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University teacher educators' practicum discourses in early childhood teacher education

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ABSTRACT

This study uses frame of boundary work to explore university teacher educators' discourses of the early childhood teacher education practicum and to identify the complexities of their positions(s) in these discourses. Data were obtained through focus group interviews with university teacher educators (N = 16) from two Finnish universities and analysed using discourse analysis and positioning theory. The analysis revealed five discourses: the discourses of expertise, work experience, criticism of policies, mediation, and encouragement. Moreover, working in the boundary between the university and the early childhood education setting challenges university teacher educators to adopt a variety of positions. This study helps us to understand the multiple demands of UTE's work in the practicum context, and to address the needs of student teachers and their supervision. It also challenges to develop collaboration with cooperative teachers, who supervise the student teachers at early childhood centres during the practicum.

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KEYWORDS

University teacher educator; practicum; early childhood teacher education; boundary work; discourse

1. Introduction

The context of this study is the practicum in Finnish early childhood teacher education (ECTE). In the practicum, university teacher educators (UTEs) teach and supervise student teachers, and they may occasionally visit the student teachers' practice environment. As part of teacher education, the practicum is organised differently in different countries and teacher education programmes; likewise, there is no agreed-upon definition of supervision in teacher education (Koc 2012). A literature review done by Matengu, Ylitapio-Mäntylä, and Puroila (2020) addresses university personnel as practicum designers. Hobbs and Stovall (2015, 96) state that teacher training should seek to consider 'the intricate role of the UTE' as both a faculty instructor responsible for student teachers and as a facilitator and supporter of the cooperative teachers (CTs) who guide the student teachers. By the concept of CT (e.g. Puroila, Kupila, and Pekkarinen 2021), we mean a teacher who works and supervises students at the early childhood education (ECE) centre during the practicum. The CT's role includes familiarising the student teacher with the practices and culture of the ECE centre, observing the student teacher's activities, commenting on the student's action plans, and providing feedback and the final assessment during the process.

Because of the variety of contexts, there is no agreed-upon definition of *practicum* (Matengu, Ylitapio-Mäntylä, and Puroila 2020). In this study, we define the practicum like Mattsson, Eilertsen, and Rorrison (2011) to mean the period when student teachers are supervised by professionals, who help shape their abilities into a well-considered practice. Further, we use the concept of the *UTE* while discussing the university teacher educator being responsible for the practicum and supervision. *Student* refers to a student teacher.

Cuenca (2010) argues that the multifaceted work of the UTE is not sufficiently researched. Further, Hobbs and Stovall (2015) suggest a strong need for research to understand the complexities of the UTEs' position(s) and its relation to meeting the needs of student teachers. It is indeed necessary to identify the UTEs' position(s) during the teacher education practicum. This study aims to fill that gap by providing insights on a less researched perspective of UTEs. Their insights on the complex positionings as practicum supervisors make the supervisors' tasks more visible. In this way, the research deepens our understanding of the UTEs' own perspective and expertise, which can inform the development of teacher education and the quality of supervision, as well as the supervisors' professional development.

Studies have emphasised the collaboration between teacher education and ECE centres as a shared enterprise (Kourti and Androussou 2013). However, relations are also complex and contested. Matengu, Ylitapio-Mäntylä, and Puroila (2020) state that the practicum community should not deny the tensions between the two sites, nor should it attempt to dissolve them. Instead, different contexts need to be brought into the dialogue and development of the collective practicum.

The framework for this study is the boundary theory proposed by Wenger's (2000) and his situated learning theory on communities of practice, emphasising how boundaries carry the potential for learning (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). Wenger (2010) reminds us that boundaries are a source of opportunities, but also of potential difficulties containing tensions and barriers to cooperation.

In this frame, boundary work takes place at the university – ECE centres with the triad of the UTEs, CTs, and students. The UTEs, CTs, and students can be seen as boundary workers crossing institutional boundaries to get tools from the other community of practice (see Lave and Wenger 1991). The purpose of this study is to explore the UTEs' discourses of the ECTE practicum and to identify the complexities of the UTEs' position(s) in these discourses. Positioning theory enables a detailed study of how discourse operates in the production of relationships and personal subjective responses and how positions are produced in discourses (see Winslade 2005). Accordingly, our research questions are: What kinds of discourses do UTEs produce about themselves as teachers and supervisors of the practicum? What kinds of positions do UTEs produce in discourses?

2. The practicum in Finnish ECTE

Next we describe the Finnish early childhood teacher education and the practicum within it. The description of the ECTE context is important in the development of discourses, because discourses live and change in context. The ECTE is changing, too, and it needs to respond to what happens in ECE in society.

