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MEALTIME IN FINNISH KINDERGARTEN
Teacher's understanding of their role during mealtime

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ABSTRACT

Shanarah O'Leary: Mealtimes in the Kindergarten: Teachers understanding of their role during mealtimes
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Mealtimes in the kindergarten are regular and essential parts of the day. Children's early experiences with food and eating can play a huge role in their future relationship with food. Many children attending early childhood education will eat a majority of their meals for the day in a kindergarten setting. It is then clear, that teachers play an important role in children's early experiences with food.

The role that teachers play during mealtimes can be understood from many perspectives. The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education in Finland points out many responsibilities during meals that are placed on teachers from an educational perspective.

This study was conducted using the methodology of video-cued focus group interview. Five teachers working in early childhood education centres in Finland were interviewed in an online focus group through Zoom. The teachers watched a video from an Australia early childhood setting and commented on their thoughts and feelings. The data was analysed using content analysis.

The results show that the role teachers take on during mealtimes is multifaceted. Teachers feel a responsibility to model social norms and enacting and reinforcing appropriate behaviours, by setting rules and regulations for the children. Mealtimes in the kindergarten are used to civilise and socialise children to the standards of society.

Keywords: mealtime, socialisation, civilising, kindergarten

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Finland, 79% of children aged 3-5 years attend some form of early childhood education and care setting (ECEC) (OECD, 2019). For many children, a large portion of their day is spent in care outside of the home, with some spending over 8 hours a day in an ECEC facility. As a result, children consume a lot of their daily meals in an early childhood facility, with many offering breakfast, lunch and snacks throughout a regular day. Research shows that children's experiences with food and eating in early childhood have a lifelong impact on health outcomes and eating behaviour (Uauy, et.al., 2008). As a result of this, teachers in early childhood education have a large impact on children's current and also future eating habits.

The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) states that mealtimes are an essential part of the day and are opportunities for children to learn different skills associated with self-care, social behaviours and cultural understanding. The activities around meals are mentioned across three different learning areas, including 'Me and our community', 'Exploring and interacting with my environment' and 'I grow, move and develop' within the curriculum, underlining the importance that is placed on the different learning opportunities presented during mealtimes. The Finnish approach to curriculum is based on the concept of social pedagogy and this has a large impact on how the curriculum discusses and approaches mealtime and what skills and knowledge are valued. Social pedagogy is practiced in many countries around Europe, while other countries such as England and Australia put less focus on this concept, focusing more on knowledge education. (Moss and Petrie, 2019). This can result in a variable approach to everyday routines such as mealtimes in kindergarten settings. Where one country may value the social aspect of the mealtime, including commensality, manners and social norms, another may put more focus on an educational approach to what specific knowledge can be learned about the meal or food, such as what or how to eat.

During mealtimes, teachers have the opportunity to influence and build on children's knowledge and understanding of a wide variety of issues, from basic table manners and healthy eating practices, to the natural environment and cultural norms and rules. According to the National Nutrition Council's publication, 'Health and Joy From Food – meal recommendations for early childhood education and care' (National Nutrition Council, 2018) teachers play an important role during kindergarten mealtimes, and have a role in helping to develop children's relationship with food. The role that teachers play during mealtimes is fundamental. This thesis will investigate teacher's understandings and perceptions of their role during mealtimes in the kindergarten.

My interest in this topic stems from my background as a dietitian, before I began working in early childhood education. I have always been interested in food and nutrition, and when I began working in kindergartens, I found myself paying a lot of attention to how different educators would approach mealtimes. It was the one part of the day that differences in opinion and practice between staff would really shine through, and where educators would have very strong opinions on how children should be and act. As an assistant, I could not have much influence on the mealtime arrangements, but I would often observe and question different practices around the mealtimes. Now working as a pre-primary teacher, I have found it very interesting to observe how different my approach is compared to my co-workers and these differences can sometimes cause tension and uncomfortable feelings. I chose this topic for my thesis to try and learn more about why teachers have certain practices related to mealtimes and how teachers understand their role during mealtimes. What discourses are teachers using to inform their practice during mealtimes? What role are teachers playing?

In this study, my aim is to understand the role of teachers during mealtimes in the kindergarten. I will investigate the different discourses that are being drawn upon by the teachers in their practice during mealtimes. The study is qualitative research. The data is collected through a video-cued focus group interview with five participants working in Finnish early childhood education centres. The data is analysed through thematic coding, using inductive coding.

Next in the thesis the literature review follows, in which I look into the Finnish National Curriculum to understand the view it portrays on mealtimes. I also discuss the research around mealtimes in kindergarten and the different

understandings of mealtimes in earlier research. After this, I will describe the methodology chosen for this thesis and the reasonings behind this choice. I will then describe the data analysis methods I used. After the description of the data analysis, I present my analysis of data and how the results are related to different discourses identified also in the literature. Finally, I give a summary of the findings and offer some conclusions.

2 MEALTIMES IN KINDERGARTEN

Mealtimes are a site of social interaction and often provide opportunities for children to learn about cultural expectations and other ideas about food. Not only this, mealtimes are also an opportunity for children to consume important nutrition and set children up for future health outcomes and eating behaviours (Uauy, et.al., 2008). The role of the teacher in these mealtimes can be understood from many different perspectives, and this literature review will attempt to investigate some of these interpretations. The National Core Curriculum is an important document for understanding how mealtimes are positioned within the Finnish early childhood education and care context and what expectations it places on teachers and on mealtimes themselves. In addition to this, it is important to understand how mealtimes are positioned from a social perspective, as this can help us to understand the norms and expectations surrounding mealtimes in different contexts.

2.1 Mealtimes in the National Core Curriculum

Mealtimes and food education in early childhood education are mentioned across many different sections of The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018). The importance of the learning opportunities presented in mealtimes is clearly outlined in section 2.6 of the curriculum, where it discusses the value of the learning presented in daily care situations:

Daily situations, such as meals, dressing and undressing, rest and taking care of personal hygiene are an essential part of the child's day. In ECEC, the care situations are always both educational and instructive situations where the children learn, among other things, interaction skills, skills related to taking care of oneself and time management as well as adopt good habits. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 23).

In this statement, the curriculum clearly positions mealtimes as a pedagogical opportunity for teachers to take advantage of, and the opportunities it presents to

teach children about social expectations, as well as providing an opportunity for children to be socialised into the cultural norms expected for the activity.

