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# Time and Temporality in Early Childhood Education and Care Work

Hanna Hjelt , Kirsti Karila  and Päivi Kupila 

Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

## ABSTRACT

We explore time and temporality within the work life context of Finnish early childhood education and care professionals. Temporality is a key element of education, since development and learning are always a matter of time and change. Furthermore, interpretations of time play a complex role in the work practices of educational institutions. Discursive analysis of focus group discussions shows that professionals must cope with several temporal dimensions. Even though the long-term orientation based on educational objectives is well recognized, as is the importance of moments of encounter with the individual child, time resource management dominates discussions. Thus, in everyday practices the pedagogical activities must be constantly adapted to changing time resources. This makes work unpredictable, creating an imbalance between the temporal dimensions. Results indicate that time and temporality interpretations are significant, as they affect the work conditions of professionals as well as the quality of early childhood education and care.

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Early childhood professionals; time; temporality; working life; educational institutions; discourse

## Introduction

Time is an integral dimension of human life. Our actions may require both focusing on the present and linking the temporal orientation to the past or the future (Hirvonen & Husso, 2012; Moran, 2015). Time is also a central element of education and care since children's development and learning is always linked to temporal change and continuity. Alongside this basic assumption of educational temporality, time has also an essential but complex role in the work practices of educational institutions. In this article, we address the questions of time and temporality within the work life context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals. More specifically, we explore how ECEC professionals activate and structure time and temporality as a frame of their work life and how these discursively formed frameworks relate to each other. Through this study, we want to participate in a discussion of ECEC and current governance trends. We assume that this time-related discussion sheds light on the prospect of ECEC professionals' ability to choose the priorities of their work. These opportunities may influence the attainment of ECEC objectives, and they might also have an impact on retention of professionals in the ECEC sector.

The basic function of ECEC as a societal institution includes a significant temporal dimension, since both the present and the future are incorporated in the processes of growth and development (Decuypere & Vanden Broeck, 2020; Hohti & Paananen, 2019; Nielsen, 2016). A significant manifestation of time and temporality is linked to the objectives set for educational institutions. Policy documents such as national curricula outline the future by indicating the societal goals and values of

**CONTACT** Hanna Hjelt  hanna.hjelt@tuni.fi

education (Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Farquhar, 2016; Onnismaa & Paananen, 2019). As Einarsdottir et al. (2015) point out, these guidelines define ECEC work; thus, practitioners' actions should be goal-oriented according to the time horizon provided by policy documents. Along with these target-oriented temporal perspectives of ECEC, the material and the situational regulate the temporality of daily activities (OECD, 2019; Paananen, 2017). For example, the usage of premises and the number of staff members can be understood as such elements. Due to the neoliberal austerity discourse that emphasizes the cost-effectiveness of services, these material elements may have a significant impact on ECEC practices (Eerola et al., 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2017). Since in the Nordic countries municipalities have strong autonomy in organizing ECEC services, the local ECEC policies outline everyday practices (Karila et al., 2017; Kröger, 2011).

Earlier research on time and temporality has focused on individual workers' experiences of time management. Specifically, in health and care work research, the institutional framing of time is defined as a question of political relevance (Hirvonen & Husso, 2012; Juhila, 2018; Wang, 2019). In the context of education, Rose and Whitty (2010) and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2012) have explored how clock-related time practices regulate and dominate the ways in which early childhood services operate. Temporality research has also identified the variety of time concepts related to the implementation of ECEC (Hohti & Paananen, 2019; Nuttall & Thomas, 2015). Recent research has dealt with work time and work conditions in the context of retention of ECEC professionals (McDonald et al., 2018; OECD, 2019).

The theoretical premises of this study derive from social constructivism, which we refer to as the process of building a social reality in interaction between individuals and society (Berger & Luckmann, 1994; Weinberg, 2014). In this interaction, language is seen as a significant, reality-building activity that has implications (Potter & Hepburn, 2008; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2017; Wiggins, 2017). Through this approach, we address time and temporality as social phenomena and examine them especially in the context of ECEC work. We assume that temporal practices do not just happen but, rather, are constructed through a variety of discourses related to the objectives and practices of the work. These temporal constructions may have consequences on the implementation of ECEC (see Tileagă & Stokoe, 2017).

Based on these underpinnings, our research questions are:

How do ECEC professionals frame their work in relation to time and temporality?

How are these time-related frames intertwined, and what are the consequences of these relations?

