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Studying Compassion in the Work of ECEC Educators: A Sociocultural Approach to Practical Wisdom in Early Childhood Education Settings

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Abstract

In recent years, in the wake of a growing number of studies highlighting the beneficial impact of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), politicians and other stakeholders have implemented changes in ECEC practitioners' work conditions via new policies and guidelines. One central theme characterizing these various efforts has been a push toward focusing attention on compassion in ECEC. This chapter discusses the notion of practical wisdom as a lens for viewing acts of compassion in a way that is attentive to the complexity and situational richness of everyday life in ECEC settings. Our sociocultural perspective on compassion highlights practical wisdom and compassion as socially shared and culturally mediated processes that are integral to the ongoing lived practice. Reflecting on such moments offers a possible avenue for change in the interactional and cultural practices of ECEC. Furthermore, we advocate that in efforts to promote compassion in ECEC institutions, primacy should not be placed on creating compassionate individual practitioners but, rather, on the cultivation of cultures of compassion. As such, our chapter study has implications for ECEC practitioners, leaders, and policymakers who wish to promote compassion in ECEC.

New policies, changing work conditions, and compassion

The sociocultural conditions impacting the work of early childhood education and care (ECEC) educators are changing. In response to a growing number of studies highlighting the beneficial impact of quality early childhood education and care (e.g., Sylva et al., 2010), politicians and other stakeholders have begun to implement new policies to improve existing ECEC practices. Many of these policies, building on a long line of argumentation within the ECEC literature, emphasize the pedagogical aspects of early childhood education and care. In Finland, for example, the new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care stresses that ECEC should be goal-directed

and planned activities that support children's learning and development, and that children should be seen as active members of their community whose voice and opinions should be considered.

Moreover, recent large-scale legislative and administrative reforms have changed the status of the new core curriculum from a general guideline to a normative document that directs the work of ECEC educators more firmly than before. Similar emphasis on the pedagogical aspects of ECEC is also reflected in ECEC policy changes across different countries (Bertram & Pascal, 2016).

Importantly for the argument advanced in this chapter, there is a shift in international ECEC policies toward an increased emphasis on compassion and other socio-emotional aspects of ECEC. Moreover, compassion and care are increasingly addressed from a pedagogical perspective. For example, OECD (2015; 2016) posits that care, empathy, and compassion as essential global competencies for an inclusive world of the future. The Korean national curriculum speaks of bringing up students "who can actively participate and communicate with the world in a spirit of compassion and sharing" (UNESCO, 2014, p. 27). In Finland, the new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care states that "Children's development is to be supported so that they learn to act and use their knowledge to benefit others as well." (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 21). The compassionate orientation that both adults and children are expected to show is also present more indirectly in the Finnish curriculum as a necessary characteristic of a supportive environment for realizing pedagogical goals.

Although the educational policies and guidelines are intended to change how ECEC educators work, they seldom automatically translate to the desired professional practices (Paananen, 2017; Singh, Thomas, & Harris, 2013). As policy studies have shown, the complexity of everyday life in educational institutions often makes the implementation of new policies difficult, and a single change in policy can produce highly different effects, depending on the local conditions of its implementation (Honig, 2006). New policies that do not consider or accommodate for the existing work conditions of early childhood educators can also easily lead to only superficial changes in educational practices, or

worse, to practices that can even undermine the core ideas of the new policy itself (e.g., Hoffman, 2009). Central to any policy change effort, then, is to understand what the social and cultural conditions of life and work in ECEC are and to conceptualize the work of early childhood educators in ways that are attentive to its complexity and situational richness.

In this chapter, we argue that there is a need for a nuanced and holistic understanding of how early childhood educators enact compassion within the complex practical conditions of life and work in ECEC settings. We posit that such an understanding can be provided by a sociocultural perspective on compassion (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppö, 2017) that views compassion not as an inherent human characteristic but in terms of situated actions and interactions that are framed and constituted in and through the history and culture of specific institutions. Specifically, this chapter discusses the notion of practical wisdom (Aristotle, 2009) as a lens for viewing acts of compassion and highlighting the professional competence of early childhood educators in this regard. Here, we build on and extend the work of Andrew Peterson (2017), who argues that deliberation and discernment (i.e., practical wisdom) that are sensitive to situational complexities are crucial properties of compassionate responses to suffering. In this chapter, we propose a sociocultural research approach to practical wisdom that views acts of compassion as socially distributed and culturally mediated. Our proposed approach also focuses on the interactional and sociocultural embedding of these acts.