The different learning opportunities presented during mealtimes is also further clarified in other sections of the curriculum. In section 2.1 “Transversal Competences, mealtimes are mentioned in two competences ‘Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression’, as well as in ‘Taking care of oneself and managing daily life’. In section 4.5 ‘Learning areas’, mealtimes are referred to within 3 different areas ‘Me and our community’, ‘Exploring and interacting with my environment’ and ‘I grow, move and develop’. Based on how widely mealtimes and their educational and social value are discussed across the curriculum, it could be understood that mealtimes are a highly valued component of ECEC in Finland. Mealtimes present opportunities for pedagogical work, as well as social outcomes, which will be further discussed.

Section 2.6 of the National Core Curriculum clearly summarises the position the curriculum takes on mealtimes and their pedagogical value in ECEC as being ‘both educational and instructional situations where the children learn’. The skills that can be learnt during mealtimes vary from interaction and social skills, to care related skills. These different skills are presented throughout the different sections of the curriculum and are clearly valued as vital aspects of ECEC.

In section 2.7 ‘Transversal competences’, mentions mealtimes and their learning opportunities in two different areas. Here, mealtimes are presented as a valuable opportunity for learning about different cultures and traditions. Food is a resource that can be used to open discussions on how cultures may be different, as well as to learn about different customs or ways of eating that may be unfamiliar to the child. Mealtimes are also important for practicing skills around self-care and wellbeing. Health and wellbeing in early childhood has a lasting impact throughout the lifespan, and the skills learned during this time are valuable throughout adulthood (Uauy, et.al., 2008).

In section 4.5 ‘Learning areas’, mealtimes are presented as an important learning environment that can provide opportunities for teaching children about different topics. In ‘Me and our community’, mealtime is presented as an opportunity for educating children about different worldviews, with food as the vehicle. In ‘Exploring and interacting with my environment’, mealtimes are presented as an opportunity to teach about environmental education. Here,

children should be taught about the impacts of food waste and learn to become responsible food consumers. The area of 'I grow, move and develop' discusses food education in the kindergarten and gives teachers very clear instructions on how the mealtime environment should be organised and what children should be familiarised with during mealtimes. It presents mealtimes as an opportunity for children to learn about the food on their plate, including different tastes, textures and appearances. It also clearly states children that should learn good table manners.

Based on these interpretations, the National Core Curriculum clearly positions mealtime as a pedagogical opportunity, within which children can learn many important behaviours, develop understanding and knowledge about the closer and broader environment and society as well as ideas around food, health and culture. The role of the teacher than is to use the mealtime to provide children with a range of educational opportunities about food, culture, the environment etc. It is also to socialise children into the behaviours expected in the situation.

2.2 Mealtimes as socialisation

Mealtimes are a site for the socialisation of people into the expectations appropriate for members of a given society. They are socially constructed and the understanding and expectations of those present at the mealtime varies between cultures. (Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Hansen, et.al., 2017). Ochs and Shohet (2006) argue that mealtimes are 'arenas for the production of sociality, morality and local understandings of the world'. Not only do mealtimes provide opportunity for socialisation, they are also a site where power relationships are negotiated between children and adults. In her study, Grieshaber (1997) found that within the family home, the rules and expectations during and surrounding mealtime were adult generated and were often resisted to by the children in many different ways. Each family had their own set of mealtime rules and expectations.

Teachers, like parents, implement rules and expectations for mealtime in an attempt to regulate and socialise the children. Olwig (2017) describes kindergarten meals as sites full of adult constructed rules and regulation, where children must follow these expectations and the social norms associated with the activity, with the purpose of creating children who are members of society. The

kindergarten is considered as a site for 'civilising' children's behaviour into what is expected in the society within which they are a part of, with mealtimes being a significant site for teachers to impose these norms and expectations (Gilliam and Gulløv, 2017). Nordic pedagogy is based around the concept of social pedagogy, which can be defined as aiming 'to encourage a strong sense of community, educates both children and adults to ensure positive relations between the individual and society, and fights to close the gap between rich and poor' (Eichsteller and Holtoff, 2011, p. 40). Teachers may feel they have a responsibility for teaching the children these rules and expectations to ensure that the children will grow to know and understand social expectations. In their attempt to regulate and socialise the children, who are constructed as 'future beings', teachers will use different strategies at the mealtime (Hansen, et.al., 2017). Brennan (2007) found that teachers spent a significant amount of time during mealtimes getting children to follow the norms expected of them during this daily routine. The teachers needed to quickly suppress the children's attempts at resistance to maintain the status quo and prevent anarchy in the group.

Ochs & Shohet (2006) argue that there are two processes visible for socialisation during mealtimes: apprenticeship and language socialisation. In the process of apprenticeship, children learn the appropriate norms and behaviours through observation and participation alongside more knowledgeable others whom could be a teacher or another child. In the process of language socialisation, the less experienced members of the community are socialised into the expectations through language and communication. The social order may be communicated to the children explicitly through messages of correction or directives, or through other less direct strategies, such as role modelling.

The practice of commensality is defined as 'the sharing of food and eating together in a social group' (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). The actual process of commensality may differ in different societies, cultures or settings. In an educational setting, Hansen and colleagues (2017), characterise the practise of commensality as having the purpose of socialising children into the skills, norms and values required during mealtimes. In many settings, commensality is a key practice and is highly valued.

2.3 The role of the teacher during mealtimes

The role that teachers play during mealtime can be understood in many different ways. Teachers may use different strategies to encourage eating, discourage the consumption of 'unhealthy' food, encourage table manners or to try to regulate children's eating habits. Teachers also draw upon previous experiences with mealtimes, often from their own family upbringing, and these values, attitudes and beliefs can influence how they organise the kindergarten mealtime and what they expect from children. This was noted in Swindle, Patterson and Boden's (2017) study, in which interviewed teachers were asked to determine how their beliefs and values surrounding mealtime, as well as their own memories of mealtimes during childhood, influenced how they managed mealtime in the kindergarten with regards to rules and routines. They found that these memories from childhood, as well as their own values and beliefs had an important impact on how the teachers managed the kindergarten mealtime, the role they played and what they expected from the children. Hansen and colleagues (2017) found that teachers felt a responsibility for teaching children the norms and expectations of the mealtime, as they argued that many children no longer learnt these behaviours in the home, making the kindergarten the only place where children could be exposed to a 'proper' mealtime. In this way, the need for rules and routines during mealtime was constructed out of concern for the children's future needs and being in the best interest of the child. Certainly, Ochs and Shohet (2006) found evidence for the teachers' arguments, where busy work and activity schedules have resulted in a decrease in commensality in the home.

