 2 and 12 children which tells us that the group size is a complex issue. Raittila (2013, 77) reveals that there is variation between and within day care centers in how the (small) groups are

organized. In my group discussions it became clear that there were multiple ways to organize the small groups within a day care center and it is obvious that this also has effects on the how the educators define a small group.

In this thesis most of the educators who defined a small group with as having a certain number of children said that an ideal size for a small group is five or six children. Also Koivisto (2007, 162) defines a small group as a group of 1-6 children and Wasik (2008, 516) states that there should not be more than five children in a small group. The educators that I interviewed for this thesis however said it is rare to have only five or six children in one small group. If this was the case one educator would have only five children and the other one has approximately ten children. Also Korkalainen (2009, 135) has found that generally the educators consider the group sizes to be too large in the day care centers.

6.2 Basis of Dividing Small Groups

The educators mentioned multiple aspects used in dividing small groups. The three main themes were *age and developmental level of children*, *social aspects* and *the organization of everyday practice* as also represented in the Table 5.

TABLE 5 Basis of Dividing Small Groups.

Age and Developmental Level	Social Aspect	Organization of Everyday Practice
Age	Peer Relations	Interests of the Child
Developmental Level	Prevention of Conflicts	Situational Aspects
Need for Support	Support of the Group	Making Everyday Practice Easier
	Safe Group	

	Aspirations of Parents	
--	---------------------------	--

The *age and developmental level* includes the aspects of the age of a child, developmental level of the child and the child's need for support. In each interview the age of a child as a factor in dividing the groups came up first and the developmental level or child's need for support was mentioned among all groups interviewed. The educators who were working with children with special needs in their group underlined the need for support as an important aspect to consider while dividing small groups but was mentioned in the conversation among all groups. In teacher 4's comment all three aspects appear and nursery nurse 8 tells about the age as a basis of dividing the groups:

Teacher 4: No siin on se ikä ja kehitystaso ja sitte ne tuentarpeet

Well there's the age and developmental level and then the need for support

Nursery Nurse 8: Meillä on jaettu kolmeen eri ryhmään kun meil on viis-, neljä- ja kolmevuotiaita. Ne on jaettu ikäperusteisesti ne ryhmät.

We have divided the children into three small groups since we have five, four and three year olds. The group are divided by considering the age of a child.

Social aspect contains both the peer relations and peer support in the child group as well as the prevention of conflicts. Every group mentioned either how it is important that every child would find a friend in his or her small group or that there will not be unnecessary conflicts in a small group. A few educators clearly stated that it is important to avoid having two children who do not get along in the same small group. Some of the educators pointed out the importance of creating a safe social environment which supports everyone becoming an equal member of the group. In the next quotation teacher 1 talks about the social aspect; being able to get along with everyone but feeling safe and comfortable in the group.

Teacher 1: Vaikka ajatellaan että pitää oppia olemaan kaikkien kanssa, mutta kyllä se ihan kelle tahansa ihmiselle on tärkeää että on joku sellanen turvallinen, onko se nyt kavveri tai aikuinen nii et on siinä samassa. Kuitenki aika tiiviisti me toimitaan pienryhmissä.

Even though we think that we need to learn how to be with different kind of people (other than only the best friends) it is important for any human being to have someone you feel comfortable and safe with in the same group whether it's a friend or an educator. After all we work big part of the day in the small groups.

In two interviews the educators reported that they had listened to the aspirations of parents. In both cases the parents had asked that a specific child would be in the same small group with their child. The educators did not give an opinion about how they would deal with a situation if a parent requested their child to be in a different small group with another child. One group discussed the possibility of parents' dissatisfaction with their child being in a same small group with another child. They ended up to the solution that they would give the basis they divided the small groups with but they would have to honor the wish of the parents.

The third category, the *organization of everyday practices* includes taking children's interests into account and making everyday practice easier by organizing children that share the same transportation or religion into the same small group as seen in the quotation of nursery nurse 10 below. The educators considered taking children's interest into account mainly an aspect for dividing variable small groups. Organizing the children with the same religion in one small group makes it easier for example to accommodate religious celebrations. The third aspect addressed paying attention to the situational aspects that arise such as negative age behavior or tiredness. The situational aspects came up working with young children, especially under three years old as teacher 3 points out:

Teacher 3: Joskus se väsymyski ja se vireystila on saattaa olla se pienryhmän jakamisen peruste er ku meillä on kuitenkin nää nii pieniä

Sometimes the tiredness and the vitality can be the reason for dividing the small group since the children we have are so young after all

Nursery nurse 10: Tänä vuonna ei vaikuttanu nyt nuo kuljetusoppilaat. Jonaki vuonna on jaettu että ne on ollu kaikki samassa ryhmässä mutta tänä vuonna ei käytetty sitä.

This year the students with transportation was not a factor to consider in our group. Some year we have divided all students with the same transportation into the same small group.

Besides dividing children into the small groups the educators also need to divide into those groups. There was considerable variation in how this was accomplished mainly depending on whether the groups were fixed or variable. In both cases the educational background (teacher/ nursery nurse) was one factor considered. Typically teachers were working in a small group with children with more need for support or with some special needs while nursery nurses were working more with so called less challenging children. Preschool education (for 6 year olds) was also provided by the teachers as seen in the quotation of teacher 1 below. One group gave a different opinion about working with children with special needs pointing out that all adults work equally with all children so that the children will learn that the same rules apply to everyone for all situations no matter which adult is teaching the group.

Teacher 1: Ja meillä on ollu nyt ainaki tänä vuonna oli sillä tavalla että lastentarhanopettajat on niitten eskarilaisten kanssa ja siellä meillä on myös erityislapsia. Ja sitte lastenhoitaja on lähinnä niitten viisvuotiaitten kanssa sitte. Siellä ei oo erityislapsia. Ja sitte minä hypin molemmissa eskariryhmissä koska mulla on se esiopetuspätevyys

At least this year the teachers have been working with the six year olds and we have also children with special needs. And the nursery nurse works mainly with the five year olds. There are no children with special needs among the five year olds. And I am working with both preschool groups (6 year olds) because I'm the only teacher in the group with qualification for preschool education.

Another factor in fixed groups was the familiarity of the educator with the children, in some cases the educator was previously a responsible for a younger children's group the year before. The educator moved to the older children's group with some of the children so the educators considered it natural and beneficial for that educator to continue working in a small group with those same children. Also a specific theme of a small group for example in Theraplay groups was one factor to consider. In the specific groups it is important to have a continuum and in some cases the educator needs to have a certification to use

this method. In the variable small groups educators had either a system of changing groups for example every two weeks or they decided their plan of action during the week.

