

Rajala, A., & Lipponen L. (2018). Early childhood education and care in Finland: Compassion in narrations of early childhood education student teachers. In S. Garvis, S. Phillipson, & H. Harju-Luukkainen (Eds.), *International perspectives on early childhood education and care: Early childhood education in the 21st century Vol I* (pp. 64-75). Routledge, New York.

CHAPTER 7

Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland: Compassion in Narrations of Early Childhood Education Student Teachers

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Introduction

Emotions are a salient topic in contemporary research of early childhood education (Madrid, Fernie, & Kantor, 2015). Yet, research addressing such a fundamental emotion or phenomenon as compassion is still scarce. The significance of compassion is nicely stated by Nussbaum (2014): it is the basic sentiment of a democratic community without which people lack the motive to respect others, protect them from harm and respond to their undeserved sufferings. Compassion and its attributes, such as social responsibility and emphatic concern, are essential competences and cultural practices that are needed, not only to build a future society, but also to thrive in everyday lives (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Nussbaum, 2011). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2016 report, *global competency for an inclusive world*, empathy and compassion are regarded as essential global competences, and these competences are increasingly being foregrounded in the curricula of different countries. Moreover, compassion results from and is a condition for secure attachment of children (Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Taggart (2016) proposes that compassion should form the foundation for ethical practices in early childhood education and care.

In this chapter, we present and elaborate a new perspective for researching compassion in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, which we call the Cultures of Compassion perspective (see also Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppö, in press). In this perspective, compassion is defined as an action that seeks to alleviate another person's suffering and involves empathic concern for the other's well-being (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011). Our perspective goes beyond the more conventional psychological and pedagogical perspectives on compassion that address such questions as to how children develop capacities to display compassion or how compassion can be fostered through pedagogy. While recognising the importance of these questions, the Cultures of Compassion

perspective conceptualizes compassion in broader terms, that is, as an integral aspect of the daily lives of both adults and children (see also Dutton & Worline,; Lilius et al., 2011; Lipponen, in press; Madrid, Fernie & Kantor, 2015). In other words, compassion is embedded in the relationships and everyday practices of ECEC settings. Furthermore, the perspective discussed in this chapter draws upon research in the social sciences that considers compassion in its socio-political context and as a contested phenomenon (for an overview, see Ure & Frost, 2014). Thus, compassion may involve balancing different agendas and potentially conflicting interests. It can also take the form of not only alleviating the immediate suffering, but acting to transform the social circumstances that damage people or cause them distress.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the Cultures of Compassion perspective can help us to understand ECEC educators' lived experiences of compassion in their work. In particular, we explore narratives of compassion collected from master degree students of early childhood education, most of whom have worked or work as qualified ECEC professionals.

Firstly, we outline our perspective for researching compassion in ECEC settings and distinguish it from other perspectives on compassion. After that, we discuss how narratives can be used to research compassion. We then outline the Finnish ECEC system and elaborate our conceptualization of compassion by analysing narratives of Finnish ECEC educators. In addition to grounding our theoretical claims, our examples demonstrate the import and relevance of our theoretical conceptualisations for research of compassion in ECEC settings. Finally, we will pose some practical implications based on our analysis for developing ECEC practices.

The Cultures of Compassion Perspective for Researching Compassion in ECEC Settings

The existing research and pedagogical programmes related to compassion in ECEC settings has mainly been conducted from psychological perspectives. From a psychological perspective, compassion is understood as an emotion, or as an individual skill or trait. As an emotion, it is seen as a part of an emotion family of distress, pity, sadness, sympathy, and love. However, as pointed out by Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas (2010), evolutionary analysis has shown that compassion is a distinct emotion, and should not be confused with these other emotions nor with empathy, which is perhaps the closest to compassion. Compassion depends not only on the noticing of suffering, but also on the extent to which a

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focal actor feels empathic concern (Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014; Kanov, Matlis, & Worline, 2004). This is defined by Batson as “other-oriented feelings that are most often congruent with the perceived welfare of the other person” (1994, p. 606). This emotional sub process is the dominant way that psychologists have studied and defined compassion (Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010). Empathic concern involves feelings of sympathy that tend to be other-oriented and altruistically, as opposed to egoistically, motivated (Batson, 1987). These feelings are a “potent source of motivation to help relieve the empathy-inducing need” (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007, p. 65). As a trait, compassion can be understood as a general pattern of behaviour, thought, or styles of emotional responses to act on the behalf of a distressed or suffering other. These patterns or styles persist across contexts and over time. They also differ across individuals and influence one’s behaviour.