Other studies have considered the role of teachers during mealtime from the perspective of food consumption. In this way, teachers viewed their role during the mealtime as regulating children's eating habits by encouraging children to eat more, eat in a certain way or encourage healthy food consumption or discourage unhealthy food consumption. The strategies teachers use to control children's consumption and eating practices have been investigated in many studies, using different terminology and definitions to categorise. Vacquera and Dotson (2014) used the categories of 'gatekeeping', 'directives' and 'hyperbolic justifications' to label the types of strategies teachers used based on their observations. Hughes and colleagues (2007) used the terms 'authoritarian',

'authoritative', 'indulgent' and 'uninvolved' to categorise their observations. Hansen and colleagues (2017) referred to different implicit and explicit techniques adults may use to create what they referred to as 'eating bodies'. This could include the creation of a routine, including rules and expectations, and the use of behaviour corrections, punishment or praise in an attempt to regulate the children during mealtime. In their study, Mita and colleagues (2015) referred to the concept of a 'positive mealtime environment' and investigated teachers' perceptions of this. According to the teachers interviewed, a positive mealtime environment included implementing rules and routines, having children and adults socialising and eating together and children learning different skills. The particular skills teachers felt that children could learn during mealtime included language skills, social skills, motor skills and cognitive skills. In addition to this, a positive environment also provided children with the opportunity to learn about different subject areas, such as colours, shapes, textures and the food itself. Hansen and colleagues (2017) found that despite mealtimes being highly regulated by adults (which they referred to in their paper as 'striated spaces'), this meal environment was preferred by some children as it provided a safe and calm space to eat. Many children still, however, found ways to have fun and bend the rules when the opportunity would arise.

The link between the concept of civilisation and social pedagogy and its influence on teachers practice is important. Mealtimes are very much socially constructed and as a result, have the potential to be an important daily activity in a country which the early childhood education system is built on the idea of social pedagogy. One area of social pedagogy is the promotion of social cohesion and since mealtimes are a part of the day when children and adults gather together to participate in the same activity, this provides a perfect opportunity for teachers to teach these valued concepts. Mealtimes present a daily opportunity for teachers to 'civilise' the children and model the norms and values expected of them in a civil society.

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted many important themes and topics for the data analysis. In particular, the aspects of civilisation and socialisation, and how these are impacting teachers roles during mealtime will be further investigated in the analysis. The different pedagogical approaches of social pedagogy and education will also be further discussed, as this will provide a very interesting interpretation of the data. The pedagogical approach in Finland is somewhat different to that in Australia, where socialisation practices are not as highly valued during mealtime, so this will provide an interesting point of discussion.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis employs the research method of the video-cued interview, as developed by Joseph Tobin and described below. Video-cued interviews are an excellent method of eliciting responses from participants that go beyond simple questions and answers, but instead will reveal the deeper discourses that underpin a participant's values, attitudes and beliefs on a subject. The video aims to elicit responses that can be analysed to understand the person's true beliefs in answering the research question.

3.1 *Video-cued interview*

This study uses a qualitative method, video-cued focus group interview, a part of video-cued ethnography. In this method, the film itself is not considered the primary data, but serves to stimulate responses from the interviewees (Adair & Kurban, 2019). In traditional video-cued ethnography, as developed by Joseph Tobin in the 1980's as a data collection method for his *Preschool in Three Cultures* study, the video is created through observation and then edited in conjunction with the participants (Adair & Kurban, 2019). In my study, a video depicting a mealtime in a family day care was pre-selected, so as to focus on the video-cued interview part of this method. In video-cued interviews, there is a protocol to be followed and still some flexibility is allowed (Adair & Kurban, 2019). During the interview, the video should be shown and then the interviewees asked for initial reactions to what they have seen. From here, the interviewer can move on to more specific questions about different parts of the video.

The video for this study has been selected from the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Learning Hub, which is an online platform that provides professional development resources for early childhood educators. The video itself is titled 'Connecting with Practice NQS PLP – Discovering – Lunchtime'. The video shows teacher-child interactions during a mealtime in a small family

daycare in Australia. The video depicts a small setting including four young children and one adult. In the video, children are eating their lunch, which has been brought to the setting in prepacked lunch boxes from home. Using a video from a different culture (Australia) is a key part of this methodology. The intention is that the “outsiders to this culture... [will] reveal, in their surprise and critical reactions... some of the implicit beliefs that guide their practices” (Tobin, 2019, p. 255). The data can be drawn from these reactions and analysed, to understand the teachers’ underlying beliefs and understandings surrounding mealtime in a kindergarten.

The interview was conducted in a small group, consisting of approximately five teachers, working in Finnish kindergartens. The interview itself was conducted through the platform Zoom and was recorded. The teachers were first shown the video in full and then asked to make general comments about what they observed during the video. The questions are quite general, in order to encourage natural conversation and discussion and are based on those suggested by Tobin (2019). If needed, some more specific questions were also generated which could be used to spark conversation. The general questions for the interview were:

1. What are your general observations about what you saw in the video?
2. Does it look typical to you?
3. What do you like best and least about the practices shown in the video?

More specific questions:

1. What role did you feel the teacher played during the mealtime?
2. How might mealtime in your kindergarten differ?
3. What are your thoughts about how the teacher handled the situation with Ian, when he didn’t want to come to eat lunch?
4. Should the teacher have reacted differently when Ian didn’t want to come to lunch?
5. How did the teacher handle the situation with Sophia?
6. What do you think about Ian eating his jelly before his savoury food?

The focus group interview was recorded, so that the data could be reviewed many times and field notes were also taken during the focus group. The video was transcribed after the meeting.

Participants were selected to take part based on opportunity sampling. According to Mukherji & Albon (2018), this is a common form of sampling used by students and allows students to recruit participants that are familiar and with whom they have a good rapport.

3.2 Research Question

This study aims to understand more about how teachers view their role during mealtimes in the kindergarten. In addition, I also investigated the overarching discourses that inform the views the teachers have.

The research question that was investigated in this thesis is:

‘How do teachers understand their role during kindergarten mealtimes?’

3.3 Content Analysis

Data analysis was based on Mukherji & Albon’s (2018) methods of data analysis for qualitative data. The data collected during the focus group interview was first be transcribed, along with any field notes that were collected. Once I become familiar with the data, the coding process begin. The data was coded to determine any general themes or ideas that were present in the data. The codes were generated during the data analysis process using the idea of inductive coding, rather than using predetermined codes. Once the data had been coded, the codes were sorted into different categories as appropriate. These categories were used to then identify any themes and relationships that can be used to further analyse the data.

