

4-6 year-old Children's Experience of Subjective Well-being and Social Relations in ECEC institutions

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Abstract: There is a need for research about children's perspectives on their everyday lives in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions, using methods that involves the children themselves and takes their voices seriously. This study aims at exploring what promotes and constrains children's wellbeing in light of their social relations to other children and staff in ECEC institutions. Research on children's own perspectives about their well-being has mainly been conducted among children older than those of preschool age, and therefore this study aimed at highlighting the voices of 4-6-year-old children regarding how they experience their lives in ECEC institutions. Quantitative data was collected through conversations with 171 Norwegian 4-6-year-old children based on an electronic questionnaire. The results indicate that relations, both with other children and with the practitioners, are important for children's well-being - particularly, liking the other children and experiencing that the children are kind to each other in the ECEC.

Keywords: early childhood education, subjective well-being, child-child relations, staff-child relations, electronic questionnaire

Introduction

In the western world there is a growing interest for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions, both related to labour market - and gender equality policy, but also for educational reasons (Adamson, 2008). Several voices are rising for the concern of the growing pressure for educational achievement, also for the very young children (Biesta, 2009; Moss et al, 2016). The United Nations (UN) are worried about this increasing focus on competition and pressure related to education, and in 2013 they published a General Comment (UN, 2013) on article 31 in the Convention of the Right of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Article 31 states that all children have the right to play, and the UN finds is

necessary to enhance the understanding of the importance of article 31 for children's well-being:

Play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children (...) and are of intrinsic value to the child, purely in terms of the enjoyment and pleasure they afford. (...) Children's development can be supported by loving and caring adults as they relate to children through play. (UN, 2013).

This comment is highlighting the importance of children's play, especially different kind of child initiated social play with peers, but also with loving and caring adults. One of the reasons is the enjoyment and pleasure it affords, it promotes a feeling of well-being. Since play is one of the most distinctive features of early childhood, it is important that children are given the opportunity to express themselves about their play, friendships and social relations in ECEC institutions. The aim of this paper is to investigate 4-6 year old children's own perspectives on their play and social relations with adults and peers in the Norwegian ECEC institution, and relate it to the concept of subjective well-being.

Children's Subjective Well-being

Research-based knowledge on what promotes and impedes the youngest children's well-being in ECEC institutions is lacking and the very notion of child well-being is contested (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012, Amerijckx and Humblet, 2014). Reviews on the topic also reveal that there are very few studies where children themselves are asked about their well-being and especially preschool children (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012, Amerijckx and Humblet, 2014). As a consequence we, who are concerned about 4-6 year old children's perspectives on their subjective well-being in ECEC institutions, must relate to research findings on older children and their perspectives on their school and home environments.

Well-being is an abstract, multi-dimensional, social and culturally constructed phenomenon, and Amerijckx and Humblet (2014) conclude after a thorough review of research on child well-being that:

The negative, eudemonic, objective, material and individual approaches to child well-being predominate over its positive, hedonic, subjective, spiritual and collective dimensions (p. 411).

Our study will be positioned as open (focusing on both positive and negative aspects of children's lives in ECEC), hedonic (as we are focusing on children's lives here and now),

subjective (we are listening to children's own experiences), spiritual (we are not focusing on material aspects) and collective (children in ECEC are members of a small institutional community, and the children are dependent of the staff and interdependent of each other as peers).

The concept of *subjective well-being* refers to an internal, subjective perception and experience of being recognised by others, feeling appreciated and having a sense of happiness and satisfaction – feeling well in relation to others (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; Foley et al., 2012; Koch, 2012; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; Thoilliez, 2011). Happiness is often seen in relation to subjective well-being, as this is a positive affect connected to general satisfaction with life. Thoilliez (2011) and Koch (2012) both apply the term in approximately the same way as subjective well-being when undertaking research on the phenomenon with younger children. Based on studies on children, happiness and wellbeing, we know that good social relationships are fundamental for wellbeing, and that family, friends and teachers are very important in this regard (Fattore, et al., 2009; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Thoilliez, 2011; Bratterud, Sandseter and Seland, 2012; Foley, Blackmore, Girdler et al., 2012).