## Previous interpretations of time and temporality

To recognize time and temporality in relation to ECEC work, we introduce the variety of time-related conceptualizations presented in current literature. Then, we focus on time management issues within the context of working life.

### *Conceptualizations of time and temporality*

Time and temporality can be understood in various ways. In modern society, our common understanding of time is linear and progressive (Adam, 1995). The course of time is seen as a process of progressing gradually towards the anticipated goal, but time is also used and controlled as a resource (Adam, 1995; Juhila, 2018). However, time is a more complex entity than this linear, measurement-based concept would suggest. In addition to this quantitative understanding of time, there are qualitative, more situational notions of time (Decuyper & Vanden Broeck, 2020). Therefore, the actual realization of time includes many dimensions, such as duration, repetition, delay, or cancellation, which may influence the situational time structures of everyday events (Moran, 2015; Wang, 2019). Because education essentially involves this variety of time dimensions, it can be composed by using the concept of temporality. Temporality captures the sense of temporal flow in which our

time is not isolated “now” moments but involves several time dimensions shaped by context and expectations linked to the past and future yet-to-come (Dawson, 2014). Temporality emerges in a variety of social, material, spatial, or emotional aspects and connects these entangled features of time, of which measurable linear time is only one dimension (Adam, 1995; Hohti & Paananen, 2019; Moran, 2015; Nuttall & Thomas, 2015; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

According to Moran (2015), time can be seen as a social practice that organizes temporality’s material impact. To clarify these impacts in the educational context, Hohti and Paananen (2019) describe the concept of relative time span, in which time and temporality are determined in relation to a wide range of situational elements. In this study, we utilize this concept of relative time to illustrate situationally constructed temporality.

### ***Temporal entanglements of work life***

In the work life context, time is often seen as a resource, and attention is paid to the management of time and time structures. According to previous research, the prime understanding of time in the labour market is measured units of clock time. Methods of shaping and measuring progressive work time, i.e., clocks and calendars, create collective social structures, yet these timeframes often relate to the discourses of efficiency and productivity (Rose & Whitty, 2010). This “time economics” approach generates time as an external, anthropogenic structure focusing on increasing the efficiency of the ratio between task and time (Adam, 1995; Nuttall & Thomas, 2015; Toivanen et al., 2016). It is obvious that organized work life, at least to some extent, requires the socially coordinated temporal order of the working community (Toivanen et al., 2016; Zuccheromaglio & Talamo, 2000). However, the concept of time, based on efficiency, does not correspond well to the psychological and sociological dimensions of time, and this is particularly perceived by professionals in the female-dominated public sector (Hirvonen & Husso, 2012; Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Sutela et al., 2019; also see Osgood, 2010). Thus, the above studies indicate that tensions exist between various dimensions of time and temporality, which could have relevance in ECEC work life. Paananen et al. (2015) has identified an imbalance between the material terms and the objectives set for the ECEC. The temporal aspects of work may reflect such disparities.

Time management studies have utilized a variety of concepts to outline time practices. Wang (2019) introduces the concept of temporal capital, which examines the employee’s right to control the temporal dimensions of work time. This ability to some extent control one’s own work time accumulates the individual practitioner’s or working group’s own temporal capital, which increases wellbeing at work (Wang, 2019). Interestingly, this time capital builds up during or even in-between the scheduled tasks as long as the individual has some opportunity to control the timeframes herself (Wang, 2019). Zuccheromaglio and Talamo (2000) applied a similar concept by explaining the relationship between “expected time”, which means standardized temporality, and “negotiated time”, which is located “in” and “around” formal schedules. Research into ECEC work has also identified the need for professionals to influence the time structures of their work, such as work hours and rosters (McDonald et al., 2018). It is even described as one of the most significant factors affecting professionals’ retention in the ECEC sector (OECD, 2019).

The time management discussion appears to have a personal tone, since the ability to control schedules has been defined as an element of an individual’s competence. However, organizing complex temporal dimensions such as the collective rhythms of work communities is a social process. Thus, individuals are seldom able to extensively change or control the temporal structures surrounding them (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Southerton, 2013 ; Toivanen et al., 2016). According to Nuttall and Thomas (2015), the time and temporality discussion concerning ECEC professionals also denotes these highly individual features. In other words, responsibility for time management often rests on the individual, assuming that time resources can be well managed if one just recognizes that fact. Nuttall and Thomas (2015) also suggest that work life research on ECEC should concentrate less on time as an objective resource and more on the wider notion of temporality.