One central limitation of a psychological perspective is that while exclusively focusing on those who express compassion, it has mainly ignored the perspectives of those who receive compassion or witness it as bystanders. Furthermore, there are a lack of studies that treat compassion as a culturally constructed phenomenon, especially in early childhood settings.

Informed by a social practice theory (Lilius et al., 2011; Orlikowski, 2002), this study seeks to overcome the limitations of the psychological perspectives and conceptualize compassion as a multi-dimensional process composed of three elements: 1) noticing another person’s suffering, 2) having other-regarding empathic concern, and 3) acting to alleviate the suffering (Kanov et al., 2004). Whereas empathy means the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing, compassion goes further in leading to actions such as helping, including, caring, comforting, sharing, and protecting others from harm and injustice. 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).

Drawing from a practice perspective, research in workplaces, such as a hospital or a university, has shown that compassion increases positive emotions and commitment to work (Frost, Dutton, Worline & Wilson, 2000; Lilius, 2008). Compassion, or lack thereof, also shapes people’s sense making about themselves, others, as well as the workplace. In the context of institutional education, Lipponen (in press) studied the formation of compassion, related to rules that govern how it is and should be expressed in early childhood settings. In

particular, the study focused on acts of compassion and their constitutive practices in a Finnish kindergarten. Lipponen found that 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. The most common rule, inscribed in the curriculum was 'including', which probably implies that the kindergarten aimed to be an inclusive space in which everybody is accepted, and everyone's needs are recognised. Observing everyday interactions, Lipponen (in press) found that most of the concrete acts of compassion were acts of comforting and caring. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the need for comfort and care is very visible in everyday life. A crying child missing its parents or a child who has hurt themselves are easy to recognise. Most of the acts of compassion were directed by teachers towards children.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the psychological and practice perspectives, we, however, argue that understanding such a complex phenomenon as compassion, requires us to go beyond the psychological and practice perspectives. As a solution, we will offer a third approach, which we call the Cultures of Compassion perspective. The basic idea of our approach is that we further elaborate and develop the practice perspective with ideas from the 'politics of compassion' (Ure & Frost, 2014), and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987). Both approaches share the idea of transforming and expanding existing institutional or organizational practices and structures.

One central question in 'politics of compassion' is to where, or towards what are acts of compassion directed. Whitebrook (2014) advocates the nature of compassion, arguing that compassion becomes political when it identifies systemic or institutional causes of collective suffering, and then acts against these causes. In a similar way, Nussbaum (2014) argues that compassion is the basic sentiment of a democratic community: without it, we lack the motive to respect others, protect them from harm and respond to their undeserved sufferings. As a building block of a democratic community, compassion should operate beyond the individual emotions as well as the relationship of the sufferer and the one who is trying to alleviate the pain.

From an activity theoretical (Engeström, 1987; Stetsenko, 2016) point of view, tracking structures or institutional causes of collective suffering and acting against them requires exploring and understanding the historical development of these institutions or systems, and their practices. These systems are shaped and transformed over long periods of time, and their problems and capacity to develop into something new in the future can only be understood against their own history. Moreover, human beings do not live in a vacuum,

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but our activities are mediated by the cultural symbol systems and artefacts we use, and social mediators, such as rules and division of labour. Thus, to understand compassion, and following the principles of activity theory, one should explore, for instance, historical developments of an organization, formation of rules as well as practical and symbolic tools that mediate how compassion can be, and should be expressed in early childhood settings.

Compassion Narratives

To illustrate our theoretical claims, we analyse examples derived from narratives collected from master degree students of early childhood education (N=24) in the University of Helsinki. The master's degree programme in early childhood education is based either on the Bachelor of Education or other at least first-cycle university degrees. The master's degree of early childhood education is comprised of 300 ECTS credits, including orienting studies, major subject studies, and optional studies.

All students participating in this study were women (aged between 22-50 years), and many of them had experiences of working as a kindergarten teacher before or during their master degree studies, or both. As a part of one of their courses, "Perspectives on Early Childhood Pedagogy and Learning", we asked them to write a short narrative about compassion. The narratives were solicited with two open-ended questions, using the following instruction (see also Lilius et al., 2008): "Please provide a one-page long story of a time when you either (a) experienced compassion in everyday life and at work, or (b) witnessed compassion in everyday life or at work".