The core basis for dividing small groups appears mainly similar in both this research and the earlier research. In this thesis all educators mentioned the first theme, age and developmental level of children as one factor to consider while dividing small groups. Sheridan et al. (2014, 388) write that the majority of preschools in their research used age as the main basis for grouping by dividing the youngest in one small groups, the oldest in one small group and the ones in the middle in one small group. This was also typically the first answer in these interviews. Also Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2015, 10) mention age as one basis for grouping.

Developmental level and a child's need for support were also mentioned in every group interview in this thesis as being a factor the grouping is based on. Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 155) point out that the developmental level of the child is the main factor the small groups is based on and Siitonen (2005, 157) underlines the significance of developmental level rather than age since there are differences in how children develop and learn despite their age. Testing and the test results of children can also be one factor in dividing small groups (see Siitonen 2005, 157) but it was not mentioned in the interviews of this thesis.

The second theme of the basis of dividing small groups in this thesis was the social aspect including several subthemes. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2015, 10) mention compatible personalities and creating a safe group for children as aspects to consider while dividing small groups. These two aspects also appeared in the group interviews of this research. Besides the safe groups and peer relations the participants pointed out the importance of support in the small group, in other words peer support. Wasik (2008, 517) underlines the importance of children supporting each other's learning in a small group. The aspirations of parents was a factor which some of the educators in the interviews pointed out as something to consider and also Raittila (2013, 80) has mentioned this as one benefit of the small group approach.

The third theme in this thesis was organization of everyday practice which included taking children's interests into account while grouping children into small groups. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2015, 10) consider children's interests and opportunity to choose the activities as an important factor to recognize. The organizational and spatial factors are also important to take into account (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2015, 10). In my results the educators underlined more the situational aspects as the vitality level of the children to determine how the spaces are used. The organizational factors (see Pramling Samuelsson 2015, 10) play a role in making the everyday practice easier since it has to do with organizing for example the children with same religion into same small group.

6.3 The Significance of the Small Group Approach

Most of the educators had a very positive perspective for the use of the small group approach and they mentioned several benefits on multiple levels. However the pedagogical significance of the small group approach is much more than the benefits and challenges. There are five aspects the participants indicated in their conversations as shown in Figure 1. The five aspects are *Planning and Assessment*, *Organization of Everyday Practice*, *Child-Centered Practice*, *Resources* and *Co-Operation with Parents*. Next in this chapter each of these aspects will be handled individually in their own section after Figure 1. It is important to notice that even though the aspects are in their own sections there are connections between all of them.



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FIGURE 1. Aspects of Pedagogical Significance of Small Group Approach in a Day Care Center.

6.3.1 Planning and Assessment

The first aspect, planning and assessment includes four subthemes which are observation, practices of planning, challenges of planning and working as a team. Each group pointed out that the use of a small group approach in a day care center supports the educators' ability to focus on observation. The educators considered it to be a huge benefit that they felt they were able to observe children playing, learning and interacting as teacher 11 points out:

Teacher 11: Helpompi niitä havainnoida ja huomioida niitä leikkejä ja tekemisiä ja pelaamisia ja muita ku on vähemmän siinä lapsia

It's easier to observe and pay attention to the play and activities when we have less children in one group.

There was quite a lot of conversation about planning and there were different ways to carry it out. Some educators underlined that planning should

be a common continuum while in other cases the teachers did all the planning and nursery nurses implemented the practices that the teachers had planned. As teacher 3 (quotation below) points out the practices of planning may also vary within one day care center. In every group interview the weekly planning meetings of the working teams was considered to be very important for the small group approach. In those weekly meetings the frame for the coming week is planned, variable small groups are divided and ideas are shared. Teacher 1 tells about the weekly meeting in the following set:

Teacher 1: Meillä ainaki se viikkopalaveri joka keskiviikko ja siellä mietitään ne seuraavan viikon toiminta -- toki meillä on niinku eskarit ja viisvuotiaat mutta että samantyyppistä toimintaa. Sitte aina se aikuinen joka on siinä ryhmässä niin yrittää niinku niiden lasten tavoitteita täyttää jotka on siinä omassa pienryhmässä mut että teemat on samat .

At least we have the weekly team meeting every Wednesday. In that meeting we are planning the activities for the coming week - we have both pre-school children and 5-year-olds but they both have somewhat similar activities. The educator in each small group tries to fulfill and include the child-specific goals into the activities while the theme of the activities in each small group is similar.

Teacher 3: Täälläki talossa on erilainen tapat osa lastentarhanopettajat suunnittelee kaiken ja sitte he (kaikki tiimin jäsenet) toteuttaa sen ja osa haluaa että lastenhoitajatki tekee sen

In this day care center there are several ways to do planning. In some groups teachers plan everything and then all educators carry out the activities and in some groups also the nursery nurses take part on planning.

The main challenge in planning and assessment according to the educators was the lack of time for it. Especially nursery nurses expressed much concern that they do not have enough time for planning and also some of the educators mentioned that it is hard to find enough time for planning. There will be more discussion regarding the lack of time in the section about resources. On one hand a nursery nurse mentioned that she felt she did not have the skills for planning the activities as she (nursery nurse 2) said:

Nursery nurse 2: Mäki aika hyvin otan ohjeita vastaan että mä voin toteuttaa jos mulle sillä tavalla annetaan, että niinku ite se oma ideointi on ehkä vähä huonon huononlaista mutta voin yrittää ainaki toteuttaa niitä (suunnitteluja) sitte jos on joku sabluuna annetaan

I'm quite good at taking instructions so that I'm able to carry out the ready planned activity but it's harder to plan the activity by myself but I can try at least if I get an example and advise how to do carry out the planning.

On the other hand in three out of five groups the educators stated that the small group approach supports the teamwork. While using the small group approach every member of the team can share and provide their knowledge, ideas and input. In one conversation it was mentioned that the teamwork has grown stronger with the small group approach and some groups said they feel like equal members in the team despite their educational background. As nursery nurses 11 and 5 sum up:

Nursery nurse 11: Saa niinku siitä omasta ryhmästä sen vastuun että sinä nyt huolehit tästä nyt. Musta se on hyvä et luotetaan myös meidänki ammattitaitoon että kyllä ne ossaa sen vettä

I'll get the response of my own small group, that I'm responsible on this. I think it's good and shows trust also on our (nursery nurses) professional skills, that we are also capable.