## Finnish ECEC as the context of time and temporality

Despite the fundamental link between time and education, the everyday practices of ECEC may reflect versatile temporal concepts. These are partly based on policy documents, such as legislation and curricula. However, activities are also shaped by cultural and social structures that are reflected in daily routines and rhythms (Kuukka, 2015).

The objectives set for educational institutions in legislation and curricula include a time horizon, i.e., the desire to shape the direction of the education in order to outline the future (Decuyper & Vanden Broeck, 2020). However, these objectives are culturally formed and reflect the current perceptions of childhood and the role of education in society. In Finland, the National Curriculum Guidelines for ECEC (2018) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (2014) are the binding policy documents that offer a basis for the local curricula drawn up by municipalities (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2014, 2018).

According to Einarsdottir et al. (2015), in Nordic ECEC curricula the child is defined as a target for forward-looking activities as well as a situational actor in the current moment. These linear and situational temporal orientations reflect divergent childhood concepts and create varied positions for children as well as for professionals. Yet, in ECEC daily practices these orientations should be integrated into a holistic entity. Therefore, even from the temporal perspective the policy documents do not always produce explicit aims but may contain a variety of objectives that merge with local interpretations (Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Onnismaa & Paananen, 2019).

In addition to the temporal outlines provided by the ECEC policy documents, the actual everyday practices in ECEC institutions contain recurring temporal frameworks, i.e., the rhythms and rituals aiming at following a predictable course of time. According to previous research, these arrangements seem to reflect a linear perception of time, since they form repeatable routines linked to scheduled session times and weekly programmes (Kuukka, 2015; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Rose & Whitty, 2010; Siippainen, 2018; Strandell, 2012). These routines stem from the standards and rules of the work community, and they are formed to structure the sequence of actions, maintaining the flow of activities in the everyday context (Adam, 1995; Kuukka, 2015). Nevertheless, there is research evidence indicating that ECEC professionals have the expertise to recognize the versatile pedagogical opportunities within these scheduled rhythms and routines (Hohti & Paananen, 2019). Despite the standard nature of work life routines, these repeated structures may not be pre-planned or mutually agreed but implicitly transformed into everyday practices and then reinforced and renewed by repeating them (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Toivanen et al., 2016).

Workforce resources create a significant framework for time structures. In Finland, these resources are usually firmly controlled by the public and private ECEC organizations. Reflecting neoliberal ideas, ECEC providers have developed productivity indicators to measure the functional efficiency of work. This kind of outcome-based governance is used, for example, to monitor child-staff and child-space ratios (see Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Paananen, 2017; Paananen et al., 2015). So, the essential manifestation of time and temporality in Finnish ECEC is linked to the material reality of work life.

## Methodology

Derived from the theoretical premises of social constructionism, we assume that ECEC professionals interactively shape their understanding on ECEC work and, in this interaction, use language as an instrument to produce multiple interpretations of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1994; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2017). Based on these underpinnings, the analytical concepts of frame and discourse have guided our study. The frame we understand as a tool of meaning-making, resembling Goffman's (1974) ideas. He describes the frame as an answer to the question, "What is going on here?" This gives us the means to categorize the pivotal elements of ECEC work through which time and temporality are constructed. We assume that frames are socially shaped, although individuals may find it possible

to vary and convert activities related to them (Persson, 2019). This discursive approach, for its part, offers us the means to explore more subtle temporal constructions expressed by professionals because, in addition to the content of speech, the features of used language, such as rhetorical strategies, deepen understanding of the dimensions of time and temporality (Burr, 2003; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Goodman, 2017; Nikander, 2008; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). However, our premise is that these local discussions also echo the voices of other people and more universal discussions (Bakhtin, 1981; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). As Gee (2010) pointed out, not only is the individual person talking but so too are rather more general discussions represented and passed through behavioural patterns using language, thinking, and acting in ways governed by social structures.