In a previous study we found that the opportunity to have an influence on where to move, what to do and with whom are of crucial importance for children's well-being in ECEC institutions (Sandseter & Seland, 2016). This also includes children's opportunity to oppose the staff and negotiate and choose activities that differ from those that the staff selects. The physical environment, the toys/equipment and everyday activities were also important aspects of 4-6 year old children's subjective well-being in ECEC institutions (Sandseter & Seland, 2016).

Fattore et al (2009) have conducted a qualitative research study with 8- to 15-year-olds, using different kinds of interviews, drawings etc. to map out their complex understandings and experiences on their well-being, in school and at home. According to this study children's well-being is fundamentally dependent on their relationships and emotions in connection with significant others, both adults and peers. Elaborated from this, Fattore et al. present three overarching and interconnected dimensions that are particularly important for children's well-being:

- (1) Positive Sense of Self: Experiences of *positive recognition* and feeling a sense of belonging.

- (2) Agency - Control in Everyday Life: Being able to exert influence on everyday occurrences.
- (3) Security and Safety: Among others, *emotional security*, warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with adult and peers which enables children to fully engage in life.

In this article, points 1 and 3 above will be particularly in focus, exploring social relations between children and between children and staff in Norwegian ECEC institutions and how this relates to children's experience of well-being. Experiences of positive recognition, being seen as a person, acknowledgement and respect is closely related to emotional security, feeling safe in the community with others, to whom you can reach out for help when needed. Children in the age of 4-6 in ECEC institutions are totally dependent on the relationships with their caregivers, even more than older children. Research on peer cultures in early years indicates that children make friends and engage in play and peer activities from an early age, and that inclusion in peer communities are important for children themselves (see further discussion below). So, even though Fattore et al. has interviewed 8-15 year old children, we find their study trustworthy and appropriate as a theoretical framework for this article.

Children's Social Relations

An influential factor of children's well-being is the experience of friendship, play and inclusion in a community (Fattore et al., 2009; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Thoilliez, 2011). Young children enjoy themselves and create meaning through participating in social activities and by playing with caring employees and peers (Corsaro, 2011; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011; Löfdahl, 2014). Children actively seek social contact with a variety of peers, and a significant part of inclusion in ECEC institutions takes place in children's peer cultures, through the children's constant efforts to position themselves in the social life (Löfdahl, 2007; Skånfors, 2010). A lack of friendship and participation in play is a strain in a child's everyday life and is a risk factor for child development, learning and health, and exclusion can be experienced as severe misrecognition (Stoor-Grenner & Kirves, 2011; Søndergaard, 2009).

Interview studies with children in ECEC institutions indicate that some children are often harassed and excluded by other children (Kvistad & Søbstad, 2005; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011; Nordahl et al., 2012). This shows the importance of listening to children's voices in research on well-being in day care institutions.

In line with international research, the Norwegian framework plan for the content and tasks of Kindergartens (NMER, 2017) also underlines the importance of good, warm and caring relations between children and staff for a high-quality ECEC. This implies that the staff must have the ability and time to listen to the children and to interact and respond in a way that makes the children feel safe, secure and recognized as social actors in the institution (Bae, 2009; Fattore et al., 2009; Seland, 2009, Drugli & Undheim, 2012).

Norwegian ECEC Institutions

All Norwegian children from 1 to 6 years of age have the legal right to be educated and cared for in an ECEC institution. The education and care of children below school age is defined as the first, non-compulsory step of the educational system. Today approximately 97% of Norwegian 4-6 year old children attend ECEC institutions (Statistics Norway, 2016).

The Norwegian ECEC has a strong emphasis on free play and friendships among children, and securing good social relations between children and staff as a means of promoting children's well-being and health. The national framework plan (NMER, 2017), applying to all ECEC institutions in Norway, emphasizes that everyday life in ECEC should be characterized by the children experiencing play, care and learning in a good physical and psychosocial environment, protected from psychological harm such as exclusion, discrimination and bullying.