Nursery nurse 5: Minusta on älyttömän hyvä että LTO4 ei sanele meille että tehkääpäs nyt lastenhoitajat näin ja näin ku opettaja sanoo vaan myö ollaan niinku kaikki

I consider it excellent that teacher 4 doesn't just tell us what to do because she is the teacher in the group and we are the nursery nurses. We are all

Teacher 4: Tasavertasia

Equal

Nursery nurse 5: Tasavertasia, et myö on saatu tehdä työtä täyspainosesti.

Equal, we have gotten to work full on.

While comparing these results with earlier research on the topic it is important to notice that planning itself is not highlighted in the articles regarding the small group approach. Wasik (2008, 515) states that small groups are sometimes used without careful planning and pedagogical goals but at least within my sample this was not the case. There was variation in how and by whom the planning was carried out but all participants considered planning and assessment to be an important aspect for the small group approach even though some educators experienced uncertainty in their planning skills.

The educators in my sample did not use the word assessment often but the concept was included in their conversation about planning as well as the basis for planning and setting the individual goals for each child. Heikka, Hujala,

Turja and Fonsén (2011, 55) underline the significance of assessment in the continuum of planning and carrying out the pedagogy in small groups. The offset for working with small group approach is in assessment and developing the activities towards children's needs (Heikka et al. 2011, 55.) The educators in this thesis also considered it important to plan the activities for children's needs. They said small groups make it possible to focus on observing the children and planning activities with goals for individual children.

In every discussion it became clear that this is quite a new way of working that has challenged the educators on some level to reorganize their practices and their work. Most of the educators stated that they feel the small group approach has supported their teamwork and they are able to benefit from everyone's knowledge and skills. The commitment and respect between team members increases while using the small group approach (see Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 155) and this was also mentioned several times in the interviews.

Observation and the educator's ability to observe children more efficiently is mentioned as one benefit of the small group approach in the earlier research as well (see Sheridan et al. 2014, 386 and Wasik 2008, 515). In this thesis the educators considered the observation important for planning and developing activities that are more appropriate and suitable for the children. Observation had absolute value meaning and by which I mean that the educators considered observation valuable in and of itself. In one of the day care centers they use observation as a focus theme for the entire semester which may have affected to the special emphasis on observation.

6.3.2 Resources

The second aspect, *resources* created much conversation among the groups with both positive and negative viewpoints. Some educators said they believe the use of the small group approach has made it possible to use the spaces (both indoors and outdoors) more efficiently. One example is when the small groups use the indoor spaces with alternating schedules as one group goes outside first and two groups stay in during this period. Some educators considered it

difficult to divide the spaces among the small groups and they felt they do not have enough indoor spaces.

Another aspect of resources dividing the opinions was the staff resources. A few participants pointed out that staff resources are used more efficiently and the children do not need to for example wait for their turn to talk to the educator as long as in a larger group but mainly the participants said they do not have enough staff resources. In the teams of three adults the person in morning shift gets off around mid-day so in the afternoon there are only two adults which makes it hard to work in small groups. Another point arose especially in the group with young children who need more help with dressing or changing diapers. As teacher 3 sums up the challenge in the afternoon with young children:

Teacher 3: Ja sit ku on kahestaan niin ku on pyllynpesua ja muuta tämmöstä nii se aina sitoo sen toisen nii sitten sit se on niinku iltapäivällä jo oikeestaan iha mahottomuus (toteuttaa pienryhmiä)

And when it's only two adults changing the diaper or something like that ties up one adult so it makes it basically impossible to work in small groups in the afternoons.

As in the quotation above, in other groups the educators said small groups are mainly used in the mornings. Some participants said directly that organized activities and small group approach is used in the mornings until lunch or nap time but in every group it became clear that there were fewer teacher-organized small group activities in the afternoons. Also the existing space and staff resources were considered difficult as pointed out in the following quotation:

Interviewer: millasia haasteita liittyy pienryhmien käyttöön?

What kind of challenges appears while using small groups?

Teacher 5: Saako siinä ihan resurssikysymyksiä sanna?

Can we say resources?

Interviewer: Saa sanoa ihan kaikkea mikä liittyy millään tavalla tähän.

Yeah, anything that has to do with this topic.

Teacher 5: No tilat ja henkilöstö määrä.

Well out spaces and staff determines.

Interviewer: Millä tavalla tilat

esimerkiksi?

Teacher5: No se liittyy siihen henkilöstöönki että meillä on tämä, teijän luokka, salanurkka, mejän luokka, lauluska nii voitaa jakkaa tilojen puitteissa pienempiin ryhmiin mut meil ei oo aikuisia siihen

Could you give me an example of the spaces?

Well it also has to do with the staff. We have this one, the other classroom (and tells the names of 5 different rooms) so we could divide children into smaller groups according to how many rooms we have but we don't have enough educators to be in all of those rooms with the children.

The small groups approach also ties all the adults to working with the children and does not allow for example one adult to take time for planning during the morning. Some educators saw this as a positive aspect but some like nursery nurses 7 and 8 (quotation below) considered it to be a challenge and a factor creating the difficulty for finding time for planning. In every group it was pointed out that the use of the small group approach creates a need to organize the resources carefully.

The nursery nurses especially experienced lack of time for planning while using small groups. The teachers have time for planning since they have the pedagogical responsibility of the group. This planning time for teachers is an obligation and the shifts are organized so that every teacher is allowed the planning time. Some of the nursery nurses felt that to plan and carry out small groups they would also need to have more time for planning as nursery nurses 7 and 8 discuss:

Nursery nurse 7: Koska on kolme ryhmää ja kolme aikuista tekemässä työtä nii myös lastenhoitajille pitäsi olla suunnittelu-aikaa ja siihen ei sitte aina taho löytyä sitä aikaa. Opettajilla on se suunnittelu-aika merkitty tuonne listoihin ja se on aina haaste et missä välissä sinä (lastenhoitaja) suunnittelet ryhmällesi sen jonkun tekemisen että se on vielä se kehittelykohde

7: Because we have three small groups and three educators I think nursery nurses should also have planning time and it appear to be very difficult to find that time. Teachers have their planning time in the shifts and it is a challenge to find time for us (nursery nurses) to plan some sort of activity for our groups. That is definitely something to improve.

