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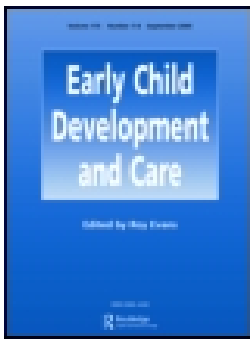
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Children's negative experiences as a part of quality evaluation in early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

Quality factors are the subject of increasing interest in the research and practice of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The purpose of the article is to emphasize the importance of the children's voice in relation to the quality of ECEC. This article focuses on children's negative experiences of ECEC as they can be used to improve services and increase children's wellbeing. The data was collected by means of a questionnaire from 2500 children aged 2–6 years (girls 50.4%) in Finland. The data was analysed using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. According to the results, children mentioned both structural and process factors. Peer interaction among children was mentioned the most when referring to negative experiences in ECEC. We conclude that children's negative experiences provide an opportunity for ECEC professionals to support children's resilience and a sense of belonging, which are important elements in the process quality of ECEC.

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Quality; participation; early childhood education and care; negative experiences

Introduction

'It isn't easy. Life, I mean', says Moominpappa in Tove Jansson's (2017) book 'Moomin begins a new life'. This notion reflects the fact that lives consist of the wide spectrum of experiences that are not always what we want or anticipate. Difficult or disappointing experiences happen also in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. What do children dislike in ECEC, and how can we use this knowledge in evaluating the quality of ECEC? In this article, we present negative experiences of 2500 children aged 2–6 years in ECEC settings in Finland. The purpose of the article is to emphasize the importance of children's experiences in evaluating the quality of ECEC services. This knowledge can be used in increasing children's wellbeing and participation in ECEC settings by supporting the professional development of early childhood education professionals (ECEP) and developing the learning environment to meet the needs and interests of children.

Quality of ECEC

The general purpose of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is to provide a good-quality early childhood education that supports children's growth, development, and learning (Finlex, 2018). However, defining and monitoring quality in ECEC is challenging and complex due to cultural differences (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2015), different ECEC settings (OECD, 2015), and different

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emphases on what is understood as valuable in ECEC over time (Vlasov et al., 2018). Quality, therefore, should be seen as 'a relative concept based on values and beliefs, and defining quality should be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process' (European Commission Network on Childcare ... , 1996).

Definitions of quality in ECEC often emphasize structural factors, learning environments, collaboration between the early childhood education professionals (ECEP) and children, and different ways to classify, evaluate, and develop the system (Pianta, Downer, & Hamre, 2016). Structural factors consist of countable measures such as characteristics of the curriculum, qualifications of the ECEP, health and safety aspects of the physical ECEC environment, and teacher-child ratios. Legislation supports the provision of structural quality (Ishimine et al., 2015; OECD, 2006). Process factors, in turn, refer to interactional situations between peers, children, and the ECEP, as well as collaboration between families and the ECEP. Process factors also include ECEP practices such as the pedagogical focus of play in children's everyday life and other daily pedagogical activities that are based on the educators' pedagogical competence. Process factors define the activities and experiences that children have in ECEC. Monitoring and evaluating process factors is more challenging compared to evaluating structural factors that have standards (Ishimine et al., 2015; OECD, 2006). Evaluation of the quality of interactional factors in ECEC is essential, though, since interaction has direct implications for children's development (Pianta et al., 2016).

Evaluation of quality in ECEC depends on whose views are examined. Katz (1993) defines four perspectives to evaluate quality in ECEC, which are the viewpoints of children, the ECEP, parents of the children, and the community, meaning researchers and professionals. According to previous studies (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Ishimine & Tayler, 2014), researchers and professionals focus mostly on structural factors of ECEC, while parents emphasize the flexible organization of ECEC and the sensitivity of the ECEP. The ECEP, in turn, highlight the importance of work-related wellbeing, functional teamwork, and supportive leadership (Nislin et al., 2016). In general, adults emphasize health and safety issues of ECEC more compared to children (Wiltz & Klein, 2001).