Aim of Study

Norway has implemented the UNCRC (UN, 1989) in its ECEC legislation, and the children's right to express themselves on matters that are affecting their lives has become a dominating discourse (Kjørholt, 2004; Seland 2009). Because there is a scarce amount of quantitative studies listening to young children voices about their subjective experiences on their well-being, we aim to contribute to this research tradition. In line with UNCRC this study is based on an understanding of children as active and competent actors. The intention is to develop more knowledge about what promotes and constrains children's well-being in light of their social relations to other children and staff in ECEC institutions.

The research question in this article is as follows:

How do children experience the social relations with other children and staff in their ECEC institution, and how is this related to their general subjective well-being?

Former research on indicators of wellbeing has not usually focused on grasping children's own perspectives on their subjective well-being (Fattore et al., 2009). Because children play an active role in creating their own well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2008), children need to be involved in all stages of research, attempting to understand their perspectives and attitudes (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007). Research on children's own perspectives about their well-being has mainly been conducted among children older than preschool age, usually from the age of eight (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). This study focuses on the voice of 4-6 year old children about how they experience their lives in ECEC institutions. In addition, because much of the research done on children's lives in ECEC has applied qualitative methods including a rather limited number of children, this study aims at using methods that allowed for including a larger number of children and quantitative data.

Method

Sampling

The participating children in this study were drawn from 18 ECEC institutions in Sør-Trøndelag County (the middle part of Norway). The institutions were selected randomly but with criteria to cover various types of institutions with regard to size, ownership, organization and professional profiling. A variation in size of the municipality and type of ECEC institution was emphasized. Type of ECEC institutions was categorized based on Vassenden et al. (2011): Small <45 children, Medium 45-79 children, Large \geq 80 children. A small department organized ECEC institution withdrew from the study just prior to data collection, so the final number of participating institutions was 17 (see Table 1). For a more detailed description of the sampling we refer to Sandseter & Seland (2016) which describes another part of the same study.

The average group size for children age 3 or more in Norwegian ECEC institutions is 19,4 children, and the most common size of an institution is between 40-80 children (U.dir 2015a). Norway has an ECEC system and policy that secures a high degree of equality of the ECEC institutions; private and municipal ECEC institutions have the same economic subsidies from the government, they are all part of the same governmental intake system so they recruit children from all socio-economic backgrounds and they are all obliged to follow the Kindergarten Act (NMER 2005) and the national Framework plan (NMER 2017). They are all also obliged to follow the norm of pedagogues (1 pedagogue per 7-9 under threes, and

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1 pedagogue per 14-18 over threes), and most of them has two assistants per pedagogue independent of the organization or profiling of the institution (U.dir 2015b). There is also a common norm for the size of the indoor and outdoor environment that applies to all ECEC institutions. This means that when samples are drawn randomly between counties, municipalities and institutions, there is a high likeliness of securing representativeness.

Table 1 Overview of the organization and size of the participating ECEC institutions (N=17)

| Organization /size | Small | Medium | Large | Total |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Department organization | 5 | 3 | 3 | 11 |
| Base/flexible organization | | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Total | 5 | 6 | 6 | 17 |

From each of the 17 ECEC institutions, 10 children were randomly drawn from the age group 4-6 years as participants. All the selected children agreed to participate. In one institution, 11 children participated, and therefore the total number of children is 171.

Participants

Of the 171 participating children 51.5% were girls and 48.5% were boys. Almost half of the children were 6 years old (48.5%), while almost a third were 5 years old (31.6%), and a fifth were 4 years old (19.9%). Because of ethical considerations, we only collect the children's year of birth (not the date), and the children did not have to answer all the questions if they did not want to. Thus, the number of answers (N) varies somewhat in the presentation of the results. The missing data were not included in the analysis.

Researchers

The collection of data was managed and conducted by two researchers (the authors of this article), with the help of three research assistants (master's degree students). The assistants were given thorough training and conducted several test interviews before data collection began in addition to receiving guidance along the way if needed.

Structured Interviews with 4- to 6-year-olds

The researchers conducted conversations with the children based on an electronic questionnaire developed for this study by the researchers. It was filled out discretely on a laptop or a tablet by the interviewer during the conversation. The questionnaire contained questions about how children experience everyday life in ECEC; the activities they engaged in, their opportunities for participation, their relationships with other children and the staff, and the institutions' physical environment (both indoors and outdoors). This article focuses on presenting results from the questions about how children experience social relations to other children and staff in the ECEC and how this relates to their general well-being. The

results on general well-being and the children's experiences of the ECEC physical environment, activities and participation are reported elsewhere (Sandseter & Seland, 2016).