Nursery nurse 8: Nii, se ei oo tasavertaista. Toki pedagoginen vastuu on aina sillä opettajalla ja näin pois päin mutta ku kuitenkin ryhmää vedetään yhtä aikaa nii tokihan se ois suotavaa että suunnittelu-aikaa löytäisi sitten niinku lastenhoitajillekin. Ja sitovaahan tämä on, et ennen oltiin aina ulkona

8: Yeah, it's not equal. Of course the teacher has the pedagogical responsibility and so on but since we are anyway also having our small groups there better be time for us nursery nurses to have time for planning. And this also ties us; earlier when the entire group went outdoors at once one educator was

koko porukalla, silloin saattoi yks jähä tekemään sisälle jotaki hommia vaikka mutta nythän sit sen oman porukan kans lähetään ulos ja se sitoo sillä tavalla sitte koko henkilökunnan siihen toimintaan kyllä koko päiväksi mukaan. Että ei jää sitä semmosta aikaa että voit valmistella sit ulkoilun aikana

able to stay in but now you have to go outdoors with your own small group and it ties all educators to be with their own small groups for the entire day. So we don't have time for preparing (the activities) while other are outdoors.

Nursery nurse 7: Nii suunnittelu- ja valmistelu-aika niinku jää hirveen vähäseksi että

7: Yeah, there's not much time at all for planning and preparing

Nursery nurse 8: Se on se haaste tässä

8: And that's the challenge of using small groups.

One interesting point in the conversation of resources dividing opinions was how to organize the everyday practice when one adult is missing from the team. There were three different ways to cope while one adult is missing. The best option which was not always available is to find another adult to take the place of the missing adult. This other adult was either a substitute or an assistant or in some cases a student engaged in the practical training in the group. Most of the educators said other adults are not always available for the group and in that situation they either combine small groups and/ or change the activities for the day.

In every conversation it was said that the goal was always to divide the children somehow such as into two smaller groups instead of three small groups. It was also typical to change the activity into a simpler activity, with the words of nursery nurse 1: "*suunnitelma B otetaan käyttöön*" (*we'll use the plan B*).

There are connections between the earlier findings and the findings of this thesis over the resources. The use of the small group approach makes it possible to take advantage of the space resources according to Raittila (2013, 80), Sheridan et al. (2014, 388) and some of the participants in this thesis. While scheduling for example outdoor activities in small groups rather than in one big group both small groups have more indoor and outdoor spaces in their use and as Raittila (2013, 80) points out the spaces are not as clearly defined for only one

use and one group as they were before using the small groups. On the other hand some of the educators pointed out that they do not have enough (indoor) spaces or staff resources to divide children as they would like.

Sometimes there are not enough resources to carry out small groups. Both Koivisto (2007, 162) and Korkalainen (2009, 136) state that sufficient resources are the lifeline for the use of small groups. Some of the participants pointed out that they would have more rooms to divide the children into smaller groups but they do not have enough educators to be with the smaller groups. Korkalainen (2009, 136) noticed the same fact in her study.

According to some of the educators it is almost impossible to carry out small groups in the afternoons because there are only two educators working. Raittila (2013, 90) underlines that there is variation between groups on whether the small groups are organized only in the mornings or also in the afternoons and Sheridan et al. (2014, 393) say that the small groups organized by the teachers mainly take place before noon and they last between half an hour and two hours. There should be more attention paid to how to organize the small groups also in the afternoons.

The nursery nurses in particular within this study expressed a strong need for finding more time for planning. Korkalainen (2009, 136) has also revealed this fact in the day care center context. In her case the educators considered it important to divide children (with special needs) into smaller groups but at the same time they felt that there is not enough time for planning and organizing the small groups.

It is also a challenge for the small groups when one of the educators is absent. The educators pointed out that if there is no substitute or assistant available the options are to combine the small groups and/ or change the planned activities which affects both the children and educators. This was also noticed in the earlier research. (See Raittila 2013, 83.) Korkalainen (2009, 135) has pointed out in her study that the lack of substitutes available is challenging the daily practices in the day care center.

6.3.3 Organization of Everyday Practice

The third aspect of the pedagogical significance of small group approach is the organization of everyday practice. This aspect includes the factors of a peaceful environment, anticipation and coping and well-being with everyday life in the day care center from both children's and educators' point of view. Peaceful environment was one of the first benefits mentioned in every group. In every interview the participants agreed on the fact that the use of the small group approach has increased the peacefulness for the group in which they worked. The noise level was lower and both children and educators experienced the tranquility in both transitions and during activities which also affects the ability to concentrate. As nursery nurses 8 and 9 say:

Nursery nurse 8: onhan ne levollisempia sillon kun on pienempi porukka nii kyllä sen näkee ihan selkeesti että lapsikin on levollisempi sillon

8: They are more peaceful when we have a smaller group, you can see it clearly how children are more calm.

Nursery nurse 9: Ja keskittyy

9: And they concentrate

Nursery nurse 8: Nii, keskittyy paremmin. Ettei siinä ympärillä ei tapahu koko ajan niin paljon.

8: Yeah, they concentrate better when there's not that much going on around them.

Anticipation was also mentioned in each of the groups in a positive sense. Some participants brought it into the conversation from the children's some the educators' point of view but anticipation was seen as a positive result of the small group approach. While using small groups it is easier for both children and adults to know and anticipate what happens next and as teacher 3 said "*se tuo rakenteen siihen aamupäivään*" (*it creates the structure for the morning*). Two of the educators also underlined that the use of the small group approach has clarified their own job description and they feel they know better their responsibilities.

Coping and well-being with daily life in a day care center has connections to anticipation and peaceful environment. The educators discussed the effects of the small group approach on their own motivation and well-being at work. Most of the educators said the effects are positive for them while they can anticipate the daily practice and work in a more peaceful environment. In three groups the educators mentioned they feel that they are able to be more present for the children and be genuinely available for them which increases their motivation and professional well-being.

Nursery nurse 1: Helpottaa sitä omaa työtä ja sitä työssäjaksamista että ko sie tiät ne siu omat (oman pienryhmän tarpeet ja toiminnot) mitä sie huolehit. Se on niinkö paljo selkeempää

It makes it easier and supports the professional well-being when you know your own responsibilities (of your own small group). Working is clearer.

In some conversations it was even said that while using small groups the work has become more meaningful and as teacher 1 commented the effect of the small group approach to her motivation "*tulee niitä onnistumisia ja pystyy tekemään paremmin työnsä nii sillonhan se työmotivaatioki kasvaa*" (it makes my motivation grow that I'm able to do my job better and succeed). All educators did not have such a positive experience of the small group approach. In two conversations the participants said they feel insufficient in their work mainly. The reason for feeling insufficient was that those educators like teacher 5 in the quotation below wanted to offer the best possible for the children but they felt they did not have enough time for planning and carrying out everything they felt they should.

