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Values of wellbeing and togetherness in the early childhood education of younger children

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This chapter is based on a small-scale study that formed part of a broader research project on the emotional wellbeing of the younger children in day-care centres in Finland¹. However, instead of focusing on wellbeing per se, it deals with *the value of wellbeing*, inspired by Nordic studies on values education in early childhood education settings (e.g., Johansson, Puroila, & Emilson, 2016; Puroila et al, 2016). Here, the value of wellbeing is discussed in a group context, that is, it refers to children and their activities in situations in which an educator is either merely present or more actively involved. Thus, the value of wellbeing is linked to social relationships and *the value of togetherness*, conceived as an expression of wellbeing, or even as a value of its own. This chapter asks: In what ways and in what situations are the values of wellbeing and togetherness expressed among the younger children in day-care groups? How do the educators communicate these values to the children?

The data were collected in two groups of one- to three-year-old children in Finland. One group comprised 12 children and three educators, while the other was a sub-group of eight children and two educators drawn from a larger mixed-age group. Methodologically, the study utilized several ethnographic data collection methods, but chiefly observations, both with and without video recordings. The data, collected over four months, amounted to 37 hours of documented observations and video-recordings. The observations covered different situations during the day, but mainly they were child-initiated activities, such as free play and exploration and educator-led small gatherings, such as moments for music and movement. The observations were studied using qualitative content analysis.

¹ Hännikäinen Maritta “Emotional wellbeing of the younger children in day-care groups: participation, social relationships and teachers’ role in joint activities” (SA no 136200).

The excerpts from the observations presented in this chapter are taken from both groups; they are not intended as generalizable, but serve as illustrative examples of values education in different situations. The original spoken language, Finnish, has been translated into English as accurately as possible, although the language used by the children has been rendered in a more standardized form. The names of the children and educators have been changed, and the Finnish pseudonyms originally given to the children have been replaced by international names to make it easier for the reader to identify the participants in the data excerpts and commentaries. The standard ethical principles and guidelines respecting good scientific practice (e.g., in addition to the preservation of anonymity, confidentiality, respect, and not harming the participants) have been followed throughout the project. An informed consent was given by the day-care personnel and parents; written assent could not be given by the children, owing to their very young age.

Wellbeing and togetherness as values

A conscious decision was made regarding the study presented in this chapter: to understand wellbeing and togetherness in early childhood education as two interlinked values that “serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other entity” (see the definition and description of values by Schwartz, 1994, p. 21). In this section, the reasons for this decision are given, and the conceptual framework of the study is described first, after which attention is turned to togetherness as a concept and value.

In many countries, rather than labeling *wellbeing* explicitly *as a value*, it is presented as a goal or a target of education in policy documents guiding early childhood education (see also Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2012; Pinazza, 2012). This is also the case in Finland. For instance, the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2004, p. 15) states that “the principal target of early childhood education and care is to promote the child’s overall wellbeing so as to ensure the best possible conditions for growth, learning and development. In this way, the child is able to enjoy the company of other children and educators, and experience joy and freedom in an unhurried, safe atmosphere”. In fact, the document mentions only two values by name. The first occurs in the context of children’s rights: “The values underlying ECEC in Finland are based on international conventions on the rights of the child, national legislation, and other guidelines. A central

value in the Convention on the Rights of the Child is *the child's human dignity*" (p.13). The second occurs in the context of when referring to the educational goals: "...it is important to underline *the intrinsic value of childhood*, to foster childhood, and to help the child develop as a human being". The document also details as an important educational goal (p. 14) the "*promotion of personal well-being* [of the child]".

Wellbeing is also raised as a topic in the national legislation on early childhood education in Finland, although not specifically with regard to values education. The recent amendments to the 1973 legislation on children's day-care, contained in the Early Childhood Education Act (Varhaiskasvatuslaki, 1973/2015) lays down ten aims for early childhood education, two of which explicitly concern wellbeing: 1) "to promote every child's growth, development, health and wellbeing in a holistic way, based on his or her age and development", and 2) "to work together with the child and his or her parent or guardian to ensure the child's balanced development and holistic wellbeing and to support the parent or other guardian in bringing up the child".