Children's participation in quality assessment in ECEC

Currently, children's views on the quality of ECEC services are used and studied only a little, even though the importance of a so-called bottom-up perspective has been recognized for 30 years. As Katz (1993, p. 3) describes it, 'the actual or true predictor of a program's effects is the quality of life experienced by each participating child on a day-to-day basis'. Some people, however, may question whether children are developmentally capable of evaluating the quality of ECEC services, since they rarely have comparative experiences from other ECEC settings. Currently, the ideological basis for valuing the voices of children and taking them into account in decision-making in accordance with age and development is strongly based on international acts (European Commission, 2014; United Nations, 2017). Supporting children's participation in general, and with regard to the quality assessment of ECEC in particular, is important because participation develops children's awareness of their rights and responsibilities, the consequences of their choices, and common ways of acting in communities (National Board of Education, 2018, pp. 21–22). Children have essential knowledge of their own daily life (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Collette, 2012), and children's views need to be considered because they differ from the viewpoints of parents and the ECEP (Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Paying attention to children's views is one prerequisite of a good-quality ECEC (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2013).

Many challenges are noted in collecting and reflecting children's views in evaluating and monitoring service quality in ECEC (OECD, 2015). One challenge is to combine children's interests at the current time with educators' future-oriented interests (Tauriainen, 2000). The practical challenge in supporting the participation of children lies in the superficial implementation of child-centred activities in ECEC practices. Children can mostly influence personal issues, free-play activities, and

situations without a strong script by the ECEP, such as outdoor or art activities (Turja, 2016). Simultaneously, children's participation in other activities is more limited. In the USA, for example, the ECEP listen to children's opinions about their artwork and play, but infrequently about their views and feelings concerning other everyday situations in ECEC (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011).

Previous research shows that children can describe their experiences and feelings concerning ECEC. Wiltz and Klein (2001) conclude that four-year-old children have knowledge of the current culture in ECEC, and they can clearly describe their experiences. Children realize that ECEC has various activities, routines, and values. The longer children stay in ECEC, the more conscious they become of their environment (Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Children's views can be investigated by listening to children, by providing opportunities for them to share their thoughts and feelings using art-based, creative methods, and by supporting their participation (Sommer et al., 2013; Vlasov et al., 2018). Children's views on how they enjoy being in ECEC and how they participate in ECEC practices can be used to include children's views in the evaluation of ECEC services (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Ishimine & Tayler, 2014).

Aim of study

This study is based on an understanding of children as active participants (Clark, Kjörholt, & Moss, 2005) who can express their current thoughts (Roos & Rutanen, 2014). The purpose of the study is to gather information about negative experiences that might compromise the wellbeing of children in ECEC. As far as we know, no previous studies on this topic exist that include such a wide target group of children. This knowledge can be used in supporting children's wellbeing and participation in ECEC settings by strengthening the structure and process quality of ECEC by professional development of the ECEP and adjusting the learning environment to boost shared enjoyment, a sense of belonging, and tolerance of a range of emotions. The research question of this article is as follows: What do children dislike in ECEC, and do the children's age or gender affect their experiences? To gain a profound understanding of the children's experiences in ECEC, the authors investigated children's positive and negative experiences. Children's positive experiences in ECEC have been reported elsewhere (Pihlainen, Reunamo, & Kärnä, 2019).

Materials and methods

Altogether, 5439 children from Southern Finland participated in the study. For this sub-study, we chose 2500 children from ECEC centres, including 500 children from each age group between 2 and 6. The children's genders were divided equally in every age group, when possible. In total, there were 1260 girls (50.4%) and 1240 boys in the data. Research data included children's views in four different languages (concealed to protect the anonymity of respondents) that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity in ECEC settings. The research data was collected by means of children's interviews, which were conducted in 2012 and 2015 by their parents. The data from the two interview rounds are intertwined in analysis, since there was no significant difference between the results.

Children and their parents held discussions in their everyday settings, such as in ECEC centres or at home. We invited parents to talk about their children's experiences with their children, because parents are the most important partners of ECEC and they should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child, including in quality assessment of ECEC (European Commission, 2014; Karila, 2016). Parents used a rigorous interview protocol with open-ended and closed questions. An interview protocol included an elaborated description of how to discuss with their children for research purposes. First, parents were instructed about the structure of the interview. Parents were asked to write down the children's answers in a questionnaire form (paper or online) as children expressed them, verbatim. Parents were also warned about guiding the children's answers. This was supported by instructing parents to express their interest and respect towards children's responses to motivate the children to discuss and share their views. Parents were told that child's

opinions may change at a fast rate and their answers may sound bizarre. Also, as written in an interview protocol, child's developing linguistic skills can make it difficult for a child to express him/herself as well as for adults to interpret them. Parents were reassured to interview their children by emphasizing the importance of eliciting the child's own feelings and experiences. Therefore, parents were instructed to provide time enough for a child to answer to the questions. Parents also had an opportunity to share their own views in a questionnaire after writing down their children's notions. We expected this to encourage the parents to distinguish their own and their children's perspectives. Children's interviews lasted about 10 min.