Next, we will briefly present the theoretical framework on compassion in early childhood educators' work and illuminate the framework with an interactional episode from our ongoing research project that studies compassion in early childhood education (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppö, 2017). We will also briefly explain our data collection and analysis method and introduce the Finnish early childhood education context. Finally, we will conclude the chapter with a discussion on how the conceptual framework presented in this chapter can inform further empirical research on the topic. In our discussion, we also provide reflections on how making mundane acts of compassion visible and reflecting on them could be used as a means to fostering cultures of compassion in ECEC practices.

Acting with compassion: Practical wisdom as a mediated action

In current psychological and educational research, compassion is commonly conceptualized as an individual emotion, skill, or trait (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Eisenberg, 2013).

Research done from these perspectives addresses questions such as how children or adults develop capacities for compassion or how compassion can be fostered through pedagogy (Taggart, 2016; Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013). While we recognize the importance of these questions, our sociocultural perspective conceptualizes compassion in broader terms, that is, as an integral aspect of the daily lives of both adults and children (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppö, in press; Lipponen, in press). In other words, a sociocultural perspective on compassion centers on the ways in which compassion is embedded in the relationships and everyday practices of ECEC settings. In our work, we define acts of compassion as sequences of actions and interactions that seek to alleviate another person's suffering and involve empathic concern for the other's wellbeing (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011). By *suffering*, we refer to "a wide range of unpleasant subjective experiences including physical and emotional pain, psychological distress and existential anguish" (Lilius et al. 2011, p. 874).

A core argument within sociocultural perspectives is that human cognitive capabilities, emotions, and actions are mediated by cultural tools and practices and their cultural-historical development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1986). Importantly, mediation does not account just for the structure and content of our deliberations, feelings, and actions but also for their emergence in the first place. Moreover, human actions are always encompassed within larger activities and activity systems that also take part in establishing the form the actions take, for example, through how the work is distributed between other people (e.g., Engeström, 1987). In this sense, the cultural tools as well as the people using them form a distributed cognitive and affective system that together constitute whatever action is taken (Valsiner, 2001). In relation to compassion, from a sociocultural perspective, when a child falls down and hurts

him or herself, the words, expressions, tones of voice, objects, and embodied actions others use to comfort him or her and the way they distribute this work is culturally mediated through and through. In different cultural settings, what is seen as an appropriate response to a similar situation might be very different and elicit a whole different set of cultural tools and practices that are used to comfort the child, if it is responded to at all (e.g., Rogoff, 2003).

There are only a few studies on compassion in ECEC settings from a sociocultural perspective. Lipponen (2018) studied the formation of compassion in relation to the rules that govern how it is and should be expressed in early childhood settings. Lipponen found that the rules for compassion were clearly inscribed in the kindergarten's curriculum, and they had significance in everyday practices, even if the teachers and children did not explicitly refer to them and did not thereby justify their situational acts. Rajala & Lipponen (2018) showed how compassion is embedded in the social relationships and practices of ECEC settings by analyzing student teachers' narratives of compassion in their working lives. The narratives described situations in which the need for compassion was triggered by personal life or work concerns. These concerns included serious illness of oneself or loved ones, children's suffering, difficulties in fulfilling the demands of work, or problems in balancing working and personal life. The compassionate acts most often took the form of provision of emotional support, giving time or flexibility, or material support.

The study by Rajala and Lipponen (2018) also showed that compassion was manifested in the daily life of kindergartens in different forms. Some of the compassionate acts identified in the study helped others to adapt to their difficult situations without trying to change the circumstances that produce suffering. Other acts were more transformative in nature; they questioned and sought to transform the undesirable practices. In a similar vein, Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa (2009) distinguished between compassion as care and compassion as justice in their study on teachers' concepts of compassion and their responses to the needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children. Compassion as care was based on concern for unfortunate others and was manifested as a need to care for and help those who suffer.