There were all together 9 questions about the relations to other children in the ECEC institution. These were 3 questions about friendship, 2 questions about playmates, 2 questions about how children behave towards each other, and 2 questions about harassment. Questions about the relations to adults/staff in the ECEC institution were all together 11 questions. There were 3 questions on how well they knew the adults in their ECEC, 4 questions about how attentive the adults were towards the children, 3 questions about how available the adults were for the children, and 1 question about incidents of negative responses from the adults to children. Even though questions could be sorted in these themes, we have analysed each question as a unique unit with its own interesting nuances. The questions about general well-being had three response alternatives, while the questions about relationships had four alternatives (e.g. yes, often/yes, sometimes/no, almost never/no, never). A technique resembling the technique used in The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (Harter & Pike, 1984) was used. The children were asked the question (e.g. "Do you think being in your ECEC institution is boring?") and answered "yes" or "no", and then the interviewer followed up to get a more nuanced answer. If the child said "yes", the interviewer asked: "Do you mean 'yes, often' or 'yes, sometimes'?" This technique was tried out in a pilot study, and amendments were made to the wording and number of questions before the actual data collection was conducted.

Statistical analyses were conducted in the IBM SPSS Statistics 22 program. The questionnaire for this study was self-developed by the researchers, and even though the aim was not to analyse this as an overall scale for children's subjective well-being (with generated total scores or subscales), the questionnaire showed a Cronbach's Alfa of 0.756, which indicate that the children were highly consistent in their responses. General descriptive analyses (percentages) were applied to find the distribution of answers and variables, bivariate correlation analysis was used to explore the correlations between variables, and a multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine what aspects could predict children's well-being.

The missing data (due to children not wanting to answer some questions) were excluded from the analysis instead of performing an imputation method to substitute the missing data with a possible plausible value (e.g. the overall mean).

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Ethical Considerations

There are special ethical issues in research with young children that arise in few other studies (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). One of these issues is the need to gain informed consent from both the parents and the children. It is important to ensure that the children understand both their own and the researcher's role during the data collection, and that they can withdraw from the interview at any time (Grieg, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007). We started all the interviews with a thorough information to the child about what he/she was about to participate in.

One should always consider the balance of power between children and the researcher in research with children (Waller & Bitou, 2011), particularly in the parts of the data collection where the children were interviewed one-on-one. One should avoid unnatural situations where the children feel that they are participating in an interrogation rather than a conversation. In this project, special attention was given to this point, and the situations were adapted to the children's needs and wishes during the interview. This resulted, for example, in interviews where the researcher sat on small child chairs or lay on the floor together with the child. The experience from this data collection was that the children were very interested in telling the researcher about their daily life in their ECEC.

The study was approved by the Data Protection Official for Research in Norway, under the premise that the data would not be analysed on institution (ECEC) level due to the low number of children in each institution.

Results

The results about the children's general well-being are reported in more detail elsewhere (Sandseter & Seland, 2015), but overall, the results show that many children are happy and content with their daily life in the ECEC institution. Still, around a third to more than half of the children report that experience being in ECEC as "just OK" and not all that good (Sandseter & Seland, 2015). This study explores how relationships with peers and adults in ECEC institutions are related to children's experience of subjective well-being.

Relations: Child - Child

Relations to peers in the ECEC institution are important for a child's well-being, and therefore several questions in the interviews focused on relations to other children.