Since 1995, the Finnish ECTE has taken place at universities. At the university, students complete the 180-credit (one credit requires approximately 27 h of work from the student) Bachelor's Degree in Educational Studies. The bachelor's programme consists of basic and intermediate studies in education, and foundational studies in professional ECE and preprimary education, which are common to all the students. In addition, students carry out specialised and free choice studies. In addition to theoretical studies, the practicum is an important part of the studies. At the universities, the legal framework, like study credits and main elements of the ECTE curricula, are determined nationally. However, the university has the option of creating its own curricula with its own emphasis on content.

Through the academic studies, students become capable of working and teaching at ECE centres as professionals. In the Finnish educational system, early childhood education (ECE) teachers are responsible for the pedagogical leadership of multi-professional teams in ECE centres. All staff members working at ECE centres must be qualified. ECE teachers must hold a post-secondarylevel degree, and preprimary teachers are required to hold either a bachelor's or master's degree in education (Act 540/2018). From 2030 on, ECE centre directors will be required to hold a master's degree in education (FNAE 2018). Today, the shortage of university-trained ECE teachers is nationwide and universities have increased the amount of students. Further, there is a need to critically examine and consider how to reform the practicum and supervision to increase student engagement and attachment to the profession (Puroila, Kupila, and Pekkarinen 2021). Practicum practices have also changed as the use of digital learning environments has evolved. The large number of students also requires the development of practicum practices, as resources may not allow for traditional student supervision meetings. In the ECTE, there is also a general expectation of more flexible learning opportunities.

Still, ECTE must also respond to other new demands from society and contribute to meeting the challenges by developing curricula and bringing the latest research to education. Finnish ECE has experienced many social and structural changes in last 10 years. In 2013, ECE (at the time with an emphasis on day care) was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education, which led to the definition of ECE as being part of the education sector. The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) establishes a framework for ECE, and the need to develop ECE teachers' competence arises from the requirements of the Act. The legislation places an emphasis on the significance of pedagogy and the ECE teacher's pedagogic responsibility. Municipalities, which organise ECE services, must create a local Early Childhood Education and Care curriculum based on the National Core Curriculum (FNAE 2018). Still, ECE teachers report also facing increasingly complex demands, such as increasing documentation and additional time pressures (Kupila et al. 2018).

2.1 The practicum at Tampere University

This study was conducted in collaboration with two universities, Tampere University and the University of Oulu. The practices of the ECTE practicum are reflected in the following descriptions, starting with Tampere University.

The students' first orientation to ECE takes place during the basic studies in educational sciences, which include familiarisation with ECE settings. The main practicum periods

consist of two practicum courses, during which students practise at ECE centres. The first is a 5-credit unit, 'Pedagogy of early childhood education and care', which aims at an overview of the pedagogic practices of early and preschool education. During the practicum, the students reflect on their practice in terms of theory and research. The second, 'Advancing expertise in early childhood education' (10 credits), highlights observation, guiding documents, and evaluation as the basis for pedagogical planning. The focus is on the multiprofessional education community and team and the ECE teacher's pedagogical leadership. The students are responsible for the pedagogical activities, and act according to the professional standards of an ECE teacher. Further, the students' understanding of cooperation with families and ECE as a functional unit and part of the neighbouring area is extended.

All the learning processes are supervised in cooperation with the UTE and the CT. Thus, in the implementation of the practicum, two activity systems meet: ECE centres and the university. CTs are required to be qualified ECE teachers, and the university trains them for supervision. In recent years, new practices have been developed for the practicum, such as students working in pairs, and supervision is done in small groups with students, UTEs, and CTs.

Since 2013, the ECTE at Tampere University has coordinated the Early Childhood Education Partnership Network, which brings together different operators: students, UTEs and researchers, EC professionals from eight municipalities, and some private ECE providers. The Partnership Network covers ECE centres as partners providing places for students' practicums, theses, and research projects. The aim of the Partnership Network is to create arenas of activity that enable the joint partnership-based learning, research, and development of the ECTE and ECE working-life cooperation. One of the key functions is the development of the students' practicum.

2.2 Practicum at the University of Oulu

The ECTE programme at the University of Oulu contains three practicum periods. During the first-year practicum, 'Early childhood education as a pedagogical operational environment' (5 credits), students work in pairs at ECE centres. The practicum provides familiarity with theories, curricula, and the ECE environment, educational partnerships and work community. It offers students opportunities to observe, plan, and implement pedagogical activities. The second practicum, 'Pedagogy in early childhood education and preprimary education' (5 ECTS), takes place in the second year of studies. During this period, students work in small groups both on the university campus and in preprimary school settings. The practicum aims at providing opportunities to apply documents and curricula in ECE and pre-primary education. It emphasises understanding the transition from ECE to preprimary education. The final practicum period, 'Early childhood teacher's evolving expertise' (10 credits) is scheduled for the third year of studies. This practicum aims at developing students' skills in analysing and developing their own learning as ECE teachers and as part of a multiprofessional community and team. All practicum periods are supervised by CTs and by a UTE. The CTs are required to be qualified ECE teachers. The university provides training for CTs to develop their competences in supervision.