After the initial data analysis, there was a possibility to return to the participants to further clarify any points that may have been unclear, or if there was any outlying data that was found during analysis.

During the data analysis process, it was important to recognise the influence of self on the data collected and how it was analysed. Reflexivity is important to understand how my own values and beliefs influenced how I analysed the data and what I may or may not consider as important. My own background, having grown up in Australia and immigrated to Finland as an adult, as well as my previous education in Nutrition and Dietetics have influenced my perspective on

this research and the approach I have taken. At the end of the thesis, I have reflected on my own thoughts and feelings that arose during the research and how my own background has influenced my actions

3.4 Data Management Plan

During this research project, data was collected from individuals for the purpose of the study. The individuals participating in the study and their personal information will not be identifiable in the results or in the thesis itself. The study population consisted of five early childhood teachers working in Finnish kindergartens. Personal data that was collected from the participants included name and contact information (e.g. email address) if there are follow-up questions. Data was collected prior to the interview, during the process of collecting informed consent. The personal data collected from the participants was securely stored for the duration of the study and will then be disposed of by shredding at the completion of the study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research involved adults participating in a focus group interview. Participants provided informed consent at the beginning of the research. One potential ethical issue is that the recruitment was based on opportunity sampling, and I invited friends and colleagues in the industry to participate. Due to my personal relationship with the participants, it was possible some may have felt unable to say no. To avoid this, I was very clear that participation is completely voluntary. In addition to this, my finalised work will be available to access online and the participants will be able to view the final work. While the participants will remain anonymous in the study, the participants themselves will likely be able to identify themselves, and this leaves room for the participants to feel judged or offended by what is written, however, the intention of this study is not to judge different ideas or strategies, but simply to understand better how different teachers view mealtime in the kindergarten and get an understanding of the role that teachers play or want to play during mealtimes. Participants in the study will remain

anonymous and all data collected will be de-identified and stored securely. It is not necessary to gain ethical approval for this study from Tampere University Ethical Committee.

3.6 Data Collection and Participants

The interview was held via a Zoom meeting, in which five teachers currently working in Finnish kindergartens participated. The meeting lasted approximately one hour, with time also to watch the video. Four of the five participants were known to the researcher. The fifth participant was introduced as a co-worker of one of the other participants. All participants were female. All of the teachers interviewed work in international English or bilingual kindergartens in Finland.

Participant one's name is Mandy. Mandy works as a teacher in a Helsinki kindergarten, where she has worked for a number of years. She has been living and working in kindergartens in Finland for more than eight years. Prior to moving to Finland, she worked as an English as a second language teacher in Northern Africa. Mandy is from a mixed culture background, and has spent most of her childhood and adult life moving between different countries in Asia, Europe and Africa.

Participant two is Danica. Danica works as a teacher in a bilingual English/Finnish kindergarten in Tampere, a position she has held for about three years. Prior to moving to Finland, Danica worked as a private nanny while learning English and studied for a degree in Early Childhood Education in Spain.

Participant three is Jane. Jane is working in an English-speaking kindergarten in Helsinki, where she has been for around one year. Prior to this, she had been working at two other English-speaking kindergartens in the Helsinki area. She has a Bachelor degree in Primary and Pre-Primary teaching, as well as a Masters Degree in Education, which she studied for in Finland. Jane also has a very multicultural background, having grown up moving to different countries in Northern America, Asia and Europe, and spending her adult life also abroad.

Participant four is Linda. Linda has a background in Montessori education and currently works in a Montessori kindergarten. She has worked in Finland for

approximately one year and has worked also in Montessori kindergartens abroad. Linda is originally from France and has lived in a number of different countries during her adult life in Northern America and Europe.

Participant five is Ella. Ella has been living in Finland for a number of years. She recently received her Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education from a southern European country. Ella has worked in a number of international English-speaking kindergartens throughout Helsinki and Vantaa and is currently working in a Montessori kindergarten.

4 ANALYSIS OF DATA

4.1 Analysis of the Data

After the data was transcribed and I read through many times, different discourses became apparent. Themes of power and control, civilising and the pedagogical benefits and value of the mealtime emerged. Below, these dominant discourses are discussed along with the literature.

4.1.1 Mealtime as a teaching and learning time

The Finnish National Curriculum outlines the importance of using the mealtime for a range of different pedagogical activities. During the discussion, many of the teachers also mentioned how the mealtime should be used for teaching children about social etiquette (using 'indoor voice', having appropriate table manners, sitting calmly at the table), increasing children's food knowledge through exposure to different foods and encouraging food literacy through discussions about the food. One teacher felt particularly strongly about the importance of discussing the different foods present in the mealtime, including the teacher's food. Mandy said:

In my place, I normally eat my own lunch, which is always very interesting for other kids, they are always like, 'what are you eating for lunch', 'is that rice again?' (laughs). Yeah, so but it's nice because they ask questions and that's the point, right? That you talk about food, not just the food that they are eating, but they are interested in what you have to eat... (p. 5)

Learning about food was clearly valued by the teachers and the mealtime was seen as a key daily opportunity to do this. In Mandy's discussion about learning through the mealtime, she felt that this was a key time for increasing children's cultural competence and understanding of different food cultures through the food. In addition to this though, teaching about food with a focus on healthy eating was also raised. Danica mentioned the value of the children being exposed to a

wide range of food in the kindergarten, that they might not otherwise consume at home:

I think it's also good the fact that sometimes, even at least in my nursery they have vegetarian options too, so it's not only chicken or beef or pork, they also get to know what soya is, what tofu, so those are also good things for them for the future (p. 11)

In the Australian context, education about food is considered important, including the types of nutrients it contains and how those nutrients are useful to the body. As a child growing up in Australia, it was very common to hear things such as 'Eat your carrots, because the vitamin A helps you see better at night' or similar. In the Finnish context, this type of learning is not as highly valued as it may be in Australia, however teachers still in some ways, maybe more discreetly than what is normal in Australia, are teaching about this aspect of food. Danica's comment, which was also agreed with by other interviewees, that kindergarten exposes children to a wide range of foods that they might otherwise not experience was considered as a very important role of the kindergarten during mealtimes. Albon (2007) also reiterated these thoughts in her book chapter on food and eating in kindergarten. She argued that food and mealtimes are a crucial part of the daily routine in kindergartens, especially as they have the potential to have such a significant impact of children's current and future health. Albon also commented on the vast literature that links healthy eating with better overall learning outcomes in children.