Table 2 Frequency of answers from children on questions concerning their relations to peers in their ECEC institution

| | <u>Answers</u> | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| | Yes, many | Some | Just a few | No, none |
| Do you like the other children in the ECEC? | 44,2 % | 43 % | 10,9 % | 1,8 % |
| Do you have some good friends in your ECEC? | 49,4 % | 33,3 % | 16,7 % | 0,6 % |
| | Yes, often | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
| Not having someone to play with | 9,8 % | 54,9 % | 18,9 % | 16,5 % |
| Children talk bad/unfriendly to each other | 23,5 % | 52,5 % | 14,2 % | 9,9 % |
| Children are kind to each other | 34,6 % | 59,6 % | 5,1 % | 0,6 % |
| Some children are harassed | 20,4 % | 53,3 % | 13,2 % | 13,2 % |
| I am harassed | 11,6 % | 45,1 % | 14,6 % | 28,7 % |

Table 2 also shows that. Correlation analysis show that those who have many good friends also report, to a significantly higher degree, that they like ($r=.314$, $p<.000$) the other children in the ECEC institution. The numbers in table 2 show that most children either like many or some of the other children in their ECEC institution, and most children have many/some good friends. Still there is a portion of the children who neither like the other children nor have someone to play with in their ECEC and that these children to a lesser degree experience having good friends in the ECEC.

It seems that the children can be somewhat rough towards each other verbally, but that they generally are kind towards each other. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there is a significant negative correlation between experiencing that children talk badly/unfriendly to each other and experiencing that the children are kind to each other ($r= -.259$, $p<.01$).

Table 2 also shows that some children experience harassment among the children in the ECEC institution. This indicates that there are quite a few children who experience harassment often or sometimes in their ECEC institution.

Relations: Staff - Child

The quality of the relations between children and staff are also important for children's well-being in the ECEC. On the question of if they knew all the staff members in their group well, most children (90.4%) said yes while a few (9.6%) said no. The majority of children (69.3%) also said that they had a favourite adult in their ECEC institution. The children were further asked several questions about how they experienced the relationship with practitioners in their ECEC.

Table 3 Frequency of answers from children about the relationship with staff in their ECEC.

| | <u>Answers</u> | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------|--------------|--------|
| | Yes, often | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
| Do the staff say hello to you when you arrive in the ECEC? | 74,5 % | 19,4 % | 3 % | 3 % |
| Does the staff in the ECEC tell you when you have done something good? | 38,8 % | 44,9 % | 7,5 % | 8,8 % |
| Does the staff in the ECEC listen to you when you speak your mind or suggest something? | 36,7 % | 49,7 % | 10,9 % | 2,7 % |
| Do you sometimes feel the staff in the ECEC is busy and have little time for you? | 19,4 % | 38,1 % | 18,1 % | 24,4 % |
| Is it hard to reach the staff in ECEC when you need them? | 16,7 % | 36,5 % | 22,4 % | 24,4 % |
| Does the staff in the ECEC do something fun together with the children? | 32,7 % | 43,2 % | 8,6 % | 15,4 % |

Table 3 shows that many children experience that the practitioners in their ECEC see and acknowledge them and are attentive towards their opinions. The majority of children also said that the practitioners in their ECEC often or sometimes do something fun with the children. Nevertheless, there are a number of children who do not express these positive experiences, and rather feel that the staff does not give much them attention and is hard to reach.

Social Relations and Children's Well-being in the ECEC

The three variables: "How do you like being in the ECEC institution?"; "Do you think your ECEC institution is a nice place for children?"; and "What is your usual emotional state when you are in your ECEC institution?" were chosen as the measures of children's general subjective well-being in the ECEC. These three variables showed a significant correlation with each other (all at $p < .000$), and together they cover several aspects of the children's experience.

To examine the relationship between several variables about the children's experiences of social relations in the ECEC and the children's general well-being, bivariate correlations were conducted. In table 4 only the statistical significant correlations (to one or several of the overall well-being variables) are shown (non-significant are discarded).