At the University of Oulu, ECTE has been developed towards an integrated model in which the practicum is viewed as a part of a complex learning system (Puroila, Kupila, and

Pekkarinen 2021; White and Forgasz 2017). Applying this model has important effects on the relationships between campus-based and practice-based studies, the collaboration between the university and ECE settings, and the supervision of students. Integrated teacher education models highlight the need to fuse campus-based and practice-based studies and call for closer partnerships between universities and educational settings in which the practicum periods take place (White and Forgasz 2017). Hence, in recent years, there has been an increased effort to bring together different actors - such as CTs, ECE leaders, UTEs, and students – to merge ideas and develop practicum practices. The idea of shared learning within a learning community is emphasised, which provides students with opportunities for dialogue, co-examination, and co-reflection with their supervising teachers, peers, and within the working communities of the educational settings. In this way, the purpose is to strengthen a holistic yet complex approach towards the process of practicum supervision where all involved are learning. CTs are (re)positioned as teacher educators who need particular supervision training in addition to their expertise in ECE (Puroila, Kupila, and Pekkarinen 2021; White and Forgasz 2017).

3. Learning on the boundary

This study applies Wenger's (2000) theory of social systems, in which the existence of a boundary is implied in the community of practice. In our description, the practicum operates on the boundaries between the university and ECE centres (see Montecinos, Walker, and Maldonado 2015). Accordingly, boundaries exist between activity systems (Engeström 2004; Edwards 2011), and they arise from the university's and ECE setting's different enterprises, like different capabilities, responsibilities, and societal functions. Consequently, a boundary can be defined 'as a socio-cultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction' (Akkerman and Bakker 2011, 133). Studies of boundaries often focus on the collaboration - or lack of it - of professionals with different expertise, tasks, and cultural backgrounds (Akkerman and Bakker 2011).

On the boundaries, competence and experience tend to diverge: a boundary interaction is usually an experience of being exposed to a foreign competence (Wenger 2000). Thus, a boundary space is multi-voiced and multi-scripted (Tsui and Law 2007). Activity in boundary space is also an opportunity for all to learn. Learning requires coconstructing and identifying knowledge from others, as well as recognising their positions, the activity systems they come from, and open engagement with differences and common ground (Wenger 2000). Wenger (2010) reminds us that in social learning systems, the value of communities and their boundaries are complementary. Deep expertise depends on a convergence between experience and competence, but these competences also need to interact. Through an active and dynamic negotiation of meaning, practice is something that is produced over time by those who engage in it (Wenger 2000, 2010).

In practicum conditions, the boundaries enable the UTEs, CTs, and students to develop their competence to participate in another community and expand what is understood as competent in their own community. Further, conditions include a shared interest in the student's activity, and finding common ground in ECE interests.

Tsui and Law (2007) argue that to acquire expertise, one has to engage with members of other communities of practice and be challenged to negotiate and integrate elements from different contexts to provide solutions to problems. Thus, the boundary includes alternative or competing discourses and positionings (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). In the practicum, UTEs, CTs, and students move between different institutions, such as the university and ECE centre, interacting with different professionals. Thus, they encounter different cultural traditions and practices. The boundary can be seen also as a significant transition point in the teacher's development (Beauchamp and Thomas 2011).

In the practicum system, communities and boundaries can be learning assets in complementary ways. Boundary crossing may involve establishing interactions between the actors of different sites and the translation and alignment of perspectives (Wenger 1998). Boundary crossers (Wenger 1998, 2000) are capable of introducing elements of one site to another. In the practicum, it requires enough legitimacy both from UTE and CT to influence the development of an ECE practice that is needed for the student. The UTE may be seen as a broker and a bridge between two sites. Wenger's (2000) has also described the position of the roamer, which means going from place to place and creating connections of moving knowledge.

In the practicum, boundary objects support connections between the two sites. Objects can take forms as artefacts, which can be pedagogical documents or models; discourses, which reflect the common language that allows EC professionals to communicate and negotiate meanings across boundaries; and students' processes (see Wenger 2000, 2010). Wenger's (2000) notes that boundary processes that support mutual learning require a two-way connection.

The ECTE – ECE centre partnership also includes UTEs' visits to ECE centres. This kind of boundary work can be seen as 'the opening of a periphery' (Waitoller and Kozleski 2013, 40), in which UTEs are offered legitimate access to the ECE centre practice without subjecting them to the demands of full membership, e.g. being responsible for teaching. Thus, the UTE participates in the ECE centre's practice only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility (see Lave & Wenger 1991). This can be specified by Lave and Wenger (1991) as legitimate peripheral participation.

In this study, *positioning theory* is used to explore what characterises UTEs' relationships in the practicum and how the relationships are understood by them (see Harre and van Langenhove 1999). Positioning theory describes how individuals position themselves or are positioned by others. In this study, we look in particular at how the UTEs position themselves in the practicum.