The new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (Varhaiskasvatusuunnitelman perusteet, 2016) will come into force in August 2017. Based on the aims presented in the Early Childhood Education Act of 2015 (see above), the core curriculum lists six basic values pertaining to early childhood education: 1) childhood as an absolute value; 2) the child's growth as a human; 3) the rights of the child, such as the right to express thoughts and opinions, the right to good education and care, and the right to play, communality and a sense of belonging to the group; 4) equality and diversity; 5) a professional, open and respectful attitude to the diversity of families; and 6) a healthy and sustainable way of living. None of these values refers explicitly to wellbeing. However, the word wellbeing is subsequently mentioned 45 times in the document, for instance in connection with daily schedules, different activities and skills, and co-operation with parents, and always with the aim of promoting children's wellbeing. Hence, it can be assumed that wellbeing is also a value in Finnish early childhood education in the sense of something that is "important to us in life" (Schwartz, 2012) – in this instance important to children in their lives.

The concept of wellbeing is often linked to the concepts of quality of life, a good life, and happiness, which concern ethical values, and to those of health and a good standard of living

(Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011; see also Hännikäinen, de Jong, & Rubinstein Reich, 1997). On a dictionary definition, wellbeing is “a feeling of being comfortable, healthy and happy” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003, p. 1874), and thus refers to the personal wellbeing of the individual. In community psychology, in turn, wellbeing has been defined as “a positive state of affairs, brought about by the satisfaction of personal, relational and collective needs” (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010, p. 61). Consequently, in discussing wellbeing as a value, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) refer to overall, holistic wellbeing, which thus comprises values for personal, relational and collective wellbeing.

In the literature, it is common to classify wellbeing into different domains, under such labels as economic, physical, social, cognitive and psychological or emotional (e.g., Bradford, 2012). In this study, the value of wellbeing refers mainly to emotional wellbeing in the day-care centre at the personal, relational and collective levels. At the personal level of wellbeing, the child would experience that he or she is protected, loved and respected, understood, accepted and connected to other people (Lillemyr, 2009; Thyssen, 1995; UNICEF, 2007). At the relational level, wellbeing is an interpersonal experience (Hännikäinen, 2015), referring, for instance, to the concerns and care directed by the child to securing the wellbeing of others (Emilsson & Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), while at the same time it refers to the child in turn being cared for by others. In this study, wellbeing at the collective level denotes the wellbeing of the day-care group as an educational community. However, in practice, these three levels of the value of wellbeing are intertwined and hard to differentiate (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), although in specific situations one of them may be more visible or dominant than the others.

In early childhood education, in both research and practice, the concepts of wellbeing and emotional wellbeing are often used as substitutes for each other, and, instead of being theoretically defined, described based on interpretations of children’s behaviour. According to Laevers (2005), a child who feels emotionally well, gives a relaxed impression, looks self-confident, is vital and energetic, seems to be in touch with his or her emotions and open to the world. The most obvious sign of wellbeing is enjoyment in the activity the child is engaged in, whether alone or together with others. More specifically, earlier studies (e.g., Hännikäinen, 2015; Løkken, 2000; for wellbeing and involvement, see Laevers, 2005) have demonstrated that young children manifest their wellbeing by, for instance, fascination, enthusiasm,

excitement, concentration and perseverance in their actions, and by nonverbal expressions, such as laughter and smiling.

But for children to experience wellbeing, a joyful, supportive and warm atmosphere is of great importance, as shown by several studies (Ahnert, Piquart, & Lamb, 2006; Dalli et al., 2011; Fugelsnes, Røthle, & Johansson, 2013; Hännikäinen, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Skidmore, 2006). Although all the members of a group contribute to its atmosphere, in early childhood education the educator's role is decisive. An atmosphere that is joyful, supportive and warm not only promotes children's wellbeing in general, but is also central for *togetherness* in the group.

Like the concept of wellbeing, there is neither a precise definition nor operationalization of the concept of togetherness. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003, p. 1747) defines togetherness as "the pleasant feeling you have when you are part of a group of people who have a close relationship with each other". Thus, togetherness is associated with positive social relationships. It stands for affiliation, a sense of group attachment, 'we-ness', and shared identity.

Togetherness can be a temporary feeling in a specific situation or a long-lasting bond. From the viewpoint of the individual, togetherness is linked to affect, to a feeling of belonging to a group (Hännikäinen, 1998). From the interpersonal viewpoint, togetherness might be understood as a feeling that people create together, perhaps again and again, when engaged in shared activity (Hännikäinen & van Oers, 2002; van Oers & Hännikäinen, 2001).