Table 4 Correlations between general well-being variables and children's experiences of social relations in the ECEC institution. Bivariate correlations.

| Children's experiences of social relations | | How do you like being in the ECEC institution? | Do you think your ECEC institution is a nice place for children? | What is your usual emotional state when you are in your ECEC institution? |
|---|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Do you like the other children in the ECEC institution? | Pearson correlation | .308** | .274** | .171* |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .031 |
| | N | 162 | 159 | 159 |
| Do you think the children in the ECEC are kind to each other? | Pearson correlation | .247** | .282** | .217** |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .002 | .000 | .007 |
| | N | 154 | 151 | 152 |
| Do the staff say hello to you when you arrive in the ECEC? | Pearson correlation | .110 | .127 | .176* |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .163 | .111 | .027 |
| | N | 163 | 158 | 159 |
| Does the staff in the ECEC tell you when you have done something good? | Pearson correlation | .182* | .137 | .086 |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .028 | .101 | .307 |
| | N | 146 | 144 | 143 |
| Does the staff in the ECEC listen to you when you speak your mind or suggest something? | Pearson correlation | .120 | .199* | .204* |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .148 | .016 | .014 |
| | N | 147 | 145 | 145 |
| Do you have a favourite staff member in the ECEC? | Pearson correlation | .002 | .088 | .187* |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .985 | .272 | .018 |
| | N | 164 | 158 | 160 |
| Does the staff in the ECEC do something fun together with the children? | Pearson correlation | .174* | .148 | .081 |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .028 | .065 | .315 |
| | N | 160 | 155 | 157 |
| Is it hard to reach the staff in ECEC when you need them? | Pearson correlation | -.084 | -.211** | -.257** |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | .302 | .009 | .001 |
| | N | 162 | 151 | 151 |

* Statistically significant at the 0.05 level, ** at the 0.01 level

Table 4 shows that there are significant positive correlations between all the items on general well-being and liking the other children in the ECEC and experiencing that the children in the ECEC are kind to each other. There are also positive correlations between one or more of the general well-being items and children having a favourite adult in the ECEC, that staff greets the children when they arrive in the ECEC, that staff tells children when they have done something good, that they listen to what the children have to say, and that they do something fun together with the children. On the other hand, table 4 shows that experiencing the staff in the ECEC as hard to reach when children need them is negatively correlated with their well-being.

To examine what aspects could predict children's well-being among the eight items that correlated with the general well-being items, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. First, the three general well-being items were computed into one general measure of general well-being. Then, using the enter regression method with the variables from table 4, a significant model emerged: $F(5,19), p < .0005$. The model explains 20,8 % of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = .208$). The two significant predictors are items about the child-child relationship: if they like the other children in ECEC and if the children are kind to each other.

Table 5 The unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients for the variables entered into the model.

| Variable | B | SE B | β |
|---|-------|------|---------|
| Do you like the other children in the ECEC institution? | 0.54 | 0.20 | 0.25* |
| Do you think the children in the ECEC are kind to each other? | 0.60 | 0.26 | 0.21* |
| Does the staff in the ECEC listen to you when you speak your mind or suggest something? | 0.29 | 0.20 | 0.13 |
| Does the staff in the ECEC tell you when you have done something good? | 0.20 | 0.16 | 0.11 |
| Is it hard to reach the staff in ECEC when you need them? | -0.16 | 0.14 | -0.16 |
| Do the staff say hello to you when you arrive in the ECEC? | 0.13 | 0.21 | 0.06 |
| Does the staff in the ECEC do something fun together with the children? | 0.06 | 0.15 | 0.04 |
| Do you have a favourite staff member in the ECEC? | 0.12 | 0.32 | 0.03 |

* $p < 0.05$

The Experience of Being Harassed and Other Dimensions of Social Relations

Table 3 shows that quite a few children experience being harassed often or sometimes when they are in their ECEC institution. This raised our attention, and analyses were conducted to explore how this experience related to other dimensions of social relations in the ECEC (including questions from the interviews not reported in the descriptive statistics above).

The results show that the experience of being harassed correlates positively with thinking the ECEC is boring ($r = .345, p < .000$), thinking the children talk badly/unfriendly to each other in the ECEC ($r = .329, p < .000$), missing their mum and dad ($r = .235, p < .01$),

experiencing that some children are scolded by the staff in the ECEC ($r=.258$, $p<.01$), and that the practitioners are busy and have little time for children ($r=.199$, $p<.05$). There are also negative correlations between the experiences of being harassed and thinking the ECEC is fun ($r= -.231$, $p<.01$), liking the other children in the ECEC ($r=-.238$, $p<.01$), and experiencing that the children in the ECEC are kind to each other ($r=-.211$, $p<.01$).