Fluid positionings are used by people to cope with the situation they usually find themselves in (Harre and van Langenhove 1999). The concept of fluidity allows the position to be seen as flexible and malleable, enabling the individual to react quickly to situations and change his/her position as the situation or discussion demands. Thus, shifts bring different ways of being with others and open or limit the ways of making sense of interactions or relationships. At the same time, the individual offers the other person(s) a position from which to respond. Still, positioning may be unrecognised. In the practicum, UTEs may have to reposition themselves depending on, e.g. the student's motives or actions that emerge during the discussion.



4 Methodology

4.1 Participants and data collection

The qualitative data were collected in June 2020 using semi-structured focus group interviews with 16 UTEs - eight teachers from each of the two universities (Table 1). Some of the participants had a master's degree, others a doctorate. Most of them also had a qualification as an ECE teacher, some as a class teacher. At the initial stage of the analysis, work experience proved to be relevant and therefore participants were divided into two categories, beginning university teacher educators and experienced educators. We defined 1-3 years work experience as the criteria for being a beginning UTE. There were five beginning teachers altogether. In order to maintain anonymity, we do not specify the number per university. In addition, we do not disclose the detailed educational background or gender of the participants. Further, university practices are not specified in terms of the university where the interview was conducted. Participation was voluntary. Ethics were followed regarding confidentiality, data protection, and minimising harm.

Table 1. Participants in focus group interviews.

| <u> </u> | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Focus group interviews | Participants | Data and duration of the interview | | | |
| Focus group interview 1 | 4 UTEs | 10 pages, 85 min | | | |
| Focus group interview 2 | 4 UTEs | 11 pages, 85 min | | | |
| Focus group interview 3 | 4 UTEs | 11 pages, 93 min | | | |
| Focus group interview 4 | 4 UTEs | 12 pages, 106 min | | | |

The interview questions and practices were designed and agreed upon together with the representatives of both universities. Both universities conducted the interview for their part. Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Participants received the interview themes in advance. The themes were:

- the role and the significance of the UTE in the practicum;
- strengths and development points as a supervisor;
- the students' needs;
- challenging situations as a supervisor;
- the UTE's and CT's job descriptions;
- the importance of the practicum and supervision concerning students' professional development.

4.2 Discourse analysis and positioning theory

In this study, the methodology draws from discourse analysis (Jokinen, Juhila, and Suoninen 2016) and positioning theory (Harre and van Langenhove 1999). Boundary theories (Wenger 2000) help to form an overall view of how the discourses can be understood, how the interrelation of the discourses are constructed, and what kinds of positions are relevant to the analysis (see Rantavuori 2018). The discursive perspective is based on social constructionism (Potter and Hepburn 2008). At the centre of the discourse analysis is an assumption of language used as a form of action. In this study, discourse is seen as a meaning system that focuses on the diversity of social reality and the variability of action. The meaning system is formed as part of different social practices in relation to and as a difference from one another. The main interest in our analysis is to identify the variety of discourses and related positions in UTE's talk, rather than measure the weight of each discourse (see Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009).

Positions are analysed within each discourse. UTEs' positions change in relation to the current communication situation. Besides, the meanings are seen to be constructed in social practices in certain contexts within the boundaries of university and ECE centres. Further, positions produce an understanding of the meanings that UTEs give to themselves, and, likewise, the communication they describe in relation to CTs, students, and boundaries. Our attention is focused on the flexibility and transformability that allows the same UTE to move in a wide range of positions that might also be contradictory to each other (see Harre and van Langenhove 1999). The aim is not to determine which of the positions is most genuinely representative.

4.3 Analysis process

In order to increase reliability, we describe the analysis process accurately step-by-step (Table 2). The credibility of the analysis is enhanced by investigator triangulation. All article authors participated in the analysis and interpretation, and discussions between the investigators strengthened the analysis process. The analysis process is a modified version of Rantavuori's (2018) discourse analysis, which has its grounds in Jokinen, Juhila, and Suoninen (2016). Through the analysis, we achieved a holistic picture of the UTEs' interpretations and talk about themselves as supervisors. Positions were seen as everyday social activities that took place between UTEs and CTs and students (see Phillips, Fawns, and Hayes 2002). Positioning theory is used to understand discursive activity in terms of the position of the UTE 'in the situations they bring into their conversations developed from institutional practices and societal rhetoric' (Phillips, Fawns, and Hayes 2002, 240). In this study, the positions were identified after the construction of the discourses (analysis step 5 below). As shown in Table 2, the analysis was multidimensional.

5. Findings

The findings reveal five discourses and various related positions produced by the UTEs in their talk. The way how positions determine UTEs as supervisors becomes visible in the discourses. The discourses and the positions are presented in Table 3 and are described and interpreted below.