Togetherness is sometimes a feeling of closeness that two persons share, like friendship, although the concept is often used in the context of a community, where it resembles sense of community (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017), and thus reflects the value attributed to community (cf. Fugelsnes et al., 2013; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). Togetherness can also be understood as a value in its own right, i.e. *the value of togetherness* (Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), as in the study discussed here.

As a matter of fact, the word 'togetherness' is not mentioned in the policy documents guiding early childhood education in Finland. Instead, the new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet, 2016) speaks about doing things together as a community or in a community (the word 'together' is mentioned 32

times in total, and the words ‘community’ or ‘communality’ 55 times). The core curriculum states, for instance, that “The peer group and experiencing belongingness to the community are crucial for children’s learning and participation”; “Acting together and experiences of participation strengthen the community”; “The community encourages the children to engage in positive interaction and to act as a member of the group. The staff in turn support the development of children’s peer relationships and cherish children’s friendships”; and “Communality grows through play and strengthens a positive emotional climate”. Statements like these might suggest that the value of togetherness is also assumed to guide the work of educators in Finnish early childhood education.

A tour from theory to praxis

In this section, we turn our attention away from definitions, earlier research and policy documents to the daily life of the one- to three-year-old children and their educators in the day-care groups that participated in this study. Analyzing and examining the role of the educators in communicating the values of wellbeing and togetherness to the children, and the manifestations of these values in the children’s activities and interaction will be considered in tandem. At the same time, to build a more comprehensive picture of the values of wellbeing and togetherness, their links to the values identified in previous Nordic studies on values education, such as the values of caring, democracy, social competence and respect (e.g., Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Fugelsnes et al., 2013; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Puroila et al., 2016) will also be discussed. The analysis is accompanied by examples taken from the observations, presenting typical situations in both day-care groups.

The values of wellbeing and togetherness were identified in interactions between educators and children in both day-care groups. These values were often communicated in situations in which two or three children were playing together, the educator either being with the children or in close proximity to them, but also in situations in which all the children were present.

In their joint activities, the children’s wellbeing was manifested by enthusiasm, excitement and concentration on their actions, and by nonverbal expressions, such as laughter and smiling. The children’s expressions of wellbeing were also observed in their relationships with educators. They looked happy and content when the educator was close by, listening to

and talking with them, playing and larking about with them. The educators displayed a caring attitude to the children by touching them warmly, caressing, kissing, hugging and embracing them. This attitude and behaviour of the educators is exemplified in the following extracts from the day-care data, drawn from both self-initiated and free activities by the children and from gatherings organized and led by educators.

Example 1. Clash during play with building blocks

In the first example, Sofia (1;3) and Victor (2;3) are sitting side by side on the floor and playing with building blocks. Hanna, the educator, is nearby with some other children, but at the same time she is attending to what is happening around her. Victor is building a tower, and Sofia is trying to do the same.

Suddenly Sofia snatches a building block from Victor's side.

Victor, annoyed: "Give it back, give it back!"

Sofia drops the block on the floor and looks surprised.

HANNA in a friendly voice: "You know Victor, don't you, that Sofia doesn't mean any harm, but she doesn't know what you're allowed and not allowed to do."

Victor looks at HANNA and concentrates on building the tower with a contented look on his face.

HANNA now sits down on the floor next to Sofia and Victor.

Sofia also continues in her efforts to build a tower. She manages to pile up some blocks, looks delighted and laughs happily.

HANNA in a joyful voice: "You did it, and you did it with laughing, too!"

Above, Sofia and Victor are playing quietly with shared building blocks, although in parallel rather than in collaboration with each other. The situation changes owing to a small, but for younger children typical, clash. The educator turns to the children and addresses Victor. She explains to Victor that very young children don't always know what is right and what isn't. The educator thus resolves the clash in a mediating manner, which might also enable her to influence the children's relationship. Victor, at least, seems no longer to be annoyed by the clash between him and Sofia. Moreover, by sitting down next to the children and remaining

with them the educator may also help the children continue their play with the shared blocks, and so contribute to the development of their togetherness.