### **Data and analysis**

To examine their views on time and temporality, we conducted 10 focus group discussions involving 40 ECEC professionals. These data were collected in 2016 and 2017–2018. To reach the volunteer participants, an invitation to the discussions was sent to ECEC centres in three Finnish municipalities. Due to municipal autonomy, local ECEC services are organized in many ways. To confirm the contextual versatility of the data, we selected three municipalities of different sizes in different parts of Finland. Among the volunteers, participants were selected locally. In order to ensure the richness of the data, selection was based on a variety of professional profiles and work experience. A total of 40 ECEC professionals participated in the discussions: 16 ECEC centre directors, 12 ECEC teachers, and 12 childcarers. The participating directors were responsible for various types of ECEC unit. The majority of them led different forms of ECEC and pre-primary education located on several premises. The number of their subordinates varied between 17 and 60. The other participants worked either in ECEC groups for one- to five-year-old children or in pre-primary education for six-year-old children. Altogether, the participants represented a versatile range of Finnish ECEC professionals.

Each discussion in our study involved four participants. Research literature generally proposes that focus group discussions should involve five to ten participants, although there is no consensus on the matter (Hennink, 2014; Marková et al., 2007; Morgan, 1997). Smaller groups with three to four participants are considered favourable if the participants share a common interest in the topic (Hennink, 2014; Morgan, 1997). In our study, the topic of ECEC work met the requirements of participants' mutual interest. Discussions were conducted and moderated by the first author of the article, and the average duration of the discussions was 90 minutes. The discussions were semi-structured into topics concerning the implementation of ECEC work and participants had received prior information on these topics. They were asked to discuss, for example, their last working days and their experiences of a successful day, as well as the objectives and assessment of ECEC. In all discussions, the talking proceeded actively and, in particular, the conversations about work days produced a lot of shared talk and circulated ideas among them (Marková et al., 2007). The moderator led the discussion to the topics, but let the participants speak freely. The transcription of these discussions included the characteristics of spoken language, such as dialect expressions.

Our analysis began with mapping the professionals' talk regarding work practices. When examining these excerpts, we utilized Goffman's (1974) ideas and shaped the question, "What are time-related determinants of ECEC practices?" Participants produced multiple time-related descriptions, for example planning for the future, confronting unexpected changes, and prioritizing tasks, which illustrated the entanglement of temporal aspects. Nonetheless, we were able to identify three different frames activated by participants. Furthermore, we proceeded with more detailed discursive analysis of the language used in these frames. By examining linguistic choices such as rhetorical strategies, utterances and shared patterns of talk, we managed to construct subtle notions of time and temporality included in the frames (Gee, 2010; Nikander, 2008). We finalized our analysis by examining the relationship between the frames activated by participants. This helped us to understand the impact of these temporal constructions on professionals' daily solutions.

## Research ethics

In Finland, formal approval is not always required for research in human sciences. Our study did not address information so sensitive as to require an ethical review but nevertheless did follow the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). The ethical requirements of research were fulfilled by ensuring the anonymity of institutions and participants and obtaining their consent to participate. Prior to giving consent, each participant received information on the study and was assured that the opportunity to withdraw from the study was guaranteed. In the extracts, we characterize participants in general terms to ensure their anonymity.

## Results

Our analysis revealed that professionals activated three different frames illuminating aspects of ECEC work and its temporality: time management, educational objectives, and moments of encounter. Although these frames are overlapping and interdependent, each offers a unique perspective on ECEC work. Table 1 displays our notions about the content of these frames.

### Time management: “running everyday life”

In our data, an essential issue seems to be time management, which appears to produce time mainly as the material resource of work, lacking another dimension of temporality. By using expressions like “organizing”, “scheduling”, and “calculating”, participants construct shared time structures and express the necessity of creating a chronological order for actions in the community (Toivanen et al., 2016; Zuccheromaglio & Talamo, 2000). The notion of time as linear and measurable is produced also by using utterances such as “running everyday life” and the “rhythm of work”, which may indicate the desire for a recurring flow of time. However, this frame is not a single entity; it contains a variety of discussions. Participants also construct time management in relation to the continuous reorganization of work as well as the challenges involved in synchronizing the diversity of tasks assigned to professionals (Ohi, 2014; Puroila, 2002).