In this article, we present the results for the question *What don't you like in ECEC?*. Sharing views on open questions freely increases children's experiences of being listened to (Brubacher, Timms, Powell, & Bearman, 2019). By analysing children's negative experiences, we pay attention to the issues that children dislike and that need improvement, to increase knowledge about possible jeopardizing negative experiences in ECEC. In addition to the negative experiences, children were also asked about their positive experiences, peer interaction, fears, the ECEP, and desires in ECEC. In the interview protocol, parents were instructed to read the questions out loud in their own words if necessary. This was expected to increase the child-centred and family-centred approach so that each child would understand the question (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012).

Data was analysed using data-driven content analysis, which includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Bauer, 2011). The first researcher modified the classification of (Markkanen & Wennerström, 2019) and analysed the data. The second author analysed the effect of the children's gender and age on the results.

Ethical aspects and trustworthiness of the study

This research is based on family-centred activities in which parents' participation is emphasized in ECEC (Karila, 2016). Family-centred research activities are still rare in ECEC, and there is limited knowledge on how to support parents' participation in investigating children's experiences. Parents' participation in investigating and recording children's experiences assumes that familiarity between the child and the parent helps the child to feel safe and secure enough to share their own views. Based on trust, the child and the parent can negotiate how the discussion is structured and processed (Mayall, 2008). Parents know their children and can modify the discussion based on the children's needs and interests, which influences the trustworthiness of the data (Korkman, Laajasalo, Juusola, Uusivuori, & Santtila, 2015).

Parents were informed that the children's anonymity will be protected during the whole study. No data was collected about the parents. In the data collection protocol, parents were instructed to ask the children the questions in their own words if necessary. According to Mashford-Scott et al. (2012), researching children's views requires the use of vocabulary that is familiar and suitable for children. In addition, children were asked short and specific questions to help the child to focus on the topic and produce detailed answers that also strengthen the trustworthiness of data (Korkman et al., 2015). Parents' participation in collecting children's views involves some challenges. Parents may disregard the children's views if they want to hide them (Mayall, 2008). Parents may also feel pressured to offer socially appropriate answers or views that stress their children's capability (Pihlainen et al., 2019). These notions were considered in the data protocol for parents by instructing parents to record children's views verbatim. However, we do not know exactly how parents interviewed their children. Listening to children's views happens through the adults' interpretations (Spyrou, 2011). We as researchers indicate trust towards parents in including them in data collection. This trust was implemented in practice with a rigorous interview protocol that guided parents' activities during data collection. Collaboration with parents in ECEC and especially parents' involvement in research activities is a topic that yet needs more elaboration in further studies. Discussions between parents and children can therefore be regarded as narratives in which both parents' and children's voices are listened to, and therefore, these narratives

and dyadic encounters between parents and children are a part of the process quality of ECEC as such (Pihlainen et al., 2019).

Results

In general, the children ($N = 2500$) related to ECEC services in a very positive way. Almost all the children ($n = 2421$, 97%) mentioned at least one positive experience in ECEC, and every third child mentioned no negative experiences in ECEC. Those children who shared their negative experiences each mentioned, in total, 1–7 experiences (mean 3.6) that they did not like in ECEC. As shown in Table 1, children mostly referred to peer interaction and daily activities as negative experiences. Children also mentioned play, discomfort, rules and restrictions, guided activities, the ECEP and their actions, and environmental factors as negative in ECEC. Children's gender and age had a statistically significant effect on negative experiences connected with interaction and guided activities. Next, we will describe children's negative experiences concerning their interaction, activities and ECEC customs in detail.