Mita and colleagues (2015) found that teachers felt it was particularly important for children to learn during the mealtime. Mealtime learning included a range of skills, including social and cognitive skills, to learning about different subject areas, such as math. Teachers saw mealtime as an important opportunity for engaging with children and discussing different topics and ideas. Topics related to social skills and interaction, cultures and worldview education, and food education were all raised by the teachers as important areas and opportunities for education and learning during the mealtime. Mandy commented about the cultural differences in eating with some children and how the kindergarten environment provides an opportunity to learn different ways of eating, compared to what a child may be used to at home:

The culture you know is different of course, [the] household is so different... like using knives and forks, not everyone, we think or expect that the child knows how to use a knife and fork and it's just not like that in some households, you know, whether they use their hands or chopsticks. (p. 12-13)

Teachers themselves also can learn in the mealtime with children, especially with regards to cultural differences in eating and social expectations. Mandy describes an important learning experience she had:

I think it's something that I have learnt like later on that, you know, everyone is very different... Yeah, it's like these little things that you maybe don't notice in the beginning when you first start off, you know, teaching and being with kids and later you realise, oh yeah, you know you learn so much along the way. (p. 13)

Teachers learning alongside children in everyday situations is also a key concept of the Finnish National Core Curriculum. ECEC is considered a 'community where children and personnel learn together and from each other' (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018, pp 30).

An important teaching technique described by the teachers in the focus groups was modelling. Arthur and colleagues (2021) describe modelling as the process through which children learn by observing others. They go on to mention that teachers can model different practices or learning processes through their actions. The teachers felt modelling appropriate mealtime behaviours such as social behaviour, manners and even healthy eating habits was vital for the children to learn how to be in the mealtimes. Linda described her views on the use of modelling as a teaching technique in mealtimes:

I think as like adults we are the example for the child, and like in every circumstances, like not just for lunch, but they are learning in imitation (p. 5)

They... notice everything, like they are really good observers, so we need to show the example to the kids and do the same as we ask. So sitting is a part of the lunch and like eating also, trying everything. I think we need to show... good examples. (p. 5)

The idea of teachers being models of appropriate behaviour in the mealtime is also referred to in the National Nutrition Council's publication on meals in early childhood education 'Health and Joy from Food – meal recommendations for early childhood education and care'. In the guidelines, staff are encouraged to think of how their actions are communicated as a model for the children. The

guidelines state that 'each person working in early childhood education and care sets an example and serves as a role model by discussing various topics, interacting and eating with the children'. (National Nutrition Council, 2018).

The use of the mealtime to meet different educational needs of the children was clearly a priority for the teachers. The learning that teachers felt mealtimes provided varied and included not only social learning (which will also be discussed further in the thesis) but also education. Learning about and experiencing different types of food, health education and cultural learning were all key areas of education that teachers felt could be met through the mealtime.

4.1.2 Civilising

The concept of civilising in kindergarten settings has been well documented in the literature. According to Albon and Hellman (2018), Norbert Elias is to be credited with developing the concept of the civilising process and how it has influenced our modern society. Elias suggests that children are not born with the understanding of how to control themselves, rather socially acceptable behaviours and values are gradually inculcated in them over time and the child learns to repress their earlier behaviours and become 'civilised' according to society's expectation (Elias, 1994). Bach (2014, p. 227.) argues that "the concept of 'civilising' both refer to a specific process of normative influence and a specific goal – proper and respectable human beings".

In Western societies, the process of civilising occurs throughout childhood, until the end product of a civilised child/adult is formed. In her work, Gulløv (2011) refers to kindergartens themselves as sites for the 'civilising' of young children. Kindergartens and schools are given the responsibility in Western societies to civilise the children attending them and to ensure that the standards of society are met with. (Gulløv, 2011). In the interview, this idea of kindergarten being an important place for ensuring the standards of society are upheld, regardless of the home situation was also raised. Danica commented:

...for us its been a big challenge to make [the children] understand that we don't lie down when we are having lunch, cause they are very used to, some of the families, to have lunch on the sofa. So, its um... you can see it straight on the kid, the way they sit, the way they put the cup, the plate, and then you ask, where do you eat your lunch or your dinner on the weekend? 'On the

sofa with the tv on'. I said, ok we need to work on those manners then. (p. 12).

In this comment, Danica describes a common situation she has encountered, where some of the children in her service are lacking what she feels is a basic understanding of the manners and decorum expected of a commensal meal in the kindergarten. Danica's suggestion that some family's do not have high enough standards for the manner in which food is eaten and the resulting requirement of the kindergarten to teach these manners was agreed with by the other participants. The teachers seem to feel they have an obligation to ensure the children are 'civilised' into the proper manner for eating meals, where they felt that some parents may be 'slacking' on teaching the children these ideals. In the interview, the teachers wondered whether this difference was a cultural one and recounted how in their home countries commensality and proper manners were highly valued parts of the mealtime. Danica continues her views:

I don't know if this way, if it's a cultural thing, cause at least in Spain, I always remember how important it was to have lunch and dinner with my family, but I don't know if in Finland it is not the case. (p. 12).

Albon and Hellman (2018) also found that teachers had similar feelings of the source of improper table manners being the home life as the teachers in this study. They found that during mealtimes, teachers would make statements implying that parents were not teaching proper manners at home when children failed to follow the standards teachers set. Interestingly, they noted that this issue only arose during mealtimes, not in other parts of the day. Teachers apparently assumed that poor decorum at the table could only be a fault picked up from home, not one that could have been picked up from friends in the kindergarten or possibly even an action of their own will and desire.

The concept of good table manners was discussed throughout the interview and was held as a foundational concept in the mealtime and a key area for the children to learn in the kindergarten. The teachers repeatedly commented on the important role they felt table manners played during mealtime, as well as how vital it was to teach the children appropriate table manners. Mandy commented:

...table manners are extremely important, they are the day-today things, not just in kindergarten, but outside... (p. 2)

The idea of table manners being of importance inside and outside the kindergarten was also supported by the other teachers in the interview. Mandy also added to her comment that she felt that teaching the children good habits in the kindergarten, such as good manners and eating habits, was 'for the kid's sake'. Hansen and colleagues (2017) also found that the teaching of table manners was a key aspect of the mealtime in the kindergartens they visited and was considered to be of particular value for the importance it would play in children's future lives as they socialised with others. Glaser (2019) argues that mealtimes are key arenas for civilisation, as they have such a strong focus on what is appropriate versus what is not appropriate behaviour, such as how to sit, how to eat, how to handle a knife and fork or other utensils, etc. The rules and regulations are created based on the society and dominant culture the kindergarten is situated within and the adults in the setting are expected to enforce these rules, thus creating 'civilised' children.