5.1 Discourse of expertise

The discourse of expertise focuses on the UTEs' community of practice – i.e. the university – which defines theoretical knowledge as an important factor in constituting professional competence. UTEs generate their expertise based on theory and research, which produce them with a shared repertoire of theoretical knowledge and language as

Table 2. The overview of the analysis process (see Rantavuori 2018, 427).

| | , | |
|-------|--|--|
| Phase | Substance of the analysis | Aim of the analysis |
| 1. | Reading the transcribed interviews | Building an overall picture of the data |
| 2. | Identifying parts of discussions in which UTEs talk about supervising students in the practicum | Selecting and recognising the meaningful situations. Perceiving the situations of the UTEs' talk about their views as supervisors |
| 3. | Reading the language used in UTEs' supervisor description situations | Identifying the general features of the language used in the situations where describing UTEs' own position as a supervisor |
| 4. | Observing the following issues when constructing the discourses UTEs' expressions of the action and themselves as supervisors in practicums Describing the discourses using the content and function | Identifying the actions and expressions the UTEs produce of themselves as supervisors Analysing the general features of the discourses |
| 5. | Constructing the positions • Ways to position oneself in relation to the action (active or passive as a supervisor) | Analysing the general features of the positions |
| 6. | Analysing discourses related to the UTEs' meanings for supervising students | Understanding how the discourses and positions are connected to the UTEs' meanings of supervising students in practicums |

Table 3. Discourses and positions.

| Discourses | Content of the discourse | Positions |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Discourse of expertise | Ownership of theory | Academic expert |
| · | Talk of expertise | Advisor |
| | Theoretical knowledge | |
| Discourse of work experience | Talk of working as an ECE teacher | Experienced practitioner |
| | Talk of working as a UTE | Evolving academic |
| Discourse of the criticism of | Talk of how student observation at the ECE centre is not | Questioner |
| policies | meaningful | Outsider |
| | Talk of how visiting the ECE centre is irrelevant and takes up resources | Passive influencer |
| Discourse of mediation | Talk of responsibility to resolve challenging situations and | Mediator |
| | tensions | Problem solver |
| Discourse of encouragement | Supporting students and emphasising their strengths | Listener |
| | Talk of listening | Supporter |
| | Talk of constructing a confidential atmosphere | Encourager |

a communal resource. They provide talk that it is their responsibility to bring theory to students and argue that the students and CTs do not have that kind of knowledge.

The discourse of expertise reveals the UTEs' ownership of theory. The excerpts illustrate the UTEs' position as leading the theoretical dimension:

UTE10: When students bring up practice in our supervision discussions, my job is to lead that discussion to what it all could mean from a theoretical perspective.

UTE13: In a good way, it [theory] also distances you from the routine practices at the ECE centre.

The UTEs stated that it is not their duty to intervene in ECE centres' practical issues. Besides, UTEs talk about their responsibility and expertise to promote the students' reflection:

UTE16: the way how they [students] reflect on their work to become aware of the perceptions that quide their actions. Then there is theory and practice side by side, because theoretical discussions may not take place there [at the ECE centre].

In boundary space, the UTEs produce CTs as the persons in charge of practical knowledge and ECE teacher's work in detail. CTs' duty is to tell the students about everyday practices, and the CTs' feedback is based on concrete observations. UTEs argue that a lot of students' learning takes place in ECE centres via the CTs. However, the UTE's position in relation to the CT is not always clear. UTE2 points out that UTEs and CTs support the students from different angles of entry. Accordingly, UTEs show a lot of respect for the CTs. Further:

UTE9: We are equal actors there, as is the student, too, equal discussants, authors.

UTE12 emphasises the common discussions as mutual appreciation between the different sites of the triad:

UTE12: There are three people having a professional discussion. Everyone comes from his or her own point of view and somehow it forms a space that allows the student to flourish. After all, we should try to remember that it is the space for the student and for that moment when we are all together.

This discourse reflects the UTEs' academic expert position. UTEs bring out their own expert knowledge as a priority over others. Still, the discourse also embodies a dichotomy, which manifests in the juxtaposition of theory versus practice, CT versus UTE, university versus ECE centre, and academic world versus the ECE's everyday practice. The following excerpt illustrates the above dichotomy:

UTE13: The CT ensures that the student learns the ECE teacher's work in day care. While I, however, even though I do not think dichotomously that theory and practice – that we are that theory and the field is that practice - yet with us the student is connected to the academic, theoretical discussion. And in the ECE field, hopefully, the theory will come true. I want to state that by no means do I think there is a dichotomy in it, I think that conversation will change. That discourse, and even theoretical discourse, still exists in the ECE field. But it becomes different because practical terms are different in day care. My key role is to show these connections to the student. I'm not arguing at all that there's no theory in the field, but the ways of speaking and the discourses are probably that kind that the student doesn't recognise as a theory.

The above quotation includes a discrepancy, and on the other hand, it contains the juxtaposition of theory and practice, where the UTE works and strives to work between two different cultures. The UTE recognises the debate and is also able to partially criticise it, but the UTE also thinks what he/she should do between the two different cultures.