The following extracts indicate how time management discussions include established time practices or routines based on working shifts and clock hours (see Kuukka, 2015; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002):

**Table 1.** Discursively produced frames of ECEC work and their inscriptions of temporality.

Frames of time and temporality in ECEC work	Notions of time and temporality	Examples of utterances
Time management <i>“running everyday life”</i>	Focus is on time elapsing, and efforts to create and maintain time management structures. Time practices emphasize the linear, measurable notion of time → Recurrence, predictability	Running everyday life, coping, schedule, structure, prioritization, counting, routines
Educational objectives <i>“creating foundations for the future”</i>	Focus is on children’s development and learning. Time practices juggle the linearly-oriented aims of education and a relational temporality engaged in daily activities.	Broad plans, laying the foundations, future skills, prevention, evaluation
Moments of encounter <i>“genuine presence”</i>	Focus is on relational time, which is based on situational interactions between a child and practitioner. In these shared moments of togetherness, the relational temporality is modified by an individual practitioner.	Genuine presence, easy going, time to hear and see, doing things in peace, everyday presence, look the child in the eye



<sup>1</sup>Director A2: There's that day-to-day routine of duty, the work proceeds minute by minute and hour by hour, and the clock is ticking.

Childcarer B3: Tasks are divided according to shifts so that you know what to plan and what you are responsible for.

Childcarer B4: In other words, who does what depends on the shift.

Childcarer B2: For example, if you are on the evening shift, you are responsible for the group's activities. Morning shift is the first one to go to the playground.

However, the participants also talked about the continuous sudden changes that often relate to current Finnish practices of applying staff ratios, which are measured at the level of the whole ECEC centre instead of at the level of the single children's group. This results in the frequent rotation of staff members between the groups (see Hjelt & Karila, 2017). As the next extracts illustrate, this approach is connected to ongoing situational reorganization that modifies the time structures and may influence the way in which professionals perceive the temporality of ECEC work (see Karila & Kinos, 2012; Moran, 2015; Puroila, 2002):

Childcarer A4: We spend quite a lot of time planning how to survive in the afternoon . . . . [W]e calculate how many children we will have, when each will be fetched [and taken] home . . . . Then we plan how to deal with the situation, how we can get [the] remaining children out to the playground.

Childcarer C2: [I]f an employee is not present, the director checks the ratios to find out which group has absent children, and then one of us may have to leave to patch up the situation.

Childcarer C3: So, one of us is placed in a different group.

Childcarer C2: This creates stress all the time. Substitution is not automation.

The time management frame also included shared discourse patterns concerning the challenge of synchronizing multiple professional tasks. This was constructed, for example, by talking about prioritizing and allocation of working hours. The following extracts reflect the multifaceted responsibilities of ECEC professionals and the tensions these tasks can create in relation to the available time resources:

Director A5: [W]e also have all kinds of teams and meetings, pedagogical teams, general staff meetings . . . and then all the development meetings. So how do you get all this done so that the week's working hours are enough. Because the employee must first and foremost be present in the group of children, and, of course, they give it priority. Then maybe they have an hour a day to be somewhere else than with the children, and not necessarily even every day.

Director A4: [M]aybe one hour a day, this hour must also include making learning plans, documenting children's curricula and typing them, and getting familiar with the programme [the director is referring to ICT programs and applications] that the staff is expected to use.

Childcarer A1: One must know how to demand time. I have to make supply orders for the whole ECEC centre and take care of all our IT stuff, so I just need to get out of that group [classroom].

As these extracts indicate, such prioritization may create tensions that manifest themselves as temporal paradoxes, since continuous balancing is required between the actual work with children, the administrative tasks, and the mutual responsibilities for developing the pedagogical competences of the work community. This resonates with the observations of Hjelt and Karila (2021) concerning the tension in ECEC leadership.

In particular, the directors' talk constructed the obligation to develop and renew ECEC pedagogy. This was denoted by utterances like "new curricula world" and "moving forward", which capture the sense of temporal flow and include expectations related to the future (Dawson, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup>In extracts, the letters A, B, and C refer to the different municipalities in which the focus group discussions took place.



However, as the extracts below indicate, the directors discuss this, interestingly, by noting that individual professionals and teams working together with a group of children are reluctant to break the daily routines based on the accustomed rhythm of work:

Director A4: Teams are now faced with a new curriculum and how it reflects everyday patterns in the children's group. Okay, working may be determined by the lunch hours and breakfast, but then the new curriculum and working with small group activities puts new pressure on how the day goes, and you have to break routines or structures you have used for decades [laughing].

Director A3: Yes, a big thing, because some people rely on knowing that their working day goes like this, and now it doesn't necessarily go like that.

Nevertheless, these directors' assumptions of reluctance to change routines contradict the participants' earlier descriptions of the continuous reorganization of daily activities. We may therefore assume that directors are not fully aware of the effects of continuous temporal changes. There is always a complex time-related relationship between change and predictability. As Adam (1995) points out, progressive change is often seen as a contrast to routine, yet repetition has a central role in formatting social structures.