During the discussion, ideas of the 'proper' way to eat a meal were raised by the teachers. This proper way included not only how the children themselves behaved and displayed table manners, but also the setting of the meal itself. Jane commented:

...our kids have like it's a proper table setting, there's a plate, there's a cup, there's utensils... (p. 9).

This ideal was also noted by Albon and Hellman (2018), the kindergarten meal environment showed what could be considered as a 'proper' way of dining, with aesthetically pleasing table settings and grouped tables for commensal dining. They highlighted how this can be linked with notions of class, where the 'correct' way is that of the dominant class in the setting. I would suggest this can also be linked with culture, where the ideals of the dominant culture are upheld as the most correct and appropriate for the mealtime. The idea that a 'proper table setting' must include a plate, cup and utensils for each person is a very cultural notion. In many cultures around the world, this is not the norm for eating. Using hands to eat, chopsticks or other types of eating implements, even having common shared plates of food are all common to other cultures. There are even differences between Western countries, where the culture might be otherwise considered quite similar. As a child growing up in Australia, meals in schools

where had sat on the ground outside with our friends, eating a sandwich and drinking from a 'poppa' (also known as a juice box in other countries), while chatting with friends. Burgers and pizza are eaten with our hands, while Finns prefer to use a knife and fork wherever possible. Often these notions of how to eat different food has a very cultural context. Even now as an immigrant in Finland, I often find myself waiting to see how others will eat their food before starting on my own, because what I consider 'finger food', I've found out, through some awkward situations, others may not.

Mealtimes in the kindergarten are clearly filled with civilising practices from teachers, as they attempt to control the children in their care and 'prepare' them for the society. Albon and Hellman (2018) argue, that compared to other daily activities in the kindergarten where children's participation is a valued concept, mealtimes seem to be a site for 'over-civilising'. During this time, young children are subjected to higher amounts of rules and discipline than they would normally receive during other parts of the day. Glaser (2019) also agrees with this concept, as they determined that mealtimes are very structured and ordered by the kindergarten staff and leave little room for children's participation. In the interview, the teachers all agreed that mealtimes were a time for rules, structures and regulations. Jane said:

(Mealtime) is a time for structure and clear, like, um, rules and expectations... (p. 7).

Having rules was very important for all the teachers, as they felt this helped to create a comfortable atmosphere for the mealtime and encouraged commensality. Teachers use linguistic commands and directives to ensure the children are following the set rules for the mealtime. In this example, Linda commented on a scene from the video that was watched, where one child started to cause some disruption during the mealtime:

(In) the beginning of the scene for instance, like when the little girl is starting to stand and to scream, it can happen, but it doesn't last more than 1 minute, because we immediately say, like ok there is rules, now it's lunchtime... (p. 3).

Albon and Hellman (2018) argued while much of the day in many Western kindergartens is based around the concept of free play, children's participation

and child-centredness, many practices they consider to be 'over-civilising' are clearly present during mealtimes. Children are expected to show high amounts of self-control in the lead up to and during the mealtime routine, such as waiting long periods for others to be ready, showing patience, displaying appropriate manners and behaviours and following the set rules.

The rules and expectations enforced by teachers during mealtime may be connected to their own childhood and experiences of mealtimes in their homes growing up. This is supported by Swindle, Patterson and Boden (2017) who found that the practices and beliefs that teachers held, which informed how they organised mealtimes in kindergarten, were often linked with childhood memories of meals and the expectations that were held then. During the discussion, the teachers themselves raised the idea that their thoughts and values around mealtime may be linked to the culture of food and eating in their home country. Many commented on the lack of a proper table setting displayed in the video and the children eating without plates or cutlery and drinking from water bottles rather than cups. Linda commented:

...food is really important in France, I think such as in Spain, so we have like the starter, the main dish, you have the cheese and then the dessert... and then you will sit down together and have lunch, it's a really important time... (p. 10).

Ella made comments of her childhood growing up in Romania, where lunches were sandwiches brought from home, a similar setting to that in the video. As a result of this, she felt that teachers have an important role to play in Finland of teaching table manners and social expectations in kindergarten.

So here in Finland we have a big responsibility, not only like teaching them other things, but like also teaching them how to have table manners... (p. 10).

The wish of leaving a different food legacy, as described by Ella, was also found in Swindle, Patterson and Boden's (2017) study. Teachers felt it was important to give the children a better experience than the one they had as children. In this case, she felt that teachers in Finland have a vital role in teaching table manners during mealtime.

Much of the teachers' responses showed the importance they placed on using different practices to civilise the children during the mealtime in the

kindergarten. The need for rules and routines, and specific set-ups for serving and eating were considered of high importance and a key foundation of the mealtime in Finnish kindergartens. What was quite striking, was that despite the teachers having different cultural backgrounds, which included different ways of eating meals in childhood, they still all had similar beliefs about how important the teaching of table manners and socialisation was for the children to learn during the meal.

4.1.3 Power, control and resistance

A recurring theme throughout the discussion, was the notion of power and control in the meal environment. Adult generated rules and regulations are common features of mealtimes in the home and in the kindergarten. Grieshaber (1997) found in her study of family mealtimes in four different Australian households, that adult-generated rules regarding behaviour, practices before and after the meal and table manners were all foundations of the mealtime. Parents in the study made a point of enforcing these rules during mealtimes, which often varied between households. (Grieshaber, 1997). Similarly to the home, kindergartens are also a site where power and control are negotiated between children and adults. During the interview, the teachers made comments about rules, regulations and expectations that they enforced during mealtimes. All teachers in the discussion made comments about the need to keep order in the environment, by implementing strict rules that the children must abide by. The teacher's felt that a teacher in this environment must be authoritative so that the children will understand what the expectations of the mealtime are and will learn how to behave appropriately. It was important for the teachers to maintain control over the environment. In their reaction to the video, many of the teachers found it surprising that they felt the teacher did not have enough authority or rules in the mealtime and that the children were allowed to behave inappropriately. One teacher commented that she felt the teacher was lacking authority in the situation. Mandy also made similar comments:

I think she just didn't have the authority or the rule structure there, and if you don't have that, of course, kids don't follow anything that they are not taught, umm, and you need to have that routine placed in, like on a day-to-day basis. Not sometimes, not when you know, you just feel like it, but it needs to be

implemented everyday. So the kids know. At the end of the day, it's for the kids' sake... (p. 2).