This discourse includes UTE's position of the advisor, which is targeted at the student and the CT. The UTE is dominant in those relations expressing how CTs and students should act and what is expected of them. The UTE's job is to tell the CT what the student can (UTE11) and should know and learn, and what ECTE requires.

Boundary work offers learning opportunities to UTEs, offering chances to deepen their pedagogical expertise. However, these opportunities differ from those offered by the university. The theoretical elements UTEs introduce to students can be seen as tools for learning. Still, as the discourse reveals, UTEs are also aware of the theoretical aspects of



the discussions at ECE centres, but those discussions differ from the way theorising appears at the university. Wenger's (2000) states that boundary interaction is an experience of being exposed to a foreign competence. This is also reflected in the way UTEs perceive and structure their position in relation to that of the CT.

5.2 Discourse of work experience

Some of the UTEs were also graduated ECE teachers and had worked at ECE centres before their career at the university; thus, they were experienced ECE professionals. They produced talk that their recent ECE experience allows them to understand what students face and how they understand ECE practice. This discourse brings understanding of the challenges beginning UTEs face in boundary space.

The UTEs consider their ECE work experience in ECE centres as a professional strength and a benefit. They argue that this allows them to mirror the student's perspective:

UTE5: I am able to quickly identify those phenomena that arise from everyday life [at the ECE]. I still have that good sense, I can go on to a discussion about what may be behind an interpretation or action. (...), you quickly see things related to the operational culture that might affect the whole system.

Beginning UTEs have received little induction while starting their work at the university and have openly expressed the need for personal support and supervision. Other UTEs have been a great source of assistance in the beginning.

In this discourse, the UTEs' positions are experienced practitioner and evolving academic. Underlying the positions is the ECE teacher's work. The positions are based on the ECE teachers' abilities versus the limited experience of the academic world. The academic identity in the academic world, is evolving. However, the discourse includes confusion in combining these positions. The beginning UTEs have difficulties in finding their identity between an ECE practitioner and academic professional.

The tensions between these two dimensions of identity are manifested. The UTEs struggle with belonging to the university community and finding their place in the academic profession, and they cannot clearly make reference to themselves as university employees. This is reminiscent of Beauchamp and Thomas's (2011) discovery of new teachers' search for agency while living in the boundary space during the first months of teaching practice. In one conversation, UTE7 defends not justifying some issue because he/she 'has been an UTE for such a short time' and he/she isn't able to use previous work experience to justify his/her opinion. Wenger's (2000) argues that it takes time to construct identity with other practices. Learning is then understood to include identity development and the transformation of practice (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). In part, ECE work experience justifies things that one cannot do or know as a UTE. Still, what is justified by experience remains partly unclear, but it seems to allow better partnership with ECE professionals and helps in understanding ECE practice.

The transition from ECE teacher to UTE is a substantial shift. The change in the position is needed, likewise, to acquire new knowledge and understanding of teaching in the academic context. Cuenca (2010) notes that the ambiguity presents a challenge to beginning UTEs, who must negotiate the unfamiliarity of the position and reflect on what kind of UTEs they want to be. UTEs have a valuable position introducing elements of



their university practice to the ECE setting; still, they may be seen as being at the periphery with the risk of not fully belonging to or being acknowledged as a participant in the ECE setting anymore (see Akkerman and Bakker 2011).

5.3 Discourse of the criticism of policies

The discourse of the criticism of policies includes UTEs' reflections on the (non-)importance of visits to the ECE centre to observe students' pedagogical activities. UTEs reflect on the futility of observation, question the significance of the visit, and do not see the relevance of it for the UTE, CT, or the student. The questioning talk is mostly based on their own previous work or study experiences. They also produce resource talk, stating that nowadays there is no time or resources for visits. Below, UTE10 searches for significance:

UTE10: I don't know what the meaning is for that. I have my own experience when I graduated from [X] University where the UTE came to observe my activities that was then pondered together. The feedback was punctual and detailed. I don't know what its meaning could be.

Even years later, UTE9 felt frustrated about the feedback he/she had received as a student. However, the talk is partly contradictory, as he/she also defends the importance of the visit:

UTE9: The UTE came to observe me in the practicum. It was really disgusting to get stuck in irrelevant things in a situation that didn't really matter. But it is interesting that my students look forward to the visit. Instead, one should generally observe how the student works there to get the right picture. (...) interesting to do that, but not with that kind of experience I gained.

The UTEs state that there is a need for an open discussion with the CT and the student about why the visit is made. They call for careful planning regarding its meaning and goal, 'what you want to achieve, so that it would not become an extra burden' (UTE10). However, the discourse does not include talk of attempts to change the format of the visit. Additionally, UTEs criticise the students' focus on completing learning tasks and performance-centredness. UTE9 emphasises:

UTE9: I had to say [to the students] that sit down and watch the situation going on, play with the kids. It is such a learning situation. You get the tasks done, but it is unique to observe the children, the community, and the work.