In contrast, compassion as justice involved helping those in trouble on the basis of the notions of equality and human rights. Peterson (2017) maintained that these different forms of compassion are mutually dependent, and their boundaries are blurred.

Peterson (2017) proposed a powerful way to conceptualize the decision making involved in response to another person's suffering. He argued that compassion should be understood as a virtue, "a cognitive, emotional and volitional response to the suffering of others" (2017, p.2). Peterson highlighted that, as a virtue, compassion always calls for *phronesis*, practical wisdom that shapes and guides our actions in a given moment. According to Nussbaum (1986), practical wisdom is

like perceiving in the sense that it is non-inferential, non-deductive; it is, centrally, the ability to recognize, acknowledge, respond to, pick out certain salient features of a complex situation. ... [P]ractical perception is gained only through a long process of living and choosing that develops the agent's resourcefulness and responsiveness. (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 305)

Thus, how compassion is enacted in practice is not a steadfast rule but essentially involves situational deliberation regarding the best course of action. In Peterson's examples, such deliberation includes aspects such as organizational and cultural norms, available resources, and circumstances that lead to the suffering of the other. Peterson (2017) highlighted this with an example from the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, where the recipients of relief aid told the international aid community that the tuna fish and mayonnaise they had received was not what they in fact needed. In this case, while the intention of the helpers was good, their practical wisdom did not consider all of the cultural constraints in play in the situation.

Peterson's way of conceptualizing practical wisdom is helpful, as it allows for capturing the deliberation that actors engage in without falling back to individualistic accounts of compassion or maintaining a sharp divide between cognition and affect. In this chapter, based on a sociocultural

perspective on compassion, we extend Peterson's work and propose a reading of compassion and practical wisdom as socially distributed and culturally mediated processes that are embedded in the interactional and sociocultural contexts of their enactment. As such, our sociocultural perspective on compassion allows us a good conceptual avenue to highlight the practical wisdom of early childhood educators in a way that is sensitive to the complexity and situational richness of everyday life in ECEC settings.

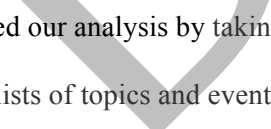
An interactional analytic approach to researching compassion

As part of our ongoing research project to study compassion in early childhood education, we engaged in a micro-ethnography (e.g., Erickson, 1992) that focused on how compassion was enacted as part of the flow of everyday life in kindergarten. Our study took place in a public kindergarten located in Helsinki, Finland. The kindergarten is situated near the centrum. Three groups of children and their educators participated in the study. In two of the groups, the ages of the children varied between one and three years, and in the third group, the ages were between two and four years. All groups had adults working as kindergarten teachers or nurses. Some of the adults had several years of work experience, while others were in their first position since graduation. This type of multiprofessional work community, with a varying combination of professional qualifications and job descriptions, is characteristic of Finnish ECEC. The minimum requirement for a kindergarten teacher is a bachelor's degree in education or in social services. Other staff in ECEC centers are expected to have at least a vocational upper-secondary qualification in the fields of social welfare or health care.

The curricula of the kindergarten highlighted that children would be learning to express and verbalize emotions in the kindergarten. The kindergarten also aimed to create an inclusive and just environment for the children, and they took active measures to prevent bullying, for example. According to our observations, the daily activities of the kindergarten exemplified the culture of Finnish early childhood education, which can be characterized in terms of a holistic approach that encourages play,

relationship, and curiosity. The daily practices also included adult-initiated activities, such as reading to children and presenting hands-on activities. Activities such as eating lunch, dressing for outdoor activities, and taking naps were also considered educationally valuable, and educators played an important role in these activities by guiding and helping the children.