This thought was mirrored by all the other teachers. The teachers felt that having these rules was to ultimately benefit the children, in learning the habits and behaviours needed to fit into the expectations of society. This interpretation is supported by Gulløv (2011), as she states that kindergartens are designed to teach children how to be in a civilised society. For the teachers, the mealtime is about preparing the children with the good habits and skills they will need to be in society in the future. Hansen and Kristensen (2017) argue 'Food is entangled with political and pedagogical concerns in relation to health, child development, enculturation, and social coherence'.

Having rules and an authoritative stance during the mealtime was also important for ensuring the control and power stayed with the teachers. Many of the teachers took issue with how they considered the teacher in the video to 'beg' one child to come to the table when he didn't feel like eating his lunch. Danica commented:

She was begging the child to please come to the table. I don't think as an adult and a teacher you should be begging your students to do something (p.4)

Later in the interview, Ella made similar comments about the teacher's lack of authority over the children:

...she was influenced by the kids and they were having [a] stronger personality than her... (p. 8)

Maintaining this structure of power the adults have over the children in the setting is especially visible during mealtimes. Hansen and colleagues (2017) describe this negotiation of power and control in the meal setting as striation and smoothing, where striated spaces are very controlled by adults and heavily structured and smooth spaces provide room for more freedom and less restraint. Adults have the power in these situations to control the environment and the children within it, deciding what is or is not acceptable. Rossholt (2012) describes the concept of children's bodies being 'in-place' or 'out-of-place', where a body in-place is acting within the predetermined boundaries and a body out-of-place is acting outside of these boundaries: 'a child in-place, does what it is expected to

do in an eating context, as the practitioner has the power to decide what kind of body/place relation is acceptable as a part of the pedagogical discourse' (Rossholt, 2012, p. 327). Hansen and colleagues (2017) argue that mealtimes are a mixture of both striation and smoothing practices, that intersect and combine. The teachers in this study seemed more comfortable situating themselves within striated spaces, feeling that the structure provided by this and the control they could exert were important for the mealtime to go smoothly.

Rossholt's (2012, p. 327) argument that 'the practitioner has the power to decide what kind of body/place relation is acceptable' is important to reflect on, as a significant theme that emerged during the discussion was the impact of culture on teacher's understand of the mealtime. When describing the Australian teacher's conduct during the video, Linda wondered about the impact of culture on her perceived lack of control and authority over the children:

...it also depends on the culture and maybe she has been raised like this, like serving the child that is there and like the child is like the king of the house (p. 8).

In the kindergarten, teachers themselves have the power to decide the expectations they will expect from the children in their group, and the culture and background of the teacher, as well as the context within which they are teaching (in this case Australia compared to Finland, with their differing pedagogical approaches), may alter what the teacher expects and what factors the teacher controls and does not control.

Interestingly, the teachers also discussed instances of the children resisting the control that was in place, in what could be described as 'smooth spaces' during the mealtime. Danica mentioned how some children might try and 'create a bit of playtime' during the mealtimes, with Linda and Jane agreeing that it is common in their kindergartens for children to play around during the mealtime. They felt it was important though for teachers in this situation to consistently enforce the rules of mealtime and to 'nip it in the bud before it gets crazier'. From these descriptions, there seems to be a large disconnect between the teachers' expectations of the lunchtime and the children's behaviour. Some of the teachers even likened the mealtime to being a 'battleground'. Jane commented that while it would be nice to give each child a lot of attention as the teacher in the video

seemed to be attempting to do, that teachers need to 'pick their battles' during the meals. Danica also commented about how getting children to taste different foods was a 'battle we need to fight... with the kids every day'. This use of the terms, 'battle' and 'fight', by the teachers are quite interesting, as they seem to reflect the teachers' ongoing struggle to maintain order and structure in an environment where chaos is just around the corner, while the children tried to find ways of subverting and resisting this control through different forms of play. Jane commented of the environment in the kindergarten:

If this were to happen in a bigger kindergarten, where there is like one teacher to like, or ok, two teachers to 10 three-year-olds like this, then it would not fly at all, cause if one kid does something out of line, then it's most likely guaranteed other kids will follow and it'll just be a mess (p. 1).

It seems that the teachers feel the need to maintain this order and structure as a means of preventing chaos. If the children would be left to their own devices for the mealtime, anarchy would soon ensue. In their study, Ishiguro (2009) also noticed this resistance to the adult-generated control tactics by the children. They noted that there was a clear difference between adult discourses in the mealtime, which involved trying to guide children to eat, giving instructions etc., while the child centred discourses were centred around play, fun and enjoyment of the food during the meal. While eating, young children are often enjoying the sensory aspects of the food – the tastes, smells, textures, which they experience through the different senses of smell, touch and taste. Hansen and Kristensen (2017) describes instances of children gaining great joy out of the sensory experiences of the food they were eating through touching, feeling or licking, much to the disgust of the supervising adults, who viewed the interactions as inappropriate behaviour and instructed children to stop.

The teachers need to maintain a controlled space and to also reinforce the imbalance of power between them and the children in their care was a clear discourse that came through in the interview. It appears the teachers felt that this was important for ensuring the children would understand and learn the social expectations of the mealtime, as they enforced table manners and appropriate behaviour. Children operating outside of the boundaries of acceptability, would result in the teachers' using directives or other tactics to stop the child and prevent the situation from escalating further. Despite this, children make different

attempts to take back some of the power through play as described by one the interviewees or by other methods, such as singing, chanting or engaging in other practices that could be seen as bending or breaking the rules (Alcock, 2007). The mealtime appears to be a space where there is a constant negotiating of power and control between teachers and children. The use of the terms 'battle' and 'fight' by the teachers to describe some of the situations they face during mealtime seem to encapsulate these negotiations between the children and the adults in the space, as the teachers fight for control, while the children find different ways to subvert this control.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Discussion

The aims of the research project were to better understand the role of teachers during mealtimes in the kindergarten from their perspective. I had some of my own thoughts and feelings on this topic, based on years of working in kindergartens and also observing many different teachers throughout this time. I really wanted to better understand teachers' actions and what drives these actions during the mealtimes. The data from this study has answered these questions.