Narratives provide a good starting point for researching compassion and sense making about compassion since they capture and convey participants' lived experiences and emotions (Bruner, 1986). For the most part, the descriptions were stories in which the respondents had received compassion from colleagues, leadership, or the children, or stories in which compassion was denied. Some of the respondents reported events that they had witnessed or in which they were themselves giving compassion. A frequent trigger of compassion in the narratives was a tragic event or a difficulty in the respondents' personal lives. These triggers included family or personal issues, serious illness of oneself or loved one, home fire, or problems in combining working life and personal life. Other triggers included difficulties to fulfil the demands of work (many of the respondents occupied a novice position in their working community), conflicts between the employees, or children's suffering. The

compassionate acts most often took the form of provision of emotional support (comforting, hugging, listening), giving time or flexibility, or material support.

In the following, we show in more detail how compassion was structured in the narratives. We also show how compassion (or its denial) was not merely described as individual isolated instances but as a recurrent feature of how the social and cultural practices were organised in the ECEC communities.

Finnish Early Childhood Education

Finnish ECEC is guided by two national level documents prepared by multi professional expert groups consisting of administrators, researchers, and trade union representatives: National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2016, to be implemented for the first time in August 2017) and National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2014). These documents serve as a basis for the curricula devised at the municipality and day care unit levels. Early childhood education staff is responsible for drafting unit-specific curricula. Early childhood education and care, pre-primary education that is part of it and basic education form an entity proceeding consistently in relation to the child's growth and learning and build a foundation for life-long learning. The municipalities are responsible for arranging the ECEC services, as well as for their quality and supervision. At the national level, ECEC is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The Finnish ECEC curricula emphasize compassionate orientation to other people. Mutual respect, empathy and a caring attitude towards others and the environment are seen as important educational goals and should be a visible part of the ECEC activities. Children are encouraged and instructed to recognise, express and regulate a variety of emotions. Moreover, the ECEC curricula instruct educators to foster children's capacity to take others into account in various conflict situations.

In general, the Finnish early childhood education can be characterised in terms of a holistic approach that encourages play, relationship, and curiosity. It builds on children's interests, and resists the 'school preparation approach'. The daily practices of Finnish early childhood education include 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 are also considered educationally valuable, and educators play an important role in these activities by guiding and helping children. In addition, during the day in the centre, children receive three meals, have a rest break, and take part in outdoor activities around the year.

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Furthermore, the Finnish ECEC is characterised by a multi professional work community with a varying combination of professional qualification levels and job descriptions, as well as cooperation with professionals in other sectors. The cooperative work is usually organised in multi professional teams. The ECEC staff responsible for children is required to have appropriate training. One in three in ECEC centres must have a higher education degree. The minimum requirement for a kindergarten teacher is a Bachelor degree in Education or in Social Science. Other staff in ECEC centres are expected to have at least a vocational upper-secondary qualification in the field of social welfare and health care. The Finnish early childhood education teacher is considered to be an autonomous professional who is committed to continuous personal development and is assumed to have an inquiry-oriented approach to uphold the quality of their work. This development orientation usually takes the form of reflection through discussion, observation and documentation within the professional community, families and the child (Kopisto, Salo, Lipponen, & Krokfors, 2014).

Compassion as a Recurrent Aspect of Daily Practice in Finnish ECEC Settings

In the first narrative, the respondent describes how difficulties in her personal life spilled into the workplace, and how the situation was collectively handled among the colleagues and leadership.

Narrative 1

“I had been in a difficult personal relation and when it ended, I was really broken mentally. Tears flowed from my eyes when I gave the children their meals. My team mates noticed this and said that I could take the time to go to the rest room. They came to substitute me. The situation made me sleepless, so after several nights of staying awake I could not do anything else than cry when I came to work. The vice principal and my team related to the issue well and they were okay with it when I took a three-day sick leave. Part of the work community were perhaps a bit unaware of what was the reason of my sick leave but when I came back to work they asked how I felt. My own team at that time (now I am in a different team) was really encouraging and compassionate, not only towards me, but towards all team members. I feel that one needs to be able to trust in one’s own team and to feel that team members encourage one to cope at work. While I was in the sick-leave, I felt that it was crucial that my team communicated to me that I should take the time to rest. But also, that they miss me. :)”