Children's negative experiences concerning interaction

When asking the children what they do not like in ECEC, they mostly referred to interaction and peer interaction situations. In particular, four-year-old children, as well as girls, mentioned inappropriate peer interaction. In peer interaction, children mentioned the physical activities of other children ($n = 315$) the most when describing negative experiences in ECEC. Children listed most often pushing, hitting, and fighting, but they also named biting, pinching, scratching, squeezing the hand, tickling, kicking, chasing, choking, or pulling someone's hair. Teasing ($n = 106$) was the most used single word to refer to peers' negative interactions. Children did not specify what they meant by teasing. However, parents explained that teasing did not happen often, or a child has seen someone teasing another child, for example *teasing of other children (which happens very seldom)* (boy, 5 yrs.). One child felt negatively when teasing someone else: *(I didn't like it when) I teased Anthony* (child's name anonymised) (girl, 2 yrs.). Children also reported their peers' improper behaviour ($n = 106$). Children experienced it as negative *when someone does something nasty* (boy, 4 yrs.), *when someone drops cuddly toy down from the bed* (girl, 2 yrs.), *boys' rage* (girl, 5 yrs.), or *I'm sad if someone takes a toy* (boy, 2 yrs.). Verbal and non-verbal communication ($n = 84$), such as swearing, name-calling, and shouting, as well as arguments and disagreements ($n = 50$), also appeared in children's descriptions.

Children's negative experiences concerning activities

Children mentioned many negative experiences concerning daily activities. Most of these experiences were tackled with day naps ($n = 278$). Children said that they did not like it when *we need to go to sleep*

Table 1. Children's negative experiences in ECEC (%) ($N = 2370$).

Category	Subcategory	Male	Female	Total
Interaction	Peer interaction	34.7% ^a	33.8% ^a	34.3%
	Interaction in general	11.9%^a	18.7%^b	15.3%
Activities	Daily activities	20.6% ^a	20.3% ^a	20.4%
	Play situations	6.8% ^a	7.1% ^a	6.9%
	Guided activities	6.0%^a	2.7%^b	4.4%
ECEC customs	Discomfort	8.3% ^a	8.1% ^a	8.2%
	Rules and restrictions	6.4% ^a	4.3% ^a	5.4%
	ECEP and their actions	3.3% ^a	3.1% ^a	3.2%
	Other	2.0% ^a	1.9% ^a	1.9%
<i>Total</i>		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Notes: The subscript letter denotes the gender categories whose column percentages do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

even though I don't want to (girl, 3 yrs.) or it's boring that we need to sleep just when we want to play (boy, 2 yrs.). Children also mentioned eating time or food ($n = 112$) as negative. These opinions concerned mostly various foods that children did not fancy, such as *pea soup* (girl, 5 yrs.), *porridge* (boy, 6 yrs.), or *tomatoes* (girl, 4 yrs.). The other daily activities that children mentioned in interviews were outdoor activities ($n = 48$), getting dressed/undressed ($n = 37$), toilet visits ($n = 11$), and cleaning ($n = 4$).

Children's play situations include situations that children stated as negative. Most of these experiences referred to situations in which a friend is not playing with a child ($n = 170$). Some children described situations when *nobody wants to play with me* (girl, 5 yrs.) as negative. Some children also experienced failure while playing with peers ($n = 73$), such as *when a friend disturbs my play* (girl, 3 yrs.), *when I want to play alone and not with someone* (boy, 4 yrs.), *when I'm with my friends and nobody figures out what to play* (girl, 6 yrs.). Children mentioned undesirable games when they played a game that their friend suggested even though they were not interested in playing it ($n = 39$). Children also shared some worries and disappointments concerning games or toys ($n = 36$), such as toys getting broken or lost. Children can also hurt themselves while playing ($n = 25$) by falling down or hitting something hard.

Activities in ECEC also include various tasks and guided activities that the ECEP have planned for children. Some children experienced these tasks as negative, including (preschool) tasks ($n = 23$), handicrafts ($n = 18$), sports ($n = 17$), circle time ($n = 17$), playing music ($n = 14$), and reading ($n = 9$). According to the children, *I don't have the strength to walk to the forest* (girl, 3 yrs.), *I need to do handicrafts and I can't play* (boy, 4 yrs.), *circle time when someone reads and we listen* (girl, 5 yrs.), *too easy preschool tasks* (boy, 6 yrs.). Furthermore, children did not like to feel lonely in ECEC ($n = 85$). The children explained that they did not have a friend to play with. This may be due to the sickness of a best friend or a friend having a shorter day or a day off from ECEC: *If I'm alone* (girl, 2 yrs.), *If my friends are not there* (boy, 5 yrs.), *If my friend is on holiday* (girl, 6 yrs.). There is a statistically significant linear trend among children's negative experiences that increases with age (Table 2). The older the children are, the more they describe guided activities as negative. In addition, boys expressed their dislike of guided activities more than girls.