The primary themes of power and control, civilising and the pedagogical value of the mealtime were the primary discourses found from the data. Interestingly, during the discussion, the teachers felt quite similarly about many of the topics discussed and there was little disagreement between them. Their unanimous feelings about the need for rules, structure and authority in the mealtime, as well as the absolute importance of teaching appropriate table manners according to the expectation of society were echoed in the literature. Throughout the discussion, the discourse of 'civilising' and the 'civilised child' came through very strongly. The need for order, to teach good table manners and to socialise the children into the appropriate behaviour expected of them were key to what the teachers felt was needed at the mealtime. Albon and Hellman (2018) argued in their paper, that the civilising that occurred during mealtimes (which they went a step further as to consider it 'over-civilising') was in stark contrast to the expectations for the rest of the day. Where participation, child-centredness and freedom to choose and play are significant aspects of many Western kindergartens, the mealtime environment felt very different. Glaser (2019) also reflected these ideas, suggested that the mealtime is very structured and regulated by adults, when compared to other aspects of the day. For me, this was a very interesting finding and reflected my own observations in the

kindergarten. Teachers in kindergarten feel a strong responsibility to teach children appropriate social behaviour, such as manners, self-control, commensality and norms. This could often conflict with the children's wants from the mealtime, which could result in teachers needing to discipline and correct the children's actions and behaviour. According to Albon and Hellman (2017), this control that is being enforced over the children during the mealtime is in stark contrast to the remainder of the day, where freedom and democracy are often valued by teachers in Western kindergartens. Civilising children and socialising them in preparation for being in the society within which they live is a strong driver of teachers need to control children's bodies. Unfortunately, this may come at the expense of understanding the vast diversity that is present in many kindergartens and ignore and devalue some children's own cultural ideals that are taught and valued in the home.

The teachers also had an educating role during the mealtime, as they considered the requirements of the curriculum to use the mealtimes for educational purposes, such as teaching about culture, sustainability or the food itself. It seems that teachers take on a multi-faceted role during mealtimes, as they aim to use the mealtime for different purposes. Mealtime in the kindergarten was used for education itself, as well as for social aims.

5.2 Conclusion and Reflections

Teachers feel a responsibility to take on different roles during children's mealtime, including that of being an educator, socialising them and teaching them the rules and social expectations for behaviour during mealtime. The social pedagogical context of Finnish early childhood education seems to have an important impact on the values that the teachers bring to the mealtime and what learning they value during this daily routine. Utilising a video from a different context that values education from the perspective of learning about things brought a very interesting perspective to the discussion with the teachers, as some practices were quite surprising for them. During the process of collecting and analysing the data I found that much of what I heard in the discussion and then read in the literature

was reflective of what I observed myself, having worked in a number of different kindergartens. I always thought of myself as being quite 'relaxed' when it comes to mealtimes, when compared to some of my co-workers, however I realised as I read through the literature and analysed the data, that I held a lot of the same beliefs and values of what children need to learn during the mealtime. I highly value mealtime for its commensality and I also regard appropriate table manners as being important for children to learn. As much as I felt going into this, that I had some different views on mealtime, these social values are something that is also reflected in my behaviour during meals. This was an excellent way for me to reflect on how I am during the mealtime and what messages I am reinforcing with my actions.

Overall, I feel that the research question in this thesis was answered well and the study methodology was an excellent method of getting true responses from the participants, as they showed their surprise and critical views of the video shown to them. I believe that this work could be valuable to help teachers to reflect on the role that they are playing during mealtimes and also to better understand the discourses that may be driving their actions. Understanding the underlying values and discourses that drive our actions is vital, to be able to reflect and evaluate why we do things the way we do and to also determine if there may be other ways of acting. In Finnish kindergartens, it seems that there are strong values placed on the behaviour of children during mealtimes and on how the children are socialised into the mealtime expectations. These values, as noble as they may be, can have negative consequences, however, when they are enforced without consideration for who may be alienated by them. Many cultures do not 'do' mealtime the same way as it is done in Western countries or in Finland, and this can mean that some children are placed at a significant disadvantage as their culture and values as regarded as 'less than' by the dominant culture. As an Australian, it was sometimes disconcerting listening to the teachers in the interview describe the setting of the meal in the video somewhat negatively, since this is how I grew up eating meals in school, with no cutlery or proper table setting, and even, in fact, sitting on the ground outside eating out of a lunchbox, trying to shove food in our mouths as quickly as possible so we would be able to be the first ones on the handball court (which was the only place to play in the shade on a hot summer's day). We had no worry about

table manners and certainly the teachers had no concerns about teaching them to us. The only concept of a 'hot lunch' I had before coming to Finland was the slice of pizza or sausage roll we could buy from the 'tuckshop' (canteen) which was served in a brown paper bag and eaten with our hands. I myself had a lot to learn when first starting to work in a Finnish kindergarten, because the idea of sitting down for a meal inside was new to me. After a few years, I've got the idea of what is expected, but I had a reality check earlier this year when working with a boy from Somalia. I observed his lack of understanding of the mealtime, how he often forgot to get a knife and fork, forgot to get a cup, and sometimes struggled with eating tidily. I brought this up with his mother during a discussion, asking what is the setup they have at their home. 'We eat usually with our hands' was the answer. Well now I understood his struggle in the kindergarten and how alien the mealtime environment must often feel to him. It is vital that as teachers we understand this, so that we can prevent children from feeling othered and left out in our kindergartens. Mealtimes in the kindergarten are possibly one of the only times of the day where all the children and staff are gathered together in one space and engaging in the same activity. When the cultural diversity of the children present is not respected or valued, it can be easy for children to feel alienated in a space where the majority seem to know and understand what is going on and how to behave. This research was not intended to tell what the best practice for teachers during mealtimes is, but to understand more teachers' actions and the reasons behind them and I believe this has been achieved.

5.3 Limitations and Further Study

This study was a small-scale qualitative study. As a result of this, the conclusions made from this cannot be generalised to other situations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision was made to conduct the interview over ZOOM for health and safety reasons. This made it a little more challenging to get a comfortable feeling within the group of participants. This showed a little in the beginning of the interview, where people generally just took turns to answer the questions and

there was not much discussion, however this changed as the time went on. I tried to help 'break the ice' by chatting and giving my own thoughts as the interview went on and it helped that almost all the participants were known to me and some knew each other. This helped the atmosphere to be a bit more relaxed and open. Of course, one limitation of knowing the participants and having many of the participants working together currently or previously, thoughts and beliefs tended to be quite similar and there was not much, if any, disagreement or different views. For future studies, it would be interesting to do a broader study that would compare teachers responses from different educational contexts, for example using a video from Finland to show Australian teachers and investigate the different values and perspectives this would provide to the research question.

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