The basic structure of compassion can be observed in the narrative. Compassion is

triggered by an overt suffering due to a difficulty in personal relationships. The difficulty spilled to the workplace and eventually took away the narrator's ability to work. Through the uncontrollable display of emotions (i.e., crying), the narrator's team *notices* that everything is not okay. Noticing the suffering triggers *an empathic response* on the part of the others. *The compassionate acts to alleviate the suffering*, then, take the form of making flexible work arrangements to allow for the narrator to recover from the difficult situation (i.e., taking a pause from work, sick-leave). In addition, the colleagues provided understanding, assurance and encouragement that was instrumental for overcoming the hardship.

Moreover, the narrative describes compassion in the narrators' workplace as a recurrent and reliable feature of the way of working of the community that was equally made available for all members of the community (Lilius et al., 2008). The narrative also evidences that compassion was experienced as a crucial aspect of a well-functioning work community. Furthermore, the trust in others' willingness to respond to hardships in a compassionate way appeared to strengthen the sense of belonging that the narrator experienced towards the community while being in a vulnerable position (Pinson, Arnot, & Candappa, 2010).

Denial of Compassion as a Recurrent Aspect of Daily Practice

In the following narrative, compassion was denied by colleagues but given by the children.

Narrative 2

"I had not worked in a kindergarten. I only have done my practicum studies during the bachelor studies. I felt that every adult working in the kindergarten were old ladies tired of life. I only received compassion from the children, they were authentic and joyful. For example, when I had personal worries, I told the children, that I have gone through sad things and I will survive. At the same time, we discussed about different emotions and their significance. Somehow, I felt that the adults did not have compassion and everyone was afraid that I would steal their place in the children's hearts. I thought that was strange."

The narrator describes her experiences of a teaching practicum. She depicts a contrast between the authentic and joyful children and the old and tired adults working in the kindergarten. By doing this, she construes an in-group and out-group configuration (Nussbaum, 2014) in which compassion is shared within the in-group but denied for members of the out-group. Thus, how compassion was given and received in this working community is described in the narrative to be within fragmented and self-contained social circles.

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The following narrative illustrates another example in which compassion was denied, this time by the kindergarten leadership.

Narrative 3

“The compassion between adults was strongly and unfortunately associated with a bad supervisor. I experienced compassion when I felt being treated unfairly. One example of this must do with substituting in the Forest club in our house. The contract says, ‘and the other tasks assigned by the supervisor’, so I had to substitute in the Forest club although because of being pregnant (it was no secret, the supervisor and other staff members knew about the pregnancy) I went to pee every hour, without exaggerating. The supervisor gave me a hint not to drink. (In the forest, it is not possible to go to the toilet unless one goes to the bush to do it). In our house, there was another person who was also pregnant, who was exempted from the Forest club because of pregnancy. My team gave me compassion and the nods and words saying it was unfair. Apparently, the Forest club was for those whose face did not please the boss.”

In this narrative, the narrator facing a personal difficulty (i.e., pregnancy) is denied the flexibility to accommodate the working arrangements to this condition. The suffering in this case is not caused by the pregnancy but the difficulty to carry out the assigned work tasks, which involved directing outdoor activities in forest. The suffering is made worse by the sense of being treated unfairly by the supervisor. Here the team members notice the suffering and show compassion by giving emotional support. Thus, we can notice a similar phenomenon as in the previous narrative: sharing of compassion is fragmented into disjoint social groups. Moreover, the lack of compassion from the supervisor appears to be associated with a declining sense of commitment and belonging to the work community.

Narratives 2 and 3 also point not only to a single, isolated instance of compassion but to a recurrent feature of the social practice. In narrative 3, this is indicated in presenting the case as one example of being treated unfairly (“*One example* of this ...”). Another indication is the assertion that the flexibility was granted unfairly in the workplace depending on whether the face of the employee pleased the supervisor. Moreover, the acts of compassion of the team members help the narrator in coping with the situation instead of raising voice to question the unfair treatment that caused the distress.

Next, we show how compassionate acts can not only help people who suffer in adapting to their difficult situations but also in questioning and trying to transform the social circumstances that cause suffering.