Teacher 5: On se sillai (vaikuttanut omaan jaksamiseen) että ku niit ei pysty käyttämään. On se mitotus henkilöstön suhteen semmonen ja ei oo aikaa suunnitella taikka valmistella taikka toteuttaa nii on joutunu muuttamaan niitä asenteita ja se muutos on edelleenki käynnissä et se työnteon tapa on hyväksyttävä se et ei voikkaan tehdä niin hyvin kun tietäis että pitäis tehdä. Ei voi tarjota niille lapsille sitä mitä ne tarvii.

Small group approach has affected on my professional well-being because I'm not able to use it. The lack of staff resources and lack of time for planning, preparing and carrying out activities has forced to change my own attitude and the change is still on process. The way of working has changed and I'm not able to do my job as well as I know I should. I'm not able to offer the children everything they need.

There was much discussion about the organization of everyday practices in the group interviews and there is also many mentions about the same topic in the earlier research while discussing the benefit of the small group approach. Both the participants in this thesis and the earlier research point out the connection between the peaceful environment or anticipation and the use of small groups and that the use of the small groups has increased the peacefulness of the environment and the anticipation. (see Kivijärvi & Ahlqvist 2005, 155; Koivisto et al. 2005, 150; Wasik 2008, 520) On the other hand the use of small groups also requires the groups to remain on a more accurate schedule (Raittila 2013, 83). In one of the interviews the educators pointed this same fact out stating that they feel pressure to stay in the schedule so that the daily practices of the entire day care center would work as planned.

Some of the educators mentioned that they can be more present and available for the children which increases the motivation to work. The increase in the interaction between educator and the child or educator's availability to the child while using small groups is also seen in the earlier research (see Bowman et al. 2001, 7, De Schipper et al. 2006, 871 & Munton et al. 2002, 59). This thesis also revealed another side of the phenomenon when some of the educators mentioned they feel insufficient. These educators pointed out that they are very aware of what they should do and how the goals and methods should be organized but they feel like they simply do not have enough resources to do as they would like.

Most of the participants said that their motivation has increased and the work feels more meaningful while using small groups. This finding is in line with Kivijärvi's and Ahlqvist's (2005, 151–152) thoughts as they point out that the small group approach has had a positive effect on the professional growth of the staff.

6.3.4 Child-Centered Practice

The fourth aspect is the *child-centered practice* was one of the largest factors in the pedagogical significance of the small group approach. All of the subthemes, individual attention, child-specific goals, agency and peer support were seen in a very positive light and all were considered benefits of using the small group approach. Every educator mentioned one way or another that while using small groups they are able to provide more individual attention for each child in their small group as teacher 3 states: "*koen myös tärkeenä opettajan näkökulmasta että mä pystyn yksilöllisempää aikaa antamaan niille lapsille*" (on teacher's point of view I consider it very important that I' able to give individual attention to the children). Individual attention was closely connected with the ability to observe but the comments for individual attention included the idea that the child is also an active being. The educators said that at the same time they are able to give the attention and the children can seek attention without the need to wait for a long time.

The subtheme, child-specific goals is more than giving the attention to the children. The participants found it easier to apply the child-specific goals to the everyday practice and activities while working with small groups as they are required according to the national curriculum guidelines for early childhood education. As both teacher 1 and teacher 4 say in their own groups:

Teacher 1: ko on pieniä ryhmiä nii pystytään niissä tuomaan niitä tavoitteita sinne lapsen arkeen ja niihin leikkeihin

When we have small groups we are able to bring the (individual) goals into the everyday practice and into their play

Teacher 4: Et me pystytään suoraan vastaamaan siihen mihinkä se lapsi tarvitsee sitä tukee, silloin kun se on se pienryhmätoiminta ja siinä on taivas rajana sit sen millä tavalla se tehdään mutta se että se on semmonen mikä tässä ryhmässä korostuu moneen muuhun ryhmärakenteeseen nähen

We are able to answer to the needs of each child while we are using the small group approach. The sky is the limit how we carry it out but I think the small group approach is the best groups structure for that

Children's agency and hearing children's opinions was one important benefit of the small group approach. The small group approach offered the educators an opportunity to get the ideas from the children and allow them participate as active individuals. The educators mentioned the importance of a small group especially for shy and quiet children. They said all children have an equal opportunity to express themselves in a small group setting. The agency was also in connection with the peer support. The participants mentioned that the small groups have deepened the togetherness and tolerance within the group and increased the peer support as teacher 6 says about tolerance:

Teacher 6: Kyllä ne lapsetki tutustuu sitte semmosissa tilanteissa (pienryhmissä) tietyllä tavalla ja oppii suvaitsemaan ja ymmärtämään toisen näkökulman

The children get familiar with each other in small groups and they learn to be tolerant and to understand the other person's point of view.

A child-centered approach appears both in the findings of this thesis and the earlier research on the topic. Giving more individual attention to the children is considered a benefit of the small group approach (see Fiene 2002; De Schipper et al. 2006, 871; Litjens & Taguma 2010, 43). All participants in this thesis mentioned this as well. Individual attention was considered important both itself and as a starting point for pedagogical action in the group. The educators' comments regarding a large group included the idea that children are more part of a group rather than individuals as in a small group the adults are able to pay attention to the individual children.

Giving individual attention has also seen beneficial for the child's self-esteem. (Koivisto 2007, 150.) In the study of Koivisto (2007, 158) the educators who paid more attention to supporting children's self-esteem started to use small groups to offer children more individual attention. The participants in this thesis underlined the importance of small groups for shy children and children with need for support.

Child-specific goals are based upon giving individual attention but it is more goal orientated. The educators said the use of the small groups gives them an opportunity to include the child-specific goals into the everyday practice and this is also seen in the work of both Asplund Carlsson et al. (2001, 60–61) and Bowman et al. (2001, 7). In this thesis the participants pointed out that the activities and the everyday organization is planned by taking into consideration the needs and the interests of the children so that the children can learn at the optimal level receiving peer support in their small group. In this thesis the peer support was seen important for children and comes alive especially in the small group settings. Siitonen (2005, 159) also underlines the peer support as an important factor within the small groups.