While talking about time management and task prioritization, the participants made rhetorical choices to address responsibility at the level of the individual employee or team of professionals. This is constructed by preferring utterances like "I need to handle" and "teams ought to develop", which create the impression of practitioners as self-governing negotiators of time resources. This might support the critical notions of Nuttall and Thomas (2015) regarding the interpretation of time management as an individual's competence. However, interpretations of time and temporality in this frame relate to the international discussion of the outcome-based governing of efficiency, which often sets rather tight frames on all situational decisions concerning time structures (Paananen, 2017).

### ***Educational objectives: "creating foundations for the future"***

Alongside the time management discussion, practitioners construct time and temporality in the context of the child's growth and development. In these discussions, participants produced a variety of intertwined time concepts. The ECEC is constructed in the context of a time continuum and manifested as the aim-oriented utilization of the child's potential, applying a rather linear conception of time. However, the practices aiming at these objectives are influenced by various social and material factors that represent a more relational view of temporality (Hohti & Paananen, 2019; Moran, 2015). When talk of time and temporality leans towards the future it is constructed by utterances like "guiding the child to a good path of life" and "educating a respectable pupil and a citizen". Nevertheless, the pedagogical planning is produced as an instrument to combine longer-term objectives and the situational adaptation of time practices.

The following extracts present how the temporal horizon of the national guidelines influences the planning of work. The participants also describe how they are able to take into account different time perspectives based on both the children's interests and their own professional choices within the framework of the curriculum:

Teacher A2: [W]ork is guided by national guidelines, but I can see that, at least in this practical everyday work, it is the working team and its values that forms the activities ... for example, we saw at the beginning of this season that nature and environmental education has to be a focus ... if you really think about the future on Earth.

Teacher A3: Of course, we have started within this national framework and then we observe what the children are interested in and it matters a lot.

The next extract from the directors' discussion illustrates how they expand the temporal span of educational planning by highlighting the quality evaluation challenges of ECEC work. This could

demonstrate the process-based temporality of pedagogical work, which was prominent especially in the directors' talk. Regardless, this issue has been critically addressed through deficiencies in the professionals' assessment competences:

Director C2: I'd think in our ECEC centre, the professionals probably know how the work should be assessed, but they do not know how to use that information to plan forward. I think we should take it even more into everyday practices. Nowadays, they just think that, yeah ... that's how it went ... but nothing changes.

The essential issue in these pedagogically orientated discussions seems to be temporal vulnerability concerning the implementation of pre-planned pedagogical activities (Hjelt & Karila, 2017). This is demonstrated by the recurrent discursive structure in which speakers acknowledge the continuous modification of working arrangements and sudden absence of staff as key factors in the decline of systematic pedagogical work. This creates a close connection between time management and educational objectives. As shown in the extracts below, due to frequent staff adjustments, the time structure of planned pedagogic activities requires modifications—for example, they may be cancelled, transferred, or shortened. This observation resonates with earlier studies of ECEC work structures (Nuttall & Thomas, 2015; Paananen, 2017):

Teacher A4: [W]e have been planning activities, but when one of us is absent and so on, the situation changes rapidly during the week and even day, and we have to drop back to what was planned and then reassemble. It makes me feel like I'm just planning, and rarely does it happen.

Director B2: [W]e're in pain not being allowed to have any extra people at the centre. Then our staff jump from one group to another, and children have to face replacements one after the other.

As the extracts above indicate, the changing situations, for example due to staff absence, involve the rapid reorganization of available workforce resources. As Puroila (2002) states, these changes must be done here and now. The phenomenon was also constructed with expressions such as “jump from one group to another” and “running on”. This rhetoric reflects the temporal impact of continuous staff adjustments on everyday life in ECEC.

This construction of temporal vulnerability of work resonates well with the observations of Paananen (2017) concerning mutual dependence of time management, educational aims, and governance of ECEC resources.

### ***Moments of encounter: “genuine presence”***

The focus of this frame is on the time practices that enable situational interaction between child and practitioner. Participants produce the idea of moments that allow them to pay undivided attention to an individual child or group of children in order to create togetherness between the children or the adult and child.