When Sofia manages to build a tower, the educator shares Sofia's enjoyment with her and praises Sofia's success. The interaction between the educator and Sofia might signal a moment of togetherness between the two of them, while Victor's attention is focused on his own play. The educator is physically and emotionally present, the atmosphere appears to be energetic and quiet, and the two children are absorbed in their creative activities. All of this displays emotional wellbeing, which Sofia expresses by laughing. From the perspective of values education, the values of wellbeing and togetherness are joined here to the value of caring, such as when the educator, for instance, listens to the children and shows understanding and responsiveness towards them.

Example 2. Enjoying a peer' success

The next example is also taken from the morning's free activities. Mia, Anna and Daniel and the educator, Jenny, are all near to each other. Mia, Anna and Jenny are sitting on a sofa, looking at a picture book, and Daniel is playing with a set of toy cars and a garage on the floor in front of the others. From time to time, the girls and the educator take a glance at him.

Daniel (2;3) has steered a bigger car into the small garage, and now tries to steer it out. Technically, this seems to be more difficult than steering the car in. The entrance is narrow and there is hardly room for Daniel to work with his fingers. However, after several trials he succeeds.

Daniel, looking delighted: "Out."

JENNY in a cheerful voice: "Oh, you got it out. Great!"

Mia (1;5), sitting next to JENNY, claps her hands; Anna (1;0) notices this and claps her hands, too.

JENNY: "Do you girls want to clap your hands, should we clap more?"

JENNY claps her hands and the girls join in clapping, while Daniel continues his game.

JENNY begins to sing a song, which the children already know: "Tap, tap, taputa, käsiäsi taputa..." [Clap, clap, clap, clap your hands...].

Mia, Anna and JENNY clap their hands smiling happily.

Here, the group is a little bigger than in the first example, as it comprises three children and an educator. Daniel is playing alone on the floor. Although the educator is engaged in another activity with Mia and Anna, she is attentive to all three children and responds to Daniel's pleasure by recognizing and praising him for his success. Mia has heard Daniel's exclamation herself, but she also seems to have noticed the educator complimenting Daniel. She has clearly had earlier experiences of a good achievement being rewarded by applause. Hence, she claps her hands, which seems to set an example to the youngest child in the group, Anna, who also starts clapping her hands. The educator takes advantage of the moment and suggests that they clap together. The situation changes on the educators' initiative – possibly as a result of the girls' clapping their hands to applaud Daniel's success – to the joint singing of a song. The song is familiar to the girls, as it has often been sung in the day-care centre, although they are not yet able verbally to join in the singing. Instead, they clap in time to the rhythm and follow the words of the song by making movements with their arms and hands. The song gives the children pleasure, manifested in their smiling faces and lively clapping.

Already at the start of the episode the girls show interest in Daniel's play. Positive attention paid to another person is a manifestation of emotional wellbeing. Daniel's wellbeing is evident in his concentration and perseverance regarding his own play. Hence, the value of wellbeing communicated to Daniel by the educator is wellbeing at the personal level, whereas, in the case of Mia and Anna, the educator communicates the value of wellbeing at both the personal and relational levels. In this situation, togetherness is more clearly shared by Mia, Anna and the educator than by the whole small group.

To summarise, the event is characterised by a friendly atmosphere and the maintenance of warm interaction between the children and the educator, both indicative of the general wellbeing and physical togetherness of all the participants. As in the first example, the values of wellbeing and togetherness are linked with the value of caring, evident in the way the educator expresses her appreciation towards the children by listening to them and taking their interests into account. Hence, the value of respect is also present in the situation.

Example 3. Singing and playing together

Unlike the two previous examples, the next example is an excerpt taken from a gathering of the whole group, known as circle time, which in this instance is initiated and led by the educator, Maria. The circle comprises the nine children who were present on the observation day: Natalie, Nora, Sonja, Oliver, Anna, Dante, Daniel, Peter, Jasper, and another educator, Jenny.

Some of the children are in the group room after returning from outdoor activities, others are in the entrance hall.

MARIA comes into the hall to invite the children to join the circle: "Let's go into the group room, MARIA has the wizard's bag waiting for you."

Sonja (3;4) cheerfully, looking at Nora (3;3): "The wizard's bag!"

Nora delighted: "Yee!"

All the children form a circle on the floor with MARIA and JENNY.

MARIA has a drum in her hand. She passes it to Sonja.

MARIA begins a song, inserting Sonja's name into it: "*Tapu tapu tallaa, taivahan alla ei ole toista Sonjan moista...*" [*Tapu tapu tallaa, under the sky, there's no other girl like Sonja*]

The song is sung together to the beat of the drum.