Children's negative experiences concerning ECEC customs

ECEC has many customs and practices that children need to accommodate. Even staying in and enjoying ECEC is not self-evident for all children all the time. Some children experienced homesickness while in ECEC ($n = 80$). Children also missed their parents and wanted to go home instead of staying in ECEC ($n = 47$): *I miss my mum and dad* (boy, 3 yrs.), *I can't stay at home* (girl, 3 yrs.). Some children felt that the rhythm of daily life in ECEC did not fit their own rhythm. These children did not like to wake up early in the mornings, or there was too little or too much time to be outside or to play. One six-year-old girl noted that *sometimes I have a too long day (in ECEC)*. On the other hand,

Table 2. Age differences of children in negative ECEC experiences.

Category	Subcategory	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years	Total
Interaction	Peer interaction	34.3%a. b	34.8%a. b	39.2%b	30.8%a	32.4%a. b	34.3%
	Challenges in interaction	9.6%a	13.9%a	14.7%a. b	20.1%b	14.6%a	15.3%
Activities	Daily activities	13.9%a. b	13.5%b	20.0%a. c	24.3%c	25.5%c	20.4%
	Play situations	6.6%a. b. c	11.9%c	8.2%b. c	4.8%a. b	3.8%a	6.9%
	Guided activities	0.6%a	2.9%a. b	2.9%a. b	4.3%b	9.1%c	4.4%
ECEC routines	Discomfort	23.5%a	13.2%b	4.7%c	5.0%c	3.8%c	8.2%
	Rules and restrictions	7.8%a	5.2%a	4.5%a	5.3%a	5.5%a	5.4%
	ECEP and their actions	1.8%a	1.9%a	4.2%a	3.5%a	3.6%a	3.2%
	Other	1.8%a	2.6%a	1.6%a	2.0%a	1.6%a	1.9%
<i>Total</i>		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Notes: Each subscript letter denotes a subset of the age in years categories whose column percentages do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

there were children who mentioned leaving home with parents as negative ($n = 18$). Children also mentioned crying ($n = 18$), fears or imaginary creatures in stories ($n = 10$), and boredom ($n = 4$) as issues that they did not like in ECEC.

Some children described the rules and restrictions of ECEC as their negative experiences. Children mostly contested the general rules in ECEC ($n = 111$), as in, for example, *we can't play hide and seek inside* (girl, 4 yrs.), *I can't kick the carpet* (boy, 3 yrs.), *I can't climb* (boy, 4 yrs.) or *I can't go to play in another group* (girl, 5 yrs.). Children also claimed that their group had too many children or they were separated into a different group from their friends ($n = 14$). Furthermore, children considered cooling-down areas ($n = 13$) and waiting ($n = 12$) as negative in ECEC.

Children also need to get accustomed to new adults who are working with them in ECEC. Children had two main concerns about the ECEP. First, some children mentioned that the ECEP behaved in an uncomfortable way ($n = 71$). Children claimed that adults shouted, said something strictly, were bossing around, restricted children's activities, and sometimes got angry. Second, a few children, who were mostly three-year-olds, reacted to a change of ECEP or their presence in ECEC ($n = 11$). For example a three-year-old boy mentioned that *a new aunt (ECEP) puts me to sleep* or a four-year old girl said that she does not like it *if educators that I know are not there (in ECEC)*. Finally, some children mentioned negative experiences from the ECEC physical environment. The soundscape in ECEC did not appeal to some children ($n = 33$): *Sometimes it's too loud* (girl, 5 yrs.). A few children missed some items ($n = 15$) in ECEC, such as *games* (girl, 3 yrs.), *there isn't a slide outside* (boy, 4 yrs.) or *there are no pets in ECEC* (girl, 4 yrs.).