It seems that the experience of negative social relations between children in the ECEC institution is related to the experience of being harassed. In addition, there is a relation between experiencing harassment and experiencing that the staff in the ECEC scold children and have little time for them. There is also a relation between experiencing harassment in the ECEC and thinking that the ECEC is boring as well as missing mum and dad when they are in the ECEC. Still, these analyses cannot conclude anything about the causal relationship between these factors, and therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

The 171 children in the present study generally express a high degree of well-being in their everyday life in the ECEC. Still, around a third of them also express that life in the ECEC is “just OK” or “in the middle”, and a few experience a rather low degree of well-being when they are in their ECEC institution. In the following we will discuss children's experienced relationships to other children and staff in their ECEC institution, and how this is related to their subjective well-being.

Relations: Child - Child

The results show that most of the children in this study like many or some of the other children in their ECEC institution and that most children have many or some good friends in the ECEC. As research indicates that friendships are important for children's well-being (Fattore et al., 2009; Foley et al., 2012; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Thoilliez, 2011), it is positive to find that 82% of the children experience to have many or some good friends in the ECEC. Additionally, liking the other children would mean that children express this feeling to each other and give each other a feeling of being recognised and appreciated, which is also important for an individual's subjective well-being (Fattore et al., 2009; Foley et al., 2012; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; Thoilliez, 2011). Still, it is worth noticing that 13% of the children only like just a few or none of the other children and that 17% have only a few or no friends in the ECEC.

The analysis showing that having friends is correlated with liking the other children indicates that it is important for the children to find common ground for liking each other, and to build friendships. If these relational qualities are lacking, the children will be more vulnerable to feeling alone and without good peer relations and a good social foundation.

The majority of children in this study experience that some children either often or sometimes talk badly/unfriendly to each other, but there is also a majority of children who think that the children are often or sometimes kind to each other in their ECEC institution (table 2). This could be interpreted as an expression of a situation where even though the children talk badly/unfriendly to each other now and then, most of them experience good social relations with peers. Still, the fact that these two variables are negatively correlated would mean that there is a group of children who experience both that the children talk badly/unfriendly to each other and that the children are not kind to each other.

The experience of being harassed by other children in the ECEC is also central when trying to capture what characterizes the social interaction between the children and what this interaction is like. The present study did not look at "bullying" as a phenomenon in the ECEC, and hence the results cannot lead to a conclusion about bullying in Norwegian ECEC institutions. Nevertheless, the descriptions of harassment that the children gave to the researchers during the interviews included experiences of being pulled by the hair, hit, pushed, having toys taken from them while playing, and being excluded from play with other children. These are experiences that are very negative and uncomfortable for the child, and there is a rather high percentage (12%) reporting that they experience this harassment often in the ECEC. Caution must be taken to problematize this result, as we know that behaviour such as pushing and hitting also can be a natural part of children's social life and their way of solving conflict situations in play. Still, taking children's subjective experiences seriously, these numbers are surprisingly high and would be interpreted as a sign of a negative social climate in the ECEC, where exclusion and misrecognition between children occurs (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011; Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005; Nordahl et al., 2012; Stoor-Grenner & Kirves, 2011).

Child – Child Relations and Subjective Well-being

Similar to other studies (Fattore et al., 2009; Holder & Coleman, 2009), the results in the present study also show that liking other children is related to the child's well-being (table 4 and 7), but surprisingly, the question about having many good friends did not reveal

statistically significant correlations with general well-being, even though there was a positive tendency. An explanation for this might be that children do not need many good friends to promote their well-being as long as they have at least one good friend who gives them the necessary recognition and feeling of belonging (Fattore et al., 2009), and research shows that playing alone can be related to subjective well-being (Seland, Sandseter, & Bratterud, 2015). In addition, there are many different emotions connected to friendships, including anxiety and jealousy, and no one can hurt your feelings as much as a good friend who will not play with you (Greve, 2009). Many friends may also make the child's position work inside the peer culture more complex and difficult (Corsaro, 2011; Skånfors, 2010).