These moments of encounter are constructed by using time-related expressions like “rush-free moment” and “calm situation”, as well as the expression “genuine presence of adult”. These linguistic choices illustrate the essential situational dimensions of this frame, supporting the earlier findings of Pramling-Samuelsson et al. (2016), which indicate that professionals define harmony and calmness as features of a good learning environment because they enable high-quality staff-child dialogue. These ideals can be attached to individualization as a value of today's society (ibid). However, the frame of moments of encounter with a few children could also represent the temporality that allows the individual practitioner to negotiate the temporal dimensions of her tasks (McDonald et al., 2018; Wang, 2019; Zuccheromaglio & Talamo, 2000).

Different nuances are also found in relation to these discussions. On the one hand, participants construct interactions and moments of encounter in the context of the child's learning. On the other hand, they talk about peaceful moments and togetherness as a counter discourse to the conscious goal-orientation of ECEC. It is essential that time and temporality are realized as a

situational, shared experience. This reflects the relative notions of time and temporality introduced by Hohti and Paananen (2019).

As the following extracts illustrate, there is an emotional dimension in this frame's discussion, which demonstrate the significance of encounters based on the situational elements and collective joy of learning. However, discussions include conditional structures like "I wish" and "I would like to", displaying the ambiguous status of these situations, which may reflect the terms of ECEC work (Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Nuttall & Thomas, 2015):

Teacher B3: I wish to have peaceful moments when you really are able to concentrate and do activities in peace with the child.

Teacher B2: [Y]ou can notice how the child made an insight herself ... or something had touched her. It is wonderful; I get a really good feeling about it.

While describing these moments of encounter, the participants reflect on the national curriculum guidelines, which require the sensitive presence of professionals in daily practices (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). The excerpts below demonstrate another perspective on these discussions. The participants use persuasive rhetoric strategies (Humä et al., 2020) while they forcefully talk about interactions and encounters with children. However, they emphasize the adult's presence as such without the systematic objective-orientation of these moments.

Childcarer C2: [T]he most important thing would be to be present for the child and we don't have to be much else. Then you can always come up with a little thing to do together, but that is enough.

Childcarer C3: I just want to say that the most important is a presence, with a child, a real everyday presence. It may not always be so today.

Conscious pedagogical utilization of these moments of encounter requires professionals to perceive multiple levels of time and temporality. The significant pedagogical potential of these situations needs to be identified and seized on in the current moment, even if the focus of activities is also on the future.

### ***Mutual frames dynamics***

In addition to outlining the temporal frames of ECEC work, we focused on the relations between these presented frames because they have an impact on the implementation of daily activities. As Goffman (1974) points out, the same activities can be framed in a variety of ways. In our data, tension is built between the time management and educational objectives of frames. As the teachers' descriptive rhetoric in the next extracts demonstrates, the mutual connection between the time span required for systematic implementation of ECEC and the policy of constant rapid changes does not work well. These changes are mainly related to the efficient management of workforce resources:

Teacher A3: When we have a pre-planned day ... e.g., a field trip is great, if we can keep to the plan and there will be no external attack, and for one reason or another, our plan will not work.

Teacher B1: When someone is absent ... and before taking an external substitute [that costs about 200 euros a day], we first scrape together people from our own unit and then we try to get them from outside units—whoever can make it.

Teacher B4: So, if a group is under-staffed, we arrange that puzzle ourselves. It takes quite a lot of working time, nowadays.

Teacher B1: It, it affects, it's the biggest, biggest, biggest, biggest confusing factor.

Apparently, these different frames of time and temporality may overlap and merge in daily practice. Nevertheless, the socially shared construction of time and temporality seems to be dominated by the frame of time management. This resonates well with previous studies illuminating the entanglement between the educational aspects of ECEC work and the governance of