Discussion

In this study, we focused on what children dislike in ECEC (for children's positive experiences in ECEC, see (Pihlainen et al., 2019)). Participation in ECEC includes situations and issues that some children do not fancy, which Dolk (2013) and Koch (2012) call everyday opposition. Good-quality ECEC lets children express their emotions, including everyday opposition (see also Sandseter & Seland, 2016) and uses these situations pedagogically by supporting children in learning to express their views even when they dislike something. Nolan, Taket, and Stagnitti (2014) refer to working with feelings, where teachers are sensitive to children's life experiences, accept children's feelings and emotions, and provide support and encouragement for children. In this study, guided activities such as circle time, sports, handicrafts, and reading provide situations in which children's experiences may vary a lot (see also Sandseter & Seland, 2016) based on the children's interests. Quality ECEC practices include various activities, rules, norms, and restrictions that inevitably may cause negative emotions for children. From the children's viewpoint, children are well capable of knowing what they want but not necessarily what they need to grow up to be an autonomic, responsible, and caring member of society. The ECEP can support children's participation by enabling choice-making, expression of opinions, problem-solving, and working with and assisting others (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). Children's participation depends on the pedagogical competence of the ECEP, and therefore it reflects process quality in ECEC.

A great number of children's negative experiences were connected to peer interaction, such as teasing physically or mentally, including by pushing, hitting, shouting, or name-calling. Many children's answers imply the randomness or remoteness of these negative experiences. This notion supports the results of Repo (2015) that 12.6% of preschool children in Finnish ECEC were involved in bullying. However, bullying is legally forbidden in Finland, and ECEC should provide a safe environment where conflicts are resolved and constructive ways of solving them are practised (Finlex, 2013, §29, 2018; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). This requires both structural and process quality. Children need sufficiently qualified ECEP who evaluate their practices and intervene in conflicts between children. Good-quality ECEC also relates to the development of social-emotional skills (Sammons et al., 2004) and better emotional wellbeing of children (Melhuish et al., 2015). Children receive support and a sense of security and belonging from positive peer relationships (Bollmer,

Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005). Since feelings of competence and belonging motivate children to act, the ECEP should support children's internal motivation towards prosocial behaviour (Repo, 2015). This includes preventing children's experiences of exclusion, since these incur a feeling of risk or relatedness (Repo, 2015). According to Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen (2010), 5–6-year-old children reported to feel insecure because of bullying or being left outside from the group. Children's negative experiences of exclusion and other forms of bullying can thus indicate the sense of belonging that a child feels in ECEC. The sense of belonging gets stronger when interaction works well and when children are treated as individuals in a group, which both reflect the process quality of ECEC.

Children also mentioned difficulties in play situations where children need to, for example, share toys with other children. Regarding the number of toys, in international terms, children have a high standard of material wellbeing in Finnish ECEC (Karila, 2016). However, children still need to share toys and space with others, which is referred to as collective ownership (Puroila & Estola, 2012). This requires regular negotiation with peers and the ECEP. Negotiations are learning tasks in which children learn to negotiate and fit their own interests with the interests of the group (see Kronqvist, 2016). A conflict of interests may lead to a bad mood in social situations, which is not negative. However, if a bad mood causes withdrawal, rage, bullying, or other negative consequences, that matters, and therefore, the ECEP need to be rigorous. Children need support in developing their self-regulation so that they can increasingly control their emotions, cognition, and motivation (Blair & Diamond, 2008). As a part of enhancing process quality in ECEC, the ECEP need to support children's self-regulation in daily practices.

Children's experiences disclosed stress that some children faced in ECEC. Especially some young children feel stress from staying away from their parents, as the data showed. This is mostly temporary, and after a stress reaction, functioning adjusts back to normal (Kronqvist, 2016). Stress, however, becomes a problem when it is very strong or prolonged (Kronqvist, 2016), affecting the child's brain development and cognitive functioning for a longer time (Swick, Knopf, Williams, & Fields, 2013). High-quality ECEC can support young children in accommodating ECEC and being separated from parents by building supportive relationships, noticing the child and their feelings, and helping monitor them (Dettling, Paker, Lane, Sebanc, & Gunnar, 2000). High-quality ECEC recognizes the early signs of stress in children and provides safe, loving, and nurturing experiences for children in order to support their feelings of trust, and to cope with and shorten the stressful situations (Kronqvist, 2016; Swick et al., 2013). These actions reflect the process quality of ECEC, which can be strengthened by further education of the ECEP. Our results reveal that most negative experiences were related to peer interactions, and play situations should be taken seriously. Being excluded is one of the most stressful events in childhood (e.g. Sajaniemi & Mäkelä, 2013). The results might indicate that some children experience rejection more than others. This can be a sign of an environment without enough pedagogical sensitivity, which might compromise children's wellbeing and learning (Sajaniemi, Suhonen, & Nislin, 2016; Syrjämäki, Pihlaja, & Sajaniemi, 2019).