To understand in detail how compassion was embedded in the ECEC practices and educators' work, we video recorded the everyday activities of the three groups intermittently over the course of three weeks. Altogether, we collected 51 hours of video over nine separate days. Our video-based research was informed by the interaction analysis tradition (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). One, and once two, researchers (Rekar Abdulhamed and Annukka Pursi) recorded the events with a handheld video camera, sometimes using an additional camera on a camera stand. We recorded the audio either with the camera microphone or a wireless microphone worn either by a child or an adult. We used the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 1990) across different kinds of situations (varying persons, locations, and types of activity) when selecting which events to record. The guardians of all the participating children, as well as the kindergarten staff, gave informed consent to conduct the research. We also paid careful attention to how the children reacted to the presence of the camera with the intention to stop the recording if we noticed that they did not want to be on the camera. However, this did not happen.



We started our analysis by taking a rough overview of all the videos and made content logs—time indexed lists of topics and events—of each video (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). We then watched the videos several times and identified episodes in which someone expressed distress or physical or emotional pain. In addition, we identified episodes in which suffering was not expressed but implicit or explicit references were made to someone's distress or pain. Altogether, we identified 59 episodes from the video corpus.

To illustrate how compassion and practical wisdom was manifested in the flow of everyday life in the kindergarten whose practices we studied, we share below one of the identified episodes in which an early childhood educator listened and responded to a child's raised concern.

“My mom got upset”: An example of practical wisdom in the daily life of a kindergarten

The following episode took place during a free play session right after the children had had their breakfast. At the time, six children and their nurse, Tarja, were gathered in the playroom. One child was sitting on a bench, two were playing with Duplo blocks in one of the corners on a mat, and the other three were getting cloth pieces to make capes for their role play. After Tarja had helped Leena tie on her cape, Leena went back to the corner of the room to get a doll and its dress. She then came back to Tarja and asked her for help in putting the dress on the doll. Tarja agreed and sat down cross-legged near the other playing children. While Tarja put the dress on the doll, Leena waited next to her (image 1), and the following conversation took place¹.

¹ In the following transcript we have used parentheses to indicate non-verbal action, square brackets to indicate moments of overlapping speech, and a downward arrow to highlight a drop in the speaker's intonation.



- 1 Tarja: Did you come with Mom, Leena?
 2 Leena: (Leena nods subtly. Leena's gaze is on the doll.)
 3 Saimi: (Saimi joins them. She stops in front of Tarja, next to Leena.)
 4 Tarja: (Tarja turns her head and looks at Leena.) Did you come?
 5 Leena: (Leena nods subtly.)
 6 Tarja: Yeah. (Tarja turns her head toward to doll and then to Saimi.)
 ...
 8 Leena: My mom got upset when I fell down. (Tarja turns to look at Leena on the word *upset*.)
 9 Tarja: You fell?
 10 Leena: Yeah, I fell, and I got a teeny-tiny hole there on my knee.
 11 Tarja: Okay. Why did she get upset?
 ...
 14 Tarja: You got a hole, or? (Tarja turns to look at Leena on the word *hole* and keeps her gaze on her.)
 15 Leena: (Leena nods subtly.)
 16 Tarja: (Tarja nods by lifting her chin a bit up with her lower lip slightly pushed up before dropping her gaze back to the doll.)
 ...
 17 Tytti: Oh, a hole into what? (stands up and steps toward Tarja)
 18 Risto: Oh, who got up[set?]? (stands up and steps toward Tarja)
 19 Tytti: [A hole] to what?
 20 Silence for 1.5 seconds
 21 Tarja: [Le-]
 22 Risto: [Oh] Who?
 23 Tarja: I dunno, Leena's mother had apparently got upset. ↓ (Tarja keeps her gaze on the dolls she is dressing.)
 24 Risto: (turns back to his own play on the floor)
 25 Tytti: Oh, into what the hole?