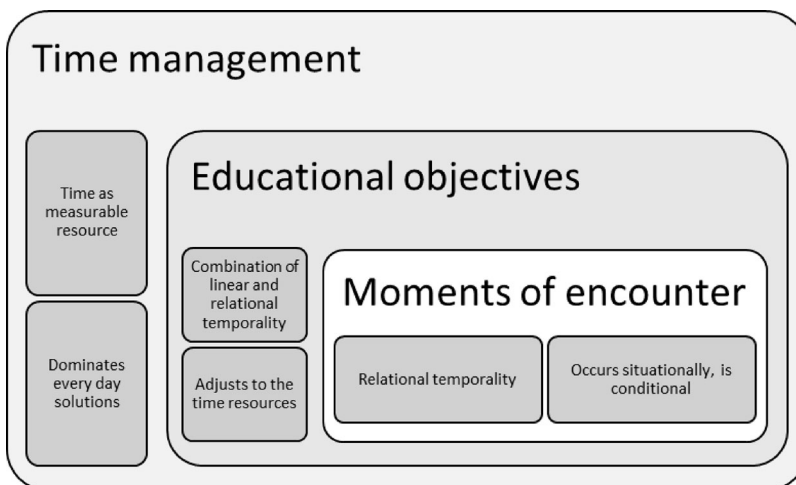
ECEC workforce resources (Eerola et al., 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2017; OECD, 2019; Paananen, 2017; Paananen et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the moments of encounter frame is placed in an interesting relationship with the educational objective frame because it has been stated that pedagogy is genuinely placed in child–staff interaction (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013). However, the moments of encounter frame is activated by favouring conditional statements that afford it subordinate status. These issues merge with general discussions of employees' ability to control to some extent their own work time (McDonald et al., 2018; OECD, 2019; Sutela et al., 2019; Wang, 2019).

Figure 1 illustrates relationships between frames of work. In our data, the time management frame seems to dominate all activities in ECEC work. The significance of curricula-based work in relation to educational objectives is well-recognized. However, the continual adjustment of pedagogical activities is produced in relation to work conditions and time management. The moments of encounter frame is constructed as situational, falling rather unpredictably within other temporal frames as part of the overall activity. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, within this frame, the participants used emotional talk that supports a sensitive atmosphere (see Osgood, 2010).

## Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that the overlapping of time dimensions is a significant part of ECEC work, and professionals have to cope with different temporal concepts. The temporal aspects of work are based on both the future-oriented objectives of education and the ability to implement flexible relational temporality in the situational time practices of ECEC work. However, in our data, time management, representing the concept of measurable time, plays a dominant role in time-related discussions. The tightly regulated and controlled management of material time resources could cause recurring reorganization of activities, which might have significant impact on the solutions made at work. Our data indicate that ECEC professionals are well aware of the tensions related to the dominance of time management but prioritizing other temporal dimensions in everyday life seems very difficult, especially if task prioritization is presented as an individual competence (see Nuttall & Thomas, 2015). These findings have an interesting connection with Wang's (2019) idea of professionals' time capital, illustrating their ability to control temporal structures of work. It seems that ECEC professionals find accumulating the time capital necessary to make meaningful pedagogical choices challenging. The time management discussion, linked to the ECEC



**Figure 1.** Frames of time and temporality and their mutual relationship and impact on the everyday practices of ECEC work.

efficiency mechanism, may reflect embedded neoliberal arguments emphasizing the austerity applied to the public sector budget (Lundqvist et al., 2017; Paananen et al., 2015).

Since Finnish municipalities have a great deal of autonomy in organizing ECEC services, the results of this study may also reflect local interpretations related to the societal function of the ECEC institution, e.g., the types of resources required and how the needs of parents and children are emphasized in the time resource allocation.

Based on our study, we suggest that the impact of current time-related practices be critically assessed at various levels of national and local ECEC organizations. Our research showed an imbalance in temporal structures that may reflect the embedded neoliberal governance of ECEC work. The pedagogical rationalities appear to compete with control of material time resources, causing continuous reorganization of pedagogical work. This may destabilize the anticipated sequence of actions and temporal flow of pedagogy. It seems that ECEC professionals do not have sufficient autonomy to control these structures, which could indicate the necessity of governance assessment at organizational level.

Without such assessment, lack of temporal autonomy may have a harmful influence on professionals' ability to use their expertise and achieve the national objectives of ECEC. Furthermore, these issues can be related to both the meaningfulness of work and work commitment, which are significant in terms of recruitment and retention of qualified ECEC personnel. Therefore, temporal interpretations could define the entire ECEC institution, even though they consist of individual everyday events.

## Limitations of this study

The study has its limitations. First, to enable rich debate and avoid possible power imbalances, each professional group was invited to engage in their own discussions. However, the participants were selected locally, and we cannot exclude the possible impact of local power structures. Second, because we captured only the Finnish context of ECEC work, overgeneralization of our findings must be avoided and their transferability must be based on local reassessment.

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## ORCID

Hanna Hjelt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6842-9538>

Kirsti Karila  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6233-2615>

Päivi Kupila  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4807-8360>

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