Sonja passes the drum to Nora and the same song is sung substituting Nora's name.

MARIA to Nora: "And who shall we sing about next?"

Nora: "Natalie (1;11)."

Natalie drums happily and the song is sung to her.

When it's Anna's (1;3) turn, JENNY helps her with the drumming.

Natalie stretches out her hands to MARIA and MARIA gathers her up in her arms.

All the children, except Jasper (1;0), who is a newcomer, participate by singing, clapping their hands or stamping their feet to the music. Jasper stands up, walks around the room, and sometimes crawls around the circle, following the drum as it is passed from one child to the next.

(...)

MARIA: "Has everyone had their turn?"

Oliver: “No, Dante hasn’t (3;4).”

MARIA: “Dante has already played the drum. But has JENNY played? No, she hasn’t!”
(...)

The final song is to MARIA. The children clap their hands with enthusiasm and sing loudly.

MARIA: “Well, you all sang very nicely, indeed.”

Sonja: “But Peter (3;0) hasn’t had his turn yet.”

MARIA: “He has, everyone’s already had a turn, haven’t they? ... And now, what about the wizard’s bag, what might we have here? It’s a long time since we last peeked into the bag.”

Jasper leaves the group to examine a toy stethoscope on a table a short distance away from the circle.

MARIA: “How does “*The wizard’s song*” go, do you remember?”

Oliver (2;9) recites the words of the song with enthusiasm and swings his hands like a wizard.

MARIA begins “The wizard’s song” and the children join in the singing.

MARIA then draws a picture out of the bag, but doesn’t show it to the children.

Instead she says: “Po, po, po.”

Nora excited by the picture, exclaims: “Possu!” [little piggy]

Natalia radiating pleasure: “Possu!”

MARIA laughs: “Yes, possu.”

Natalia, Nora, Sonja and Peter laugh along with her.

MARIA: “How many little piggies were there altogether, remember?”

Children count together: “One, two, three.”

MARIA begins to recite the rhyme about the three little piggies. The children look happy and eagerly join in the rhyme both verbally and with hand and finger movements.
(...)

In both day-care groups, one or more gatherings in which all the children and at least one educator were present was held every day. These were most often pre-organized by the educator, but occasionally they were initiated by the children, such as when a child asked the educator to sing a song or to read a book. The song or the book would attract the interest of the other children, and the whole group would gradually gather together. The gathering in the above excerpt, however, was planned by Maria in advance. In general, one aim of such

gatherings is to create and strengthen togetherness in the group and to offer shared joy and pleasure to all.

Maria asks for the children's opinions on and observations about the turns at beating the drum and being sung to, and thereby publicly ensuring that the song has been sung to each child. In these situations, she is also giving each child individual attention by using their names in turn. Jenny has taken a less active role in this gathering, but while singing she also helps the youngest children to beat the drum. In fact, Maria reminds the children that the educators are also members of the group by asking if Jenny has had her turn. The song is then sung to Jenny, and finally also to Maria herself, as suggested by Jenny. Throughout all eleven renditions of the song, the children are full of energy.

In the middle of the singing, Natalie expresses her wish to sit in Maria's lap, and her wish is fulfilled. Maria also pays special attention to Jasper, the newcomer, in that she allows him, without hesitation, to walk around and just observe what is going on, and so become acquainted with day-care life. Neither does she react negatively when, a little later, Jasper leaves the circle to pursue interests of his own. Jasper seems to be curious and content in his wanderings close to the others.

When the song has been sung to everyone, Maria compliments the children on their singing and then turns to the next topic, the activities offered by "the wizards' bag", a bag containing cards depicting games, songs, poems and rhymes. The first card after "the wizard's song" suggests the rhyme about the three little piggies. By giving a clue, a sound referring to the rhyme, and by asking questions, she invites the children to discuss the three little piggies. The children appear to be joyfully engaged in a joint activity.

The atmosphere appears to be congenial, replete with vitality and amusement. The episode clearly shows that the values of wellbeing and togetherness are shared by the educators and the children. In this circle time, the values of social competence, democracy and community are linked with the values of wellbeing and togetherness: the children have the possibility to participate in the community, they show interest in each other, and they are attentive in observing that the educator takes everyone into account when giving turns at beating the drum and singing. The educators seem to be consistent in guiding the children towards the adoption of these values at the personal, relational and collective levels.

