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**FLEXIBLY SCHEDULED EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE**
A Narrative Overview

Faculty of Education and Culture
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ABSTRACT

Sampo Lamminsalo: Flexibly Scheduled ECEC: a Narrative Overview
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Flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a service provided to families of young children, where the parents work non-regular hours. This study is a narrative overview of existing studies concentrating on flexibly scheduled ECEC from the viewpoints of parents, children and the educators.

Flexibly scheduled ECEC is a divisive subject when it comes to the opinions of parents and educators alike. There is worry about whether flexibly scheduled ECEC is for the benefit of the child, while at the same time others praise it for its adaptability and home-likeness. Research data shows that the effects flexibly scheduled ECEC has on children are varied.

There are risks regarding attending flexibly scheduled ECEC for the child, as flexible schedules can lead to negative emotions, difficulties during transitions and their sense of belonging. Stability, familiarity, and cooperation between parents and educators are vital. Children's fatigue and temperament also influence their emotional experiences in flexible ECEC, highlighting the importance of tailored support and routines.

The main challenge for educators in flexibly scheduled ECEC is the unpredictable nature of it. Varying schedules of the educators and the children affect planning and implementing pedagogy, communication and team and group dynamics. Evening and weekend work requires managing diverse age groups and fluctuating schedules, emphasizing emotional support over routines.

Several ongoing debates about the benefit of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC are discussed in this thesis. The overview will provide insight into the factors in effect behind said debates.

Keywords: Flexibly Scheduled ECEC, Children's Daily Rhythms, Children's Wellbeing, 24-hour Economy, Pedagogy in Flexibly Scheduled ECEC

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Sampo Lamminsalo: Vuoropäivähoito: Narratiivinen kirjallisuuskatsaus
Kandidaatin tutkielma
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Vuoropäivähoito on palvelu, jota järjestetään lapsiperheille, joissa huoltajien työaikojen johdosta päiväkotikäisillä lapsilla on hoidontarvetta tavallisten päiväkotien aukioloaikojen ulkopuolelta. Tämä tutkielma on narratiivinen kirjallisuuskatsaus, jossa keskitytään vuoropäivähoitoon huoltajien, lasten ja kasvattajien näkökulmista.

Vuoropäivähoito on vanhemmille ja kasvattajille mielipiteitä jakava aihe. Toisaalta nähtävissä on huolta siitä, onko vuorohoito paras ratkaisu lapsen näkökulmasta, mutta toisaalta myös näkemyksiä vuorohoidon paremmuudesta joustavuuden ja kodinomaisuuden takia on havaittavissa sekä vanhempien, että kasvattajien kokemuksissa. Tutkimustieto näyttää vuorohoidon vaikutuksen lapsiin olevan vaihteleva.

Vuoropäivähoidossa oleminen altistaa lasta riskitekijöille, sillä muuntuvat aikataulut voivat johtaa negatiivisiin tunteisiin, vaikeuttaa siirtymiä ja vähentää kuulumisen kokemusta lapsessa. Pysyvyys, ennakoitavuus ja kodin ja vuoropäivähoidon välinen yhteistyö ovat tärkeitä lapsen tukemisen kannalta. Lapsen väsymys ja persoona vaikuttavat myös osaltaan heidän kokemuksiinsa vuoropäivähoidosta, joten yksilöllistetty tuki ja vakaat rutiinit ovat myös tärkeitä.

Suurin haaste vuorohoidossa työskenteleville kasvattajille on sen ennakoitavuuden hankaluus. Kasvattajien ja lasten vaihtelevat aikataulut vaikuttavat pedagogiikan suunnitteluun ja toteuttamiseen, kommunikointiin sekä ryhmän ja tiimin dynamiikkoihin. Ilta- ja viikonlopputyö vaatii suuren ikäjakauman ryhmien ohjaamista ja poikkeaviin aikatauluihin sopeuttamista, panostaen emotionaaliseen läsnäoloon rutiinien sijaan.

Tässä tutkielmassa tuodaan esiin useita mielipiteitä jakavia keskustelunaiheita siitä, mikä on lasten parhaaksi vuorohoidossa, sekä niiden pohjalla vaikuttavia tekijöitä.

Avainsanat: Vuoropäivähoito, lasten vuorokausirytmät, lasten hyvinvointi, 24:n tunnin ekonomia, pedagogiikka vuorohoidossa

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Flexibly scheduled early childhood education and care (from here on ECEC) is a significant sector of ECEC in Finland. Due to the global trend moving towards a 24-hour economy, adults are increasingly working both regular and irregular shifts instead of or in addition to standard work hours (Presser, 2005.) This movement influences young children, when their parents must work outside of the hours of daycares that operate on regular hours. Globally, the existence of ECEC services that operate on a flexible basis is varied and it is rare for the organization of it to be governmentally overseen (Salonen et. Al., 2018.) In Finland, it is the legal right of each child to receive care no matter the time of day, based on their parents' work or studies (Varhaiskasvatuslaki, 2018). Flexibly scheduled ECEC has existed in Finland for long, and the notion of children partaking in ECEC during non-standard times of the day was mentioned in the legislation for organized ECEC as early as the early 1970's (Laki lasten päivähoidosta, 1973).