The agency was mentioned in each interview and it was seen as an important factor in the small group approach as well as being very beneficial especially for the quiet and shy children. Several articles point out that children tend to participate and be more active in a smaller group setting (see Fiene 2002; Hujala et al. 2007, 159; De Schipper et al. 2006, 33; Litjens et al. 2012, 33). Sheridan et al. (2014, 386) writes that in a smaller group it is possible for the educator to listen and pay attention to children's ideas and opinions. Also in this thesis the educators underlined that they are able to receive ideas directly from children in a small group setting.

6.3.5 Co-Operation with Parents

The fifth and last aspect is the *co-operation with parents*. In every conversation the educators underlined the fact that they co-operate with all parents, not only with the ones whose children are in their small group. The educators considered it very important that the parents know that they can talk to all educators. Some of the participants said they had not noticed any difference in the co-operation with the parents while using the small group approach. This experience was mainly in the groups where they had not used the small group approach for a long time and the small groups were variable. As nursery nurse 8 states:

Nursery nurse 8: Minusta tuntuu et se on niinku sillä tasolla kuitenkin tää työskentely tässä näissä pienryhmissä et ei vanhemmilla välttämättä oo sitä tietoo kuka sitä heidän lapsensa pienryhmää vetää (ryhmässä käytössä vaihtuvat pienryhmät)

I think the use of small group approach is on the level that parents don't necessarily know who's been teaching their child's small group. (this particular group uses variable small groups)

On the other side most of the educators said that their relationship with the parents has grown and while they became closer with the child in the small group they also get closer to the entire family. Some of the educators felt that the trust in the co-operation has strengthened as teacher 2 said: "*Nii seki niinku luo semmosta luottamusta vanhemman kans että ne tietää et sie tunnet niitten lapset*" (*Well it also strengthens the trust that the parents know that you know their children well*). Nursery nurse 4 mentions the closer co-operation and common view of the child with parents while having small groups:

Nursery nurse 4: Ku pienryhmissä toimitaa nii oppii lapsista huomaamaan semmosia asioita mitä pystyy vanhemmille välittämään. Ja sit vanhemmat kertovat meille omasta lapsesta nii huomataan siinä pienryhmässä että niinhän tämä, tällä lapsella onki tämmösiä taitoja tai taipumuksia, hän on luonteeltaan tämmönen.

When we work with small group approach we learn to notice things about children we can also tell to the parents about. And when the parents tell us about their child, in the small group we can notice and verify the same skills, tendencies and characteristics.

Raittila (2013, 81) says it might create challenges for the co-operation since the educators are mainly working in the mornings and the educator from the child's small group may not see the parents of the child for several days in the afternoons when the parents come to pick up their child. Knowing this fact it makes more sense that all the participants in this thesis underlined that the co-operation happens with all the parents and they want all the parents to feel free to talk to any of the educators.

On the other hand Kivijärvi and Ahlqvist (2005, 155) write that the small group approach has caused the relationship with the child to become closer and more meaningful which also affects the relationship with the family. Some of

the participants in this thesis experienced that the co-operation with the parents has become closer since their relationship with the child is closer and also the parents realize this. Some of the participants stated that the use of a small group approach has not affected the co-operation with the parents. It would be interesting to investigate the situation from the parent's point of view if they have experienced any changes in the co-operation while using small groups.

7 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will consider the results of this thesis. In the earlier chapter I compared my findings to the findings of earlier research but in this chapter the discussion goes deeper into the phenomenon and consideration of the significance of these findings regarding the field of early childhood education. The first section contains this discussion and the other section explores the trustworthiness of this thesis and proposes the themes for further studies.

7.1 No Return to "the Old Way of Working"

The goal of this thesis was to clarify the educators' view of the use of the small group approach in a day care center. The results revealed that there are several ways to define a small group among the educators either by a certain number of children or by dividing a large group into smaller groups. The basis of dividing the small groups also varied. The three main themes for the basis of dividing the small groups were age and developmental level, social aspect and the organization of everyday practice. The pedagogical significance of the small group approach generated a lot of discussion in the groups and the main themes of it were planning and assessment, resources, organization of everyday practices, child-centered practice and co-operation with parents.

The results reveal that there is variation in the views of the educators in the field of early childhood education to define a small group and also the basis of dividing those vary so it would be beneficial to have more established models for the use of the small groups approach. All educators interviewed for this thesis stated that it has been challenging to put the small groups into operation in their group. The change is always challenging to the team and the individual and it takes time (see Nummenmaa, Karila, Joensuu & Rönholm 2007, 42). I believe it would make it easier and more accessible if the educators had more clearly defined, substantial models to start working with. All children and all educators are different so it is not possible to reproduce the practices

directly but the availability of more information and knowledge regarding the use of the small group approach will make it more accessible.

The field of early childhood education in Finland is so wide that no one can describe all different ways to organize the groups or the practices but it is important for the pedagogical development of the practices to have the information available and easy to attain. The kindergarten teacher has the pedagogical responsibility of the group but carrying out new practices such as using small groups requires the commitment of all educators in the group. The knowledge of the new practice and how it will improve the educational environment for both children and educators makes it easier to commit to implementation of this model so the research is needed. The pedagogical basis and significance is vital to define so that the use of the small group approach is justified and not used because it makes it more peaceful or easier to the educators.

This thesis demonstrates that the use of the small group approach has multiple aspects from planning and resources to child-centered practice as well as co-operation with parents in addition to the organization of everyday practice. These aspects appeared in the earlier research one way or the other but the emphasis was different. Next I will focus on the most interesting findings that stand out and require more discussion.

One of the first aspects mentioned as basis on dividing the small groups was the developmental level of the child as found also in the earlier research (see chapter 3.2). This is understandable and it makes sense to divide the children into the groups according to their skills but we also need to see the bigger picture. If the children are always in the groups divided by their skills it easily becomes a spiral making the early childhood education unequal.

If we start dividing the children into "the skilled ones" and "the less skilled ones" already in the early childhood education the gap will most likely only grow and the same children will become "the skilled pupils and students" and later on the most successful employees. This might sound exaggerating but if we do not pay attention to the equality of our early childhood education system

this can be the worst result. We need to offer each child equal opportunities and one solution might be to use both homogenous and heterogeneous small groups.

In this thesis it became clear that time for planning is another complex issue which needs more attention paid on. There are multiple practices to carry out the process of planning which is the base of high quality early childhood education. The nursery nurses especially experienced lack of time for planning and some even considered it unfair that the teachers have their planning time while they do not. The everyday practice in the day care center is busy and as the educators expressed to me it is hard to find time for planning and preparing the activities. It is important to separate the concepts of the pedagogical planning and preparing the activities. As one kindergarten teacher stated it should be noticed that the kindergarten teachers do not use their planning time for planning and preparing the single activities they carry out in the small groups.

The planning time is primarily used for planning the pedagogical solutions to carry out the everyday practices such as how to create the learning environment to meet the children's needs or how to support the agency for all the children. Since some small group are under the response of a nursery nurse who has not obtained education for pedagogical planning it is important to make sure that all children will receive the pedagogically planned early childhood education. It would be vital for the working team to discuss the pedagogical planning and preparing the activities and also to clarify what is included in everyone's duties. The conversation about the pedagogical planning is also vital on a wider scale than in the working team. A more specific and detailed definition for pedagogical planning in early childhood education is needed.

It was also interesting that the educators underlined that the parents should be able to speak with any educator in the group but at the same time they said they are in their own small groups during the mornings and each small group has their own activities with the goals appropriate for the children

in that small group. The dilemma, at least in my mind, points to the question of how well the educators are able to tell about the day of a child who they have not spent time with and who is not in their own small group. This requires sharing the knowledge among the educators throughout the day.

Another point to consider is in regard to working in the small groups mainly in the mornings. Some participants mentioned it is impossible to work in the small groups during the afternoons and all groups used teacher-organized small groups in the mornings but not in the afternoons after the lunch. It is interesting to notice that all educators mentioned that they use small groups but in the conversation it was indirectly said that the daily time spent in the small groups is actually not long.

The time in the small groups is in some cases only the time of the daily activity in the morning before going outdoors so it can be as short as an hour. In case a child spends seven hours in a day care center the time in the small group is actually just a very small part of his entire day. One could question if it is justified to say that the day care center uses small groups if the time in the small groups is actually about an hour per day. This is not always the case and it is important to keep in mind that there is a wide variation in the use small groups.

The results also showed that one missing educator challenges the use of the small groups at least as they are normally used. They educators pointed out that they may reorganize the small groups if they lack one educator or even if they have a substitute. One group expressed and also my experience tells that it is quite often that one educator is missing for one reason or another so it would be important to think about the situation from child's point of view. In the worst case (for example during the flu season) there may be several weeks when all educators are not present. One of the benefits of the small group approach is that the child knows well the educator and the other children in his or her own small group and it is easier for the shy children to express themselves in a familiar group.

It is understandable that the educators may reorganize the groups for example to make "an easy group" to the substituting educator but from

children's point of view it is one more change. The routines and structure create a safe environment to the child and unnecessary changes should be avoided. To a shy and reserved child especially it might be very stressful to be in an unfamiliar small group with an unknown educator. Even though it might be challenging to the substituting educator it would be more beneficial to the children to use the familiar small groups always when possible.

The educators in this thesis also mentioned the effects on professional well-being and coping with the everyday practice in the day care center. Some participants felt insufficient not being able to use small groups as effectively as they would like to but most of the participants expressed that they feel more motivated and engaged with their job while using small groups. This is an important finding for the field of early childhood education and one might speculate that the use of the small group approach could lead to higher job satisfaction among early childhood educators. The job satisfaction in the field of early childhood education has been in the public conversation lately and a trade paper to the kindergarten teachers, *Lastentarha* has published several articles discussing a trend that newly graduated kindergarten teachers tend to change their profession after the first couple of years in Finland.

To avoid the lack of qualified kindergarten teachers we should ensure that the work in the day care center is motivational and provides the teachers and educators with sufficient conditions. Most of the participants mentioned working closely with the teams, anticipation and peacefulness of the environment and authentic presence with the children as aspect that increased their motivation and professional well-being. These things will most likely occur as a result of using the small groups at least according to the educators in this thesis.

This thesis revealed that a group interview is a good way to gather information about the topic from an educators' point of view while giving them an opportunity to share their knowledge and reflect on their work. At the same time the group interview created the challenge that some participants may have answered differently because of the presence of other participants. In retrospect,

it might be better to combine the aspect of participating as a group and as an individual. Both individual and group interview might not be motivating for the participant but a short questionnaire or a writing task before the group interview would reveal better the individual voices and the group interview would give the opportunity to share and enrich the views.

This thesis has produced new knowledge of the small groups approach and one important message to the field of early childhood education is that the small group approach, as any new practice, is a complex issue which needs to be discussed. All educators must be committed to the common practice and there are several issues that can be understood differently and practices such as planning that might need to be reorganized. Conclusively said it is important to discuss about the common ways of working, make clear to all educators what is on their response and to keep the open, reflective conversation on in the working team all the time.

Both Koivisto et al. (2005, 148) and Mikkola and Nevalainen (2009, 33) state that the experiences of the educators using the small group approach have mainly been very positive even though there have been some challenges. The main result of my thesis was very similar and all the participants in this thesis were generally satisfied with the small group approach even though they also had some criticism about the phenomenon. After the critique and challenges the educators pointed out all groups underlined in the end of the interview how they would not go back to the "old way of working" without the small groups.

7.2 Trustworthiness of this Thesis

Guba and Lincoln (1985) have defined four major criteria to evaluate the trustworthiness of a research with qualitative approach which are still accurate (see Tauriainen 2000, 113). These four criteria are *truth value*, *applicability*, *consistency* and *neutrality* (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 290) and next I will disclose more about each of the criteria and how it applies in this thesis.

The first criteria of trustworthiness, truth value or by another name credibility refers to the similarity of understanding about the phenomenon by the informants and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 296; Tauriainen 2000, 114). To improve the similar view of the phenomenon during the interview I asked more details and made sure I understood correctly by repeating some of the main ideas for the answers. The knowledge and familiarization of the context and the culture also enhances the credibility of the research (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 301–302; Patton 2002, 546). I am a kindergarten teacher and I have worked as a substitute in other day care centers so I am familiar with the basic structure of everyday practices in a day care center. In one of the day care centers I only visited in order to conduct the interviews. I spent more time between the interviews in the second day care center (one was organized in the morning and the other one in the afternoon) so I was more familiar with this day care center and its culture.

Guba and Lincoln (1985, 303) also point out that credibility may be enhanced by building trust which is a developmental process. The participants need to trust that the information they give will not be used against them, there are no hidden agendas and that their anonymity will be protected (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 303). Because of my time resources for this thesis I was not able to spend much time with the participants building trust over time but before every interview I told them the purpose of the research and explained that the data would be handled with confidence. I also underlines that I am interested to hear their opinions and that there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions.

It is also recommended to use member checking to improve the credibility of the research. Member checking means that the analysis and the conclusions made by the researcher are in line with the participants' view, so in other words the participants have an opportunity to check the categories and conclusions to say if researcher has managed to find their point of view. (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 314; Patton 2002, 560.) I decided not to use member checking for two reasons. First reason is that while working as a substitute teacher I know how busy the everyday life in a day care center is so I felt that I did not want to obligate the participants after more than half a year to continue participating in my research. The second reason not to use member checking was that in the interviews some of the educators mentioned they would not be working in the same day care center or even in the same city next fall (when my thesis is ready) so it would have been very difficult to reach all participants.

The second criteria of trustworthiness is applicability or transferability which refers to the possibility of transferring the findings from one context into another. The main goal of qualitative research is not to make generalizations but the data collection, participants, context and process of analysis should be described in detail. The point is that the report of the research has a dense description with such details that it is possible for another researcher to copy the same settings into another context (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 297–298, 316; Tauriainen 2000, 115.) I paid attention in describing the settings and process of this research carefully giving enough information that it would be possible to transfer it to another context.

The third criteria of trustworthiness, consistence or dependability involves paying attention to and evaluating the unseen factors such as the interaction between and among informants and the researcher, the context and the methods (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 299; Tauriainen 2000, 116). I was unfamiliar with all of the participants but I had contacted them before the actual interview and disclosed the themes of the interview. I also gave the participants the opportunity to decide the venue of the interview in the day care center. Dependability may be enhanced by overlapping methods, step-by-step

replication and audit (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 317). I carried out this research myself as a single researcher but throughout the process I consulted other students who were also working on their master's thesis as well as our professor to obtain second opinions.

The fourth and final criteria of trustworthiness is neutrality of confirmability. In qualitative research the background of the researcher affects the interpretations which is why it is important that the data be authentic and the reporting be truthful. To confirm the interpretations the researcher should reveal his or her offset as a researcher. (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 300; Tauriainen 2000, 117.) I paid a special attention to handling the data truthfully and I considered it important to add both the authentic and translated quotations to the final report. The detailed description of the process and methods of the analysis improves also the confirmability of the research (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 318–320; Tauriainen 2000, 117).

Patton (2002, 566) points out that the researcher is one vital factor influencing the credibility of the research since he or she is one instrument in the process. The researcher should reveal and report all information that has possibly affected the process of the research such as the data collection or analysis. The previous experience of researcher in conducting research affects the credibility. (Patton 2002, 566–567.) Prior to this research I have conducted another qualitative research for my Bachelor's thesis so I do not have extensive research experience. Knowing this I considered it important to keep a research diary during the entire process and to consult both my colleagues and my professor while needed.

Another technique to improve the trustworthiness of research (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) is to use reflexive journal. It is a researcher's own tool used to write about both self and method. (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 327.) I used a reflexive journal to gather my thoughts and considerations during the entire research process. The journal helped me to evaluate my role as a researcher in this research. I also noted interesting themes for further studies in my journal that I will represent in the next chapter.

7.3 Themes for Further Studies

There is not a great deal of research of this topic at this time, but one interesting and important viewpoint would be the research from the children's point of view. Almost all the participants mentioned the small groups to be beneficial for children but it would be interesting to carry out a research project to examine how children feel about the small group approach and to discover for example what aspects of this educational model they appreciate.

Children's agency is a hot topic in the field of early childhood education. Combining children's agency and the small group approach would be another interesting topic to explore. One such experimental topic would be a research project in which the children themselves would have an opportunity to create the small groups with the help of an educator.

The sample in this thesis was small since my approach was qualitative. It would contribute more knowledge of the phenomenon to conduct research using quantitative settings. With larger sample and quantitative approach we would obtain wider and more extensive knowledge of the use of the small group approach.

I have gained a huge amount of knowledge during this project and I have learned a lot of the practices of early childhood education and the small group approach especially. As discussed earlier the variation in both the definition and basis for dividing the small group is considerable and there are both benefits and challenges with this approach on multiple level. The small group approach may be a solution in the growing strain for the high-quality early childhood education in the day care centers while committed to it as a team.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1. License Application for the Research

TUTKIMUSLUPAHAKEMUS

Olen Saana Lonka ja opiskelen Jyväskylän yliopistolla varhaiskasvatuksen maisterivaiheen opintoja. Haen tutkimuslupaa opintoihini liittyvän pro gradu - tutkielman tekemiseksi. Teemme yhdessä ohjaajani Raija Raittilan kanssa tutkimusta päiväkotien pienryhmätyöskentelystä. Olemme jo keränneet kyselylomakeaineistoa eräästä toisesta kaupungista ja haluaisimme syventää kyselyaineiston tekemällä ryhmähaastatteluja päiväkodin kasvatusvastuullisille aikuisille.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää päiväkotien pienryhmätoiminnan käytäntöjä kasvattajien näkökulmasta. Tarkoitukseni on järjestää ryhmähaastatteluja (4kpl) kasvatusvastuullisille aikuisille kevään 2016 aikana. Haastattelut tehdään päiväkodilla haastateltavien työaikana. Olen ollut jo yhteydessä XX päiväkodinjohtajaan XX, joka on ilmaissut kiinnostuksensa tutkimukseen osallistumisesta päiväkotihenkilökunnan kanssa. Tutkielman on tarkoitus valmistua joulukuuhun 2016 mennessä. Tarkemmat tiedot tutkimuskysymyksistä sekä tavoitteista ja toteutuksesta löytyvät tutkimussuunnitelmastani, joka on liitteenä.

Tutkijana sitoudun noudattamaan hyviä tutkimuseettisiä periaatteita ja aineisto tulee vain minun sekä ohjaajani käyttöön. Haastatteluun osallistuminen on kasvattajille täysin vapaaehtoista. Käsittelem aineistoa luottamuksellisesti ja anonyymisti. Raportoidessani en käytä tutkittavien nimiä enkä mainitse nimeltä päiväkoteja tai kuntaa, jossa aineisto on kerätty.

Ryhmähaastatteluun osallistuminen tarjoaa haastateltaville foorumin reflektoida omaa työskentelyään sekä jakaa ja saada toisilta ideoita pienryhmätoiminnan käyttöön ja kehittämiseen omassa ryhmässä.

Annan mieluusti lisätietoja pro gradu -tutkielmaani liittyen!

Ystävällisin terveisin

Saana Lonka

Raija Raittila

Tutkielman ohjaaja