Experiencing that the children are not nice to each other, and hence are not nice to them, also has a negative relation to children's well-being (table 4 and 5) and could be a threat for the children's level of positive affect and a positive and satisfactory sense of self (Fattore et al., 2009; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). Even though we did not find a significant relation between being harassed and our variables of general of well-being, the importance of taking this seriously is strengthened when looking at the correlations showing that there is a relation between experiencing harassment from other children and not liking the other children, thinking the children talk badly/unfriendly to each other, and experiencing that the children in the ECEC are not kind to each other. The experience of several negative child-child relations in the ECEC thus seems to be connected with the experience of being harassed. Altogether, this would be experienced by the child as a very uncomfortable situation where one is struggling with misrecognition and a lack of good relations and emotional security (Fattore et al., 2009).

Relations: Staff-Child

Most children (76%) reported that the staff does fun things with the children (table 3), but on more specific questions about if the practitioners play with them indoors and outdoors, the results show that very few children experience that the staff participate in play. Around a third of the children say that the practitioners never play with them either indoors or outdoors. It seems that even though the children have a general perception of the staff doing fun things together with them, this is not necessarily connected to the staff playing with them. Still, it is surprising to find such low engagement from the staff in the ECEC regarding participating in children's play. However, these findings are in line with Kallestad and Ødegaard (2013), who found that Norwegian ECEC institutions generally have a low level of teacher-led activities,

and Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä (2011), who found that the staff and the children seemed distant from each other, especially during the outdoor activities, which Seland (2009) also found.

A majority of the children experience that the practitioners both see and acknowledge them and are aware of their opinions and wishes (table 3). This is related both to being seen in general, but also receiving specific positive feedback and being listened to when the child takes initiative on something. Still, more than half of the children experience that the practitioners are often or sometimes busy and have little time, and that it is hard to reach them when the children need them. Although this is the expression of only half of the children, it is a somewhat large group considering that ECEC are institutions in which a main aim is to be together with and available for the children (NMER, 2005, 2017; UN, 1989).

Staff – Child Relations and Subjective Well-being

Secure and recognizing relationships with the ECEC staff are important for children's well-being (Fattore et al., 2009; Foley et al., 2012; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; Thoilliez, 2011), and all practitioners working in the ECEC are responsible for creating such good relations with the children. The importance of establishing a good adult–child relationship that is clearly perceived as something positive by the child is evident when looking at the results showing a positive correlation between children's general well-being and the experiences of being greeted by the staff when arriving in the ECEC, having the staff tell them when they have done something good and having the staff listen to them when they speak or suggest things (table 2). Add to this the negative correlation between the experiences of the staff being hard to reach when then children need them and children's general subjective well-being. This may be of special relevance for children this age group, who are deeply dependent on adult protection, help and care. Not reaching the staff when in need may cause a feeling of insecurity. Feeling safe and secure is one of the most important issues for feeling well, even for older children (Fattore et.al.2009). Overall, the staff in the ECEC has a great responsibility of securing the children's well-being and health (NMER, 2017), and knowing that a high degree of well-being promotes better health and quality of life (Huppert & So, 2013; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012), the way practitioners in ECEC meet the children and their willingness and time to engage in play and positive relations with them is of high importance.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring children's experience of social relations with other children and staff in their ECEC institution and how this is related to their general subjective well-being. Looking at the correlation between general well-being and social relations, the results show that relations, both with other children and with the practitioners in the ECEC, are important for children's well-being - particularly, liking the other children, experiencing that the children are kind to each other in the ECEC and having positive relations to the staff.

A special focus has been given to children experiencing harassment in the ECEC, and a somewhat alarming amount of children say that they experience this often. The experience of being harassed is correlated with a number of negative experiences of social relations, and this call for a special attention towards these children and how to help them establish positive social relations with other children. It is the ECEC staff's responsibility to promote these positive relations when the children struggle to establish them, and this would require the staff's availability and attention. When we know that the groups of children in Norwegian ECEC are growing and that the child-staff ratio is increasing (Seland, 2009; Vassenden et al., 2011), we are concerned about the quality of ECEC and the children's experience of well-being. As the UN with its General Comment #17 (2013) states; play, friendship and good social relations among peers and staff are of unique value, both for children's life quality, development and learning.

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