In 2013, about seven percent of Finnish children in municipal ECEC centres were placed in flexibly scheduled ECEC, and over half of them had at least an occasional need for night care (Säkkinen, 2014.) Finnish municipalities organize Flexibly scheduled ECEC mainly in ECEC centres with either extended working hours or centres that are open on a 24-hour basis (Salonen et.al., 2018.)

Flexibly scheduled ECEC is less predictable than daytime ECEC due to the higher total number of educators per group, of which most work in shifts so that the group of educators working in a group during the day is fluid both in individuals and in numbers, both within a day and between different days. The child composition of the group is similarly fluid with the number of children fluctuating, leading to daily changes in group dynamic with the presence and absences of individuals (Rönkä et. Al., 2019).

The purpose of this thesis is to synthesize existing studies about flexibly scheduled ECEC into a comprehensive narrative. This is to get a clear

understanding of how flexibly scheduled ECEC has been studied to date, and what differentiates it from daytime ECEC.

2 METHODS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Narrative overview is a type of a literature review where the author condenses several existing studies into a comprehensive narrative. Writing a Narrative overview consists of gathering literature based on selected criteria and then condensing and synthesizing said studies objectively. Narrative reviews have a high risk of being affected by author bias, therefore transparency regarding material searches must be applied and effort made to remain objective (Green, et. Al., 2006).

2.1 Disclosure of Bias

The author of this thesis has worked in flexibly scheduled ECEC, and therefore his experiences affect the way he views it. Special attention has been paid to make the data gathering phase of this thesis transparent in order to make the searches replicable, and to the objective processing of the studies used.

2.2 Research question

What does research tell us about flexibly scheduled ECEC from the perspectives of children, families and educators?

2.3 Data gathering

The search for studies used in this overview, two search engines were utilized; Andor and Google scholar. Nine different searches were used for both search engines, and gathered all literature found with the following operators:

- “shift work” AND (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)
- “24-hour economy” AND (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)

- “non-standard hour” AND (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)
- Vuoropäiväko*
- Vuoropäivähoi*
- Vuorohoi*
- Ympäri vuorokau* (päiväko* OR päivähoi* OR hoito* OR hoido*)
- “flexibly scheduled” AND (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)
- “night care” and (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)
- “evening care” and (“day care” OR child* OR “early child*”)

The literature gathered was then filtered by the following criteria.

- Is it written in English or Finnish?
- Is it peer reviewed?
- Is it published between the years 2000 and 2023?
- Does it discuss flexibly scheduled ECEC?
- Is it focused on children or educators in flexible ECEC or the experiences of parents whose children are in flexibly scheduled ECEC in the context of said ECEC?

After filtering out literature irrelevant for the purposes of this overview according to the criteria listed, the number of studies to process was 17. A majority of the studies were published in English, however, it is worthy of note that most of the studies, while written in English, were conducted by Finnish researchers in Finland.

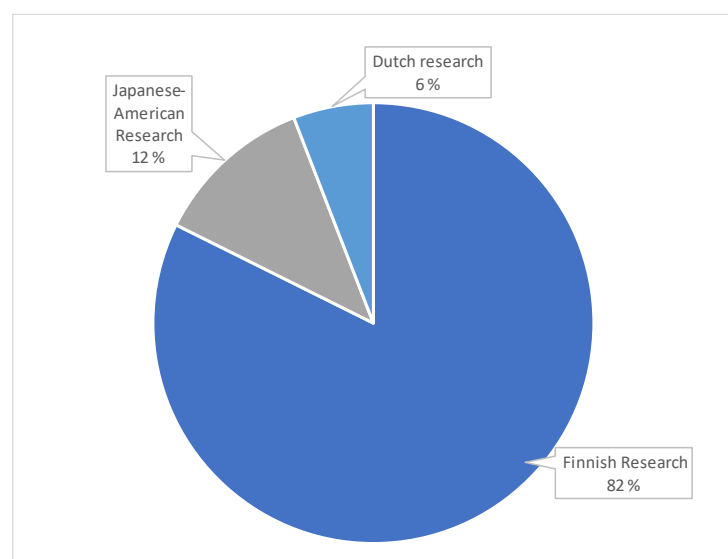


FIGURE 1. Origin of the research used.

2.4 Processing the data

After initial familiarization, the studies were sorted into categories according to their subjects. Three major categories arose: studies focused on the children in flexibly scheduled ECEC, parents of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC and work in flexibly scheduled ECEC. These categories were observed separately from one another. A deeper familiarization then took place categorically, and the findings were used to bring forth a narrative for each category. The findings were then brought together to come to a comprehensive conclusion on the research of Flexibly scheduled ECEC.