26 Tarja: All right, should we put a hat on its head? (turns her gaze to Leena)



Interpreting “My mom got upset”

What takes place in the episode is a brief conversation between a child and an adult, Leena and Tarja, regarding Leena’s concern about her mother getting upset. Leena raises her concern when she introduces a new topic, namely that her mother got angry at her (line 8). Thus far, Leena has only nodded in response to Tarja’s questions in the conversation and speaks aloud here for the first time when she mentions her mother. This suggests that Leena is troubled by how her mother reacted. Furthermore, while the way in which Leena delivers her concern does not clearly express distress or pain (i.e., her tone of voice is neutral), the substance of what she says indicates that the matter worries her. The fact that Tarja turns her gaze toward Leena and makes eye contact with her when Leena voices “upset” suggests that this aspect of what Leena shares is important to Tarja and needs her closer attention.

In the following, we argue that Tarja responds to Leena’s concern with compassion. We also argue that practical wisdom is evident in the constitution of the response, specifically in the way in which it is adjusted to the situational constraints and made appropriate from the perspective of the recipient of

compassion, Leena. What is important for our argument is that the practical wisdom displayed here is not only a matter of Tarja's private deliberation. Instead, our analysis highlights how both Tarja and Leena's actions are necessary for the achievement of practical wisdom in this episode. We will highlight three significant moments that illuminate practical wisdom as mediated action: 1) Tarja creating a space for joint conversation with Leena (lines 1–6), 2) Tarja and Leena's joint effort to make sense of what had happened (line 11), 3) the way Leena and Tarja close the topic (lines 15 and 16) and treat the topic closed when other children join the conversation (lines 20, 23, & 26). We will unpack each moment more carefully below.

First, Tarja shows practical wisdom by creating a suitable moment for Leena to bring up her concerns stemming from her life outside of the kindergarten (line 1). Dressing the doll does not require them to talk, but the fact that Leena waits by Tarja while she is dressing the doll opens up the opportunity for joint conversation, and Tarja seizes it. By asking Leena about her morning, Tarja creates a space for talking about out-of-kindergarten time. This question and the ensuing conversation (lines 1–6) create the ground for Leena to introduce her concern.

Second, practical wisdom is also visible in the episode in the cooperative efforts of Tarja and Leena to make sense of the event troubling Leena. Tarja asks Leena why she thinks her mother got dismayed (line 11). Given that Leena has already provided an explanation for Tarja in her first turn (line 8), Tarja's second question positions Leena as the authority regarding her concern. Furthermore, Tarja's question offers Leena room to reflect on her troubling experience and the possible reasons for her mother getting upset. In other words, Tarja's question supports Leena in developing her understanding of the situation from the mother's perspective. The fact that Tarja re-voices Leena's own explanation (line 14), suggests that Tarja heard Leena's explanation the first time but willingly did not take it as the only possible reason for why her mother got upset. Tarja's question is also wise because it potentially offers her more information about the situation and especially about Leena's perspective on it and, thus, can aid her in crafting a better response to Leena's concern.

In the third moment, practical wisdom is present in the episode through the way Tarja and Leena close the topic of discussion together. We can see this from how they treat the topic jointly and how closely Tarja pays attention to Leena's responses. For example, after Tarja does not hear a response to her question (line 11), she asks Leena again (line 14), but this time turns her gaze toward Leena and keeps looking until she sees Leena's nod. Tarja then takes Leena's nonverbal response as a confirmation of what she had proposed in her question. More importantly, Tarja seems to interpret Leena's nonverbal gesture as an indication that Leena does not want to tell more about the incident. This is evident from Tarja's nonverbal head nod and facial expression (line 16), which acknowledged to Leena that her response was adequate and that she agrees that the discussion has ended.

In the third moment, practical wisdom is also evident in how the topic of Leena's worry is kept closed when she indicates that she does not want to talk about it. Indeed, what the excerpt shows is that although the conversation was held publicly, Leena does not seem willing to talk about it with the group, and, importantly, Tarja again follows her lead. This is evident from how neither Leena nor Tarja answer Tytti and Risto's questions at first (lines 17–20). The fact that both Tytti and Risto direct their questions to Tarja by looking at her (see image 2) emphasizes this interpretation. Moreover, although Tarja eventually answers Risto's repeated question (line 22), she gives only a short response that is formulated in a way that does not take a strong stance on what happened (line 23). More importantly, the fact that Tarja's intonation drops during her turn-at-talk (line 23) and that she changes the topic of the talk (line 26) instead of answering Tytti's question indicates that she wants to treat the topic of Leena's concern as closed.