Example 4. "The elf does exercises"

The last excerpt illustrates joint rough-and-tumble play. Again, all the children from the group who are present – Emma, Silvia, Victor, William, Lily and Sofia – participate in the game, together with their educators Hanna and Helen. The game takes place in the group room. The educators have put on a recording that includes the song "The elf does exercises".

Music is playing.

HANNA and HELEN sing cheerfully along with the music: "The elf does exercises, the elf does exercises, the elf does exercises before his breakfast porridge. Crouch down, crouch down, right, right down!"

Emma (2;5), Silvia (2;3) and Victor (2;4) do the exercise smiling, they crouch down, stamp their feet, jump, and whirl around. This seems to interest Lily (1;5), who comes over to watch them. William (2;3) also comes over and looks closely at HELEN and begins to stamp his feet and crouch down like HELEN and the others.

While playing, William looks at Lily, touches her head tenderly and says: "Crouch down, right, right down."

Lily bends down a little bit, keenly observing William. Then Lily also makes swinging motions. William laughs.

The children and educators are whirling around on the floor.

Sofia (1;4) is lounging on the floor, looking at the others.

HANNA and HELEN sing: "Crouch down, and get up! Crouch down, and get up!"

William: "Up!"

Sofia gets up and tries to crouch down carefully, but stops and begins to observe Emma. Emma, Victor and Silvia follow the educators' example laughing, exercising and dancing wildly from start to finish. At the end of the song everyone claps their hands and laughs.

The educators have prepared a surprise for the children. When the music begins, the educators begin to sing and do exercises, in this way inviting the children to join in. Three of the oldest children join in immediately, and are soon followed by the others. The game seems to look exciting to Lily and William; they come closer, and William joins the game straightaway.

William notices that Lily remains outside the game. He encourages her to join in through his gentle gesture and verbal guidance, and Lily joins in, trying to imitate William. This seems to amuse William.

The song goes on, and Sofia has not yet joined in the game. William is again attentive and tells Sofia what to do, and so she gets up to play. Finally, everyone is involved in the game. The wellbeing of the group manifests itself in mutual fascination, excitement and laughter and in the creation of a lively, cheerful atmosphere. Everyone is engaged in a shared activity that is fun, and the educators seem to enjoy being with the children. The episode reflects the values of wellbeing and togetherness at the collective level, communicated in this situation by all participants alike. Obviously, the situation also includes the value of caring, visible in William's behavior, as well as the values of democracy and community. Everyone has an equal right to participate in the game.

Summary and conclusions

In his theory of basic human values, Schwarz (2012) underlines that any attitude or behavior typically has implications for more than just one value. In this study, the values of wellbeing and togetherness were interrelated and partially overlapped with other values embedded in the policy documents and legislation pertaining to Nordic early childhood education (cf. e.g., Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Fugelsnes et al., 2013; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Puroila et al., 2016). For example, the values of wellbeing and togetherness were linked to both the value of caring, such as when the educator expressed her appreciation towards the children by listening to them and taking their interests into account, and the value of respect.

The values of social competence, democracy and community were also linked to the values of wellbeing and togetherness in both groups. The educators made sure that the children had equal opportunities to participate in the activities of their little community, as observed, for instance, in the educator-led gathering that included singing and music making (example 3), and in joint rough-and-tumble play (example 4). In their joint activities in small or whole groups, pre-arranged by the educators or sometimes initiated spontaneously by the children themselves, the children expressed solidarity with each other by, for example, seeing to it that

no-one was left out. Thus, even these one- to three-year-old children had the ability to take others' perspectives into account.

The values of wellbeing were communicated at the personal, relational and collective levels, which often co-occurred (cf. Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The children's wellbeing was manifested by their facial expressions, gestures, smiling, laughter, voices and movements, as well as by the engagement, concentration, perseverance, fascination, enthusiasm and excitement they showed in their activities (cf. Hännikäinen, 2015) at all three levels, whether acting with others or being 'alone'. The educators displayed the value of wellbeing at the personal level by paying attention to the children individually and by showing them emotional warmth. They treated the children in a friendly, encouraging way, showing them acceptance and enabling them to experience a feeling of safety and protection, as also recommended by UNICEF (2007).