In this study, some children mentioned improper verbal communication by peers as a negative in ECEC. Applying a sociocultural lens emphasizes the significance of relationships, practices, and environments in children's lives, affecting children's ways of communicating. Therefore, ECEC requires intervention in children's improper verbal communication, together with other stakeholders, such as parents, to build a shared understanding of appropriate ways of communication. This requires knowledge from children as well as sensitivity from the ECEP (Kronqvist, 2016). The ECEP can provide examples for children on how to interact with other people in a constructive and positive way. In addition, providing a positive learning environment for children requires collaboration with parents. Collaboration and building positive learning environments clearly contribute to the process quality of ECEC.

Participation in its deepest sense means that people can be listened to and have influence in things concerning themselves by participating in their communities to plan activities, make decisions, and take responsibility for how to implement things (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). Simultaneously, children have a right to get protection and care (United Nations, 2017) so that they can

trust that adults provide the security and know-how to handle daily situations. In good-quality ECEC, the ECEP balance these two aspirations in their daily activities. In practice, the ECEP know their children individually and adjust the participation of children to support the children's growth, development, and learning. Participation of children in ECEC contributes to process quality. In addition, the expertise of the ECEP is an important factor in quality, since educating the ECEP strengthens the quality of ECEC (Manning, Garvis, Fleming, & Wong, 2017, p. 44).

The results of this study emphasize the process quality of ECEC and the importance of supporting the professional development of the ECEP. It is, however, crucial to note that children's negative experiences do not automatically mean that the expertise of the ECEP is being criticized (Katz, 1993). 'Staff are accountable for applying all practices acknowledged and accepted by the profession to be relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand' (Katz, 1993, p. 5). Simultaneously, following all children's wishes to improve the quality of ECEC services is not sustainable, since this neglects the educational role of ECEC. Children's experiences, both positive and negative, form a complex everyday environment in which the ECEP are required to face all the children's emotions in a constructive and supportive way.

Conclusions

In this article, we presented the negative experiences of 2500 children in ECEC in Finland and how they relate to the quality factors of ECEC. In general, children were strongly satisfied with ECEC and shared significantly more positive experiences than negative experiences. According to the results, children mostly mentioned negative experiences concerning process quality, such as peer interaction and daily activities. A few children expressed dislike of structural quality, such as the physical environment or teacher-child ratio. The results confirmed that many two-year-old and older children can describe what they like or dislike. Listening to children's views on a regular basis reflects the process quality of ECEC, and therefore it is important to communicate with children and listen not only to their positive and negative experiences but also their dreams and expectations regarding ECEC.

In this study, children's experiences were collected by their parents. Collaboration with parents reflects process quality in ECEC, and it should be supported on a regular basis. In addition, we call for new, collaborative ways of collecting children's ideas and experiences to develop the quality of ECEC. While children's notions are valuable in themselves, to inform us how it feels to be a child in ECEC (see also Katz, 1993), they should be handled in line with the views of parents, the ECEP, and service providers to provide a full picture of quality in ECEC.

Process quality strongly reflects interactional and pedagogical aspects of ECEC. Children's negative experiences can be tackled by supporting children's social-emotional learning, developing self-regulation skills, building supportive relationships with the ECEP, and providing positive learning environments. These elements express resilience (Nolan et al., 2014), which is defined as 'an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change' (Merriam Webster dictionary, 2020). Resilience, according to previous research (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), supports children's emotionally healthy and socially adjusted growth, which, in turn, enables them to achieve academic success. Each child should feel welcome, appreciated, and protected, and should have a sense of belonging to the group each day in ECEC (Katz, 1993). With this idea in mind, we refer to the beginning of this article, where Moominpappa pondered the difficulty of life. We conclude that good-quality ECEC provides a safe place for children to learn to cope with negative experiences in a supportive and positive environment. Children's negative experiences, therefore, provide an opportunity for ECEC to support children's resilience and sense of belonging, which are important elements of process quality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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