ECEC educators work as a lens for researching cultures of compassion

In this chapter, we have argued that recent national and international ECEC policies and guidelines have significantly impacted the sociocultural conditions of the work of ECEC educators, placing

increased emphasis on pedagogy and pedagogical interpretations of compassion and care. We have also argued that this change presents a need to employ new concepts to better understand and conceptualize the existing professional practices in their full complexity. To this end, we introduced the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom as a way to describe and discuss when, how, for whom, and in what form ECEC educators enact compassion as part their professional practice. More specifically, we have provided a sociocultural research approach for studying practical wisdom and compassion as distributed and culturally mediated processes embedded in the interactional and sociocultural contexts of their enactment. As we have demonstrated with our empirical example, our approach provides one avenue to highlight compassion and the practical wisdom nested within the complexity and situational richness of everyday life in kindergartens. More specifically, we illustrated the participants' practical wisdom in creating a space for joint conversation about a concerning issue, trying to make sense of the source of the concern, and controlling who was allowed to know about the concern and how much.

While the analysis presented in this chapter revealed the potential of our sociocultural approach to practical wisdom to generate new insights on compassion in institutional ECEC settings, a single episode does not allow us to fully evaluate the applicability of our reading. Thus, we need further empirical research to see whether or not our reading can highlight the dynamics of the phenomenon in full. Future research could, for example, identify the varied ways in which practical wisdom is manifested and the role it plays in constituting compassionate acts in the daily lives of different ECEC settings. *Such research could bring analytic depth into the study of compassion* as it is displayed in adult-child interactions, as well as in child and adult peer interaction.

The potentiality of our sociocultural reading of practical wisdom does not, however, pertain only to illuminating how compassion is displayed in institutional ECEC settings in situations like the one we shared. That is, compassion and practical wisdom can also probably emerge in other kinds of situations, not just when adults and children are responding to someone's suffering in the moment.

Other potential situations could be, for example, when ECEC educators reflect on their dilemmatic work situations in team weekly meetings or *spontaneously* during the work day. Studying the way in which practical wisdom and compassion manifest in these kinds of situations could be one potential avenue for further research. From our sociocultural reading of practical wisdom, such situations could be understood as instances of sharing experiences related to compassion and reasoning about them together.

Furthermore, shared reflections could also be deliberately promoted and enriched through research. In our prior work (Rajala, Lipponen, Pursi, & Abdulhamed, 2017), we have discussed a method of video-elicited discussions designed to create a safe and supportive space for ECEC educators to reflect on their work. These discussions could serve as interesting sites to examine how ECEC educators engage in a collective attempt to achieve practical wisdom when discussing their work and appropriate ways of responding to children's distress. Furthermore, researchers could also introduce relevant theoretical concepts to these discussions in order to support the practitioners in their reflections and, thus, potentially expand their capacity for practical wisdom and compassion. Within this type of research–practice partnerships, theory can serve as a fruitful tool for promoting professional development and a culture of compassion in different ECEC settings. For example, in the Change Laboratory method (Virkkunen & Shelley Newnham, 2013), researchers confront the participants with material such as recorded interviews or videos of everyday events taking place in the kindergarten. These materials are then discussed together with the practitioners with the intention of provoking them to question their everyday practices. After that, they are supported in analyzing the problematic issues of their practice by locating these issues within a broader perspective. Here, theoretical concepts and models can be useful tools that drive the change process forward.

To conclude, we wish to emphasize that our sociocultural perspective on compassion highlights practical wisdom and compassion as socially shared and culturally mediated processes that are integral to the ongoing lived practice of ECEC settings. We have argued that reflecting on such

moments offers a possible avenue for change in the interactional and cultural practices of ECEC.

Furthermore, we have advocated for a view that, in efforts to promote compassion in ECEC settings, primacy should not be placed on creating compassionate individual practitioners but, rather, on the cultivation of cultures of compassion. As such, our study has implications for ECEC practitioners, leaders, and policymakers who wish to promote compassion in ECEC.

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