In this discourse, the UTEs's positions are questioner, outsider, and passive influencer. Wenger's (2000) argues that learning can occur when people interact with, move across, or participate in different practices. One way to enrich the boundary encounter is to visit a practice, looking for forms and ways of working and observation situations. When looking at the discourse, one can consider whether it partly describes passivity and passive adaptation to existing practices. Hence, the UTE's position was also external in relation to the students' tasks. UTEs question practices that are built around the practicum over the years and have become established in institutions that the UTEs themselves built and created. They view the situation from outside and take a passive position by distancing themselves from agency. They are also accustomed to acting in a certain way, which may also indicate cultural affiliation.



5.4 Discourse of mediation

The discourse of mediation emerged from the UTEs' responsibility to resolve challenging situations, such as conflicts, tensions, or communication problems between the CT and student. Additionally, mediation is required in situations where students have doubts about their suitability for the EC profession or the student is at risk of exhaustion. The UTEs also encounter situations where the CTs do not approve of the student's performance.

The UTEs' talk includes the ethical issues faced by the students. The students may question the ECE centre's pedagogical activities, they may refuse to do things as they are done or instructed at the ECE centre, or they may not understand or approve of the values or arguments behind the ECE centre's practice, nor accept the CTs' values or motives. When asked about the students' needs for support, UTE13 explains:

UTE13: (...) challenges in relation to the CT, or the ECE community. Less often, challenges with children. (...) perhaps more to do with the tension of working together. These are concrete key issues where students need support or encouragement.

Different approaches and expectations can be problematic and may lead to conflicts that need to be addressed, 'the student must have a person to whom to speak, a safe place to talk' (UTE11). UTEs also stress the importance of strengthening the students' ability to talk about problems in the professional development process.

Analysing previous notions from a boundary work perspective, the UTE's job is to clarify two different institutions' interpretations. When UTEs position themselves as *mediators* or *problem-solvers*, they bring institutions closer together. As a mediator, the UTE has the challenge to build a common understanding between the CT and the student, and further, the UTE can help crossing institutional boundaries and the construction of a common boundary space. Different ambiguities are typical when acting on the boundaries of different institutions. Working as a mediator allows crossing and removing boundaries, rather than distancing sites from others or allowing conflicts to create barriers to common understanding.

The *problem-solver's* position is obvious in the talk of the responsibility to solve problematic situations. This is done with the cooperation and help of other UTEs. UTEs highlight their reliance on other UTEs getting support via collegiate joint debate. The discourse contains the idea of how working at the boundaries between two institutions can be demanding (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). Wenger's (2000) argues that the boundary may be a source of potential difficulties and create divisions. Boundaries can be places where different perspectives meet. In the practicum, students must adjust their practices according to ECE working culture while at the same time they are students at the university.

Students can face problems if the values of the ECE centre's operating culture are in contradiction with their own perceptions. In this context, the UTE's position as a mediator or problem-solver is important in creating new possibilities. The discourse includes reflection on how the UTEs see their position of solving tensions between the CT and the student. Solving tensions can be an opportunity for all parties to learn from each other.



5.5 Discourse of encouragement

The UTEs' talk in this discourse includes encouraging the student and highlighting the student's strengths and needs. Constructing a positive atmosphere, an experience of trust, and positive feedback are emphasised.

UTE4: (...) showing confidence. That's the basic starting point (...) acceptance. And then we build, we go forward.

UTEs produce talk of an interactive and equal relationship with joint dialogue and reflection. The UTE's position is seen as a good listener, supporter, and encourager. The following excerpt exemplifies these positions:

UTE11: The UTE's role is to ensure that everyone is good in his/her own way. I try to give as much positive feedback as possible to students and that is my strength also. (...) there are skills and strengths in everyone.

UTE14: Encouraging and constructive feedback no matter what the process was. In the end, always try to get into a positive atmosphere so that things don't stay floating.

UTE8: (...) to praise the student in a very personal way. When you can say that was really great, it stays in their mind. You can always find something like that, be supportive.

In this discourse, the UTEs' own strengths are produced as being related to good interaction skills and the creation of a warm and confidential atmosphere in which all students dare to share emotions. The talk highlights the positive frame. Besides, there is no attempt to hold firm on institutional or professional boundaries; there is permission to cross student-teacher boundaries and a common understanding is sought; likewise, there are efforts to find positive sides in every student as an encouraging viewpoint. However, the UTEs mostly attach the encouragement to the interaction between themselves and the students, but less between the UTEs and CTs.

6. Discussion

This study uses Wenger's (2000) frame of boundary work to explore the discourses that UTEs produce concerning their tasks in the ECTE practicum as well as the positions they produce in discourses. Our study revealed five discourses and various positions related with each discourse: the discourse of expertise, the discourse of work experience, the discourse of the criticism of policies, the discourse of mediation, and the discourse of encouragement.