Questioning Daily Practices that may Cause Suffering

The next narrative tells about a development workshop in which the narrator raises her voice to call into question the way in which the adults in the kindergarten supervise children's free play in outdoor situations.

Narrative 4

Our kindergarten staff was having a development workshop on the topic of "the development of a child's language capacities"... Together with one of the nurses, I discussed the significance of small, quickly passing pedagogical moments and how important it is for adults to be present for the children. We both had made an observation that especially when being outside, some of the adults tend to gather into adult groups leaving the children's doings without attention, although they are simultaneously doing a bit of controlling ... When collectively sharing our experiences and thoughts, my group encouraged me to bring forward our observation about the pedagogical moments and their significance. I described the situation in a nice way and said that I also myself can sometimes be blamed for 'standing' in the yard. Without offending or pointing to anyone we wanted to get our kindergarten community to reflect on their activity, to which the principal replied a bit offended that she does not recognise this problem. As a new and recently graduated kindergarten teacher I felt very embarrassed and uncomfortable. I was also irritated because I knew the problem existed. Nevertheless, approving facial expressions and nods of some of the colleagues were expressions of compassion in my opinion. One kindergarten teacher commented and supported our group's view of the situation. Having experienced the compassion by a few persons of our community, I was left feeling strong, and the principal's comment did not feel so bad any longer. Even a small gaze, nod, and approving comments meant a lot after the comments and gestures of the principal.

The narrator first describes how she was discussing the relevance of fleeting pedagogical moments with children and how opportunities to create these moments were lost when the adults gather amongst themselves in the yard. This empathic concern for the children's needs and well-being can be interpreted as an act of compassion towards the children. The narrator was encouraged by her small group to raise this issue in the collective discussion. However, the kindergarten leader was less than pleased on this remark and denied the existence of the problem. The narrator had been newly graduated and recruited to the kindergarten and was thus in a vulnerable position when she dared to question the social practices of the kindergarten. She felt embarrassed and uncomfortable as well as irritated by being treated in an unjust way by the leader. In the situation, compassion was also shown by the colleagues who openly showed their support by nodding and making approving

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comments. In a sense, the subject of the compassionate act towards the children was gradually expanded to include more people. The narrator experienced this social support as essential for her well-being.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have unpacked compassion as a practice-related phenomenon, illuminating how compassion is embedded in the social relationships and practices of ECEC settings. In particular, we showed how compassion was supported or hindered by the way the work was organised in the kindergartens. Our analysis also illuminates a distinction between compassionate acts that help others to adapt to their difficult situations and more transformative acts that question and seek to transform the undesirable practices. Notably, no-one can make a social change alone; it requires a collective effort and shared agency (Archer, 2000; Virkkunen, 2006). We showed how questioning taken-for-granted practices was risky and resulted in irritating people who oversaw organizing the work. This risk was decreased by caring others who showed their compassion by giving social support for the dissident person. Our analysis also underscores the important role that giving, receiving and witnessing compassion plays in shaping people's sensemaking about themselves as persons and educators, as well as about significant others and the work organisation.

The cultures of compassion perspective discussed in this chapter helps to rethink how compassion can be promoted in ECEC settings. We argue that working towards cultures of compassion involves designing inclusive spaces, spaces where dignity and safety are norms, diversity is recognised and accepted, and everyone feels encouraged, supported, and included. Designing inclusive spaces is in line with the European Commission's (2015) "new policies for fairness in education from early age". Moreover, the practices of compassion and their enactment constitute the potential to answer to the polarization in contemporary society by increasing the opportunities on what people are actually able to do and to be. Compassion is a necessary part of social interaction in terms of facing societal challenges of increasing diversity, unpredictability and complexity.

In sum, while there is a growing attention to the role of emotions in early childhood education, little research exists on compassion. Moreover, the existing research is often premised on individualistic assumptions (Madrid, Fernie, & Kantor, 2015; Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013) and fail to address compassion as constituted in and constituting social

practices. Our explorative research guides further research on the topic. Future research needs to produce research-based information for practitioners to support the development of cultures of compassion. There is a need to develop proactive models and scripts for educational practice that can contribute to the development of compassion on institutional and cultural levels. For policy makers, there is a need to produce tools for capitalising knowledge on constitution of cultures of compassion in terms of both preschool level activities, and national and municipal level policymaking in increasing social justice in the society.

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