At the relational level, and helped by the educators, especially when disagreements emerged, the children showed mutual helpfulness and consideration, and comforted each other (cf. Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). The disagreements between the children were mostly mild and mainly concerned play materials or play space, and seldom escalated into crises. The educators principally used positive, mediating strategies to resolve conflicts and generally sought to console all the children involved in them, thus communicating caring values.

Wellbeing at the collective level was communicated by the educators through their efforts at building an atmosphere that was warm, supportive and joyful, and often also lively and energetic or playful and humoristic (cf. Ahnert et al., 2006; Dalli et al., 2011; Fugelsnes et al., 2013). Creating an atmosphere in which the emphasis is laid on friendly relationships and mutual respect, and on shared efforts, shared understanding and shared meaning is not only of central importance for children's wellbeing, but is also essential for generating and strengthening togetherness.

When the subjects of early childhood education are very young children, continuous, close and sensitive relationships and positive interaction between educator and child are of the utmost importance. In this study, the educators displayed a caring attitude to the children by touching them warmly, caressing, kissing, hugging and embracing them, although these

actions might not be regarded as caring behavior by all children. The educators were physically and emotionally present and available for the children, showing interest in the children and their activities by listening to them and orienting towards their experiences (cf. Dalli et al., 2011; Johansson & Emilson, 2016). An affective bond, tenderness, and friendly, reciprocal interactions were regularly observed between the educators and the children.

This study demonstrates that the value of togetherness is closely merged with the value of wellbeing. The children expressed togetherness by helping, caring for and consoling as well as encouraging and praising each other (cf. Sigurdardóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016). Such actions are also manifestations of emotional wellbeing at the relational level. Further, the children manifested togetherness by being physically close to each other and by keenly observing and imitating each other, as noted, for instance, in examples 2 and 4. However, the most important contexts for togetherness were probably play and playful actions (cf. Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015) in small groups, and in the whole-group activities organized and directed by the educators.

To create and promote togetherness and wellbeing among the children, the educators encouraged them to engage in shared activities. They initiated, arranged and promoted joint play for children by providing materials and motivated the children to play together. This was often achieved through singing and playing music, reciting poems and rhymes, and reading fairy tales and stories with themes that seemed to interest the children. Newcomers, like Jasper in the third example, were supported in observing and gradually joining in shared activities. The educators praised the children in their joint activities, helped them resolve disagreements and clashes in constructive ways, as seen in the first example, and above all, played with them. In sum, the educators seemed to be perceive the children's wellbeing, and the togetherness connected to it, as of paramount importance.

When planning joint activities, such as circle time or other gatherings, educators might consider how to implement values education in advance. However, with younger children, opportunities for communicating values are more likely to arise from the ongoing situation, on a moment-to-moment basis, as reactions to what the children are doing; thus, educators should also be prepared for these occasions in advance. It is for this reason that educators need professional knowledge and understanding of younger children's interests and needs, even when these are expressed by children who have not yet acquired much spoken language.

At the same time, educators also need knowledge on values, how to identify values and how to address values in practice.

One of the central features of values is that they go beyond specific actions (Schwarz, 2012). Earlier research has shown that educators have difficulties verbalizing and identifying values on the conceptual level (Puroila et al., 2016), and thus might also have difficulties in communicating values to each other. However, they transmit values to children in many ways, not least by being role models for children (Sigurdardóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016). Teachers model values by their behavior, both non-verbally and verbally, and even very young children are subtle observers of the behavior of teachers, and also imitate their teachers (Hyson & Taylor, 2011), as was evident in this study.

But how does one become a good role model? Thornberg (2016) states, referring to Sanderse (2013), that teachers must be able to reflect on their own practice. They should verbally explicate their actions among themselves (see also Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016). As Thornberg (2016, p. 241) puts it, “through professional discussions, preschool teachers can become more conscious and elaborative in their language as values educators”.

This study concludes along the same lines. To develop as a values educator, the educator must be ready for personal and professional self-reflection, to constantly challenge oneself by asking questions such as “Why am I in this profession, what are my values, what is important for me in my work, what am I aiming at as an educator?” Observing each other’s educational practices and discussing them together can help educators to answer these questions. This requires a trusting and confidential working climate that encourages dialogue and joint discussion on various work-related issues, and thereby enables educators to learn from each other – and also experience togetherness. The ultimate beneficiaries of professional discussion by reflective educators are, of course, the children in their day-care groups.

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