Our study showed the ownership of theory as a strong basis for the UTEs' work and masters UTEs' interaction relationships. The study also provided insights into the dichotomies that emerge in the discourses. The discourse of work experience also contains the idea of the separation between the university and ECE setting, each having their own institutional activity systems. This also highlights that professionals are, as it were, on different sides. Socio-cultural differences can cause discontinuity, and students may find the differences challenging. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) remind us that the aim of boundary work should not be to see intersecting social worlds merging or borders dissolving, nor should it be seen as a transition from diversity to homogeneity, but rather as a process of creating continuity in a situation of socio-cultural diversity.

Boundary encounters, such as conversations and visits, can take various forms and provide direct exposure to the practicum (see Wenger 2000, 2010). Wenger (1998) argues that the connecting effects of boundary encounters depend on the boundary relations among those involved. One way to enrich the boundary encounter is to visit the other community of practice. According to Wenger (1998), this kind of immersion would provide a broader exposure to the community of practice being visited and to how its members engage with one another. This study reveals that some of the UTEs found the visits to ECE centres contradictory and meaningless. Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) remind us that the shared responsibility for students' learning needs requires us to understand what happens when multiple professions and various kinds of expertise and tools come together. UTEs should take responsibility for the interactions among the professionals and students representing different institutions and activity systems.

UTEs and CTs need each other in their shared process in supporting the students' professional development and growth. However, the discourses did not indicate that UTEs feel that they learn so much from CTs, although many studies concerning mentoring have found that CTs (e.g. Puroila, Kupila, and Pekkarinen 2021) feel that they learn alongside each other.

Our study reveals that the discourses do not show boundaries so much as a communal or reciprocal phenomenon - rather, teachers and representatives of different institutions are produced as rather solitary actors in relation to a representative of another institution. The unifying factor between the institutions is mostly the student. Positions were also often produced alone, although supportive colleagues were important in this process. Thus, Edwards (2011) notion of relational expertise would bring an important addition to boundary work. Edwards (2011) emphasises the ability to engage with others. In the practicum, that would mean the recognition of the resources that others bring to the partnership. It is important to identify CTs' professional strengths and expertise. Reflection was also visible, which includes expanding one's perspectives on the practices and the transformation of the codevelopment of practices.

As the talk concerning the visits to the ECE centre showed, the UTE's own experiences even several years ago influence current thinking. The discourses embody the present moment and the current cultural context. It is interesting that in the discourse of criticism, UTEs do not perceive themselves as active agents to produce change; instead, teacher training practices were taken more as a given practice.

The study contributes to research on early childhood teacher education theoretically by deepening our understanding of the practicum within the frame of boundary work and positioning theory. These theoretical frameworks have been helpful in providing deeper insights and conceptual tools for exploring the ECTE practicum as a boundary space.

In this study, boundary space is constituted between two activity systems, the university and the ECE setting. From the perspective of ECTE, the research confirmed that the boundary space can be identified as a space where different actors meet and bring their expertise into collective action. The study opens up these perspectives and helps us to understand the diversity of the UTEs' work in the practicum, and, likewise, the positions that UTEs are expected to be prepared for in the boundary space. This research also has a practical contribution. Discourses and descriptions of the positions are relevant from an educational perspective in ECTE. The results will benefit ECTE and the development of the curriculum, as well as contribute to the development of supervision practices.

The boundary work challenges UTEs to adopt a variety of positions. This study makes the existence of the positions transparent. Recognising and understanding the diversity of positions helps UTEs to understand the needs of student teachers and their supervision. Understanding positions supports collaboration with CTs and recognition of the nature of collaboration, too. It is important to train UTEs so that they are aware of the many personal, contextual, and boundary work factors present in the supervision process.

Research is always conducted in a particular social context at a particular time and must be understood in that context. In further research, it would be important to examine positions and discourses from other aspects of the boundary space, too. Furthermore, it would be important to delve into why some positions are more active and others more passive. The extent to which these different positions help to meet existing needs in ECTE is also a challenge for future research.

7. Conclusion

Our study highlights the diversity of the UTEs' work, providing insights into the several complexities of discourses and positions UTEs produce. The findings help us to understand the requirements of UTEs' work in relation to the practicum and the context of boundary space. The UTEs must be willing and able to take a wide variety of positions. Thus, the study shows the fluid nature of the positions. Students' needs and the interaction with the CT may result in rapid repositioning. This is reminiscent of the work of Winslade (2005), who highlights that discursive positioning leaves room for changes on both the personal and social levels. The awareness of the different positions helps the UTEs to develop their own supervision skills, too. The findings show how the UTEs perceive their academic expertise over the CT and the student. The tensions or power dynamics that may develop in partnership work (see Waitoller and Kozleski 2013) are an important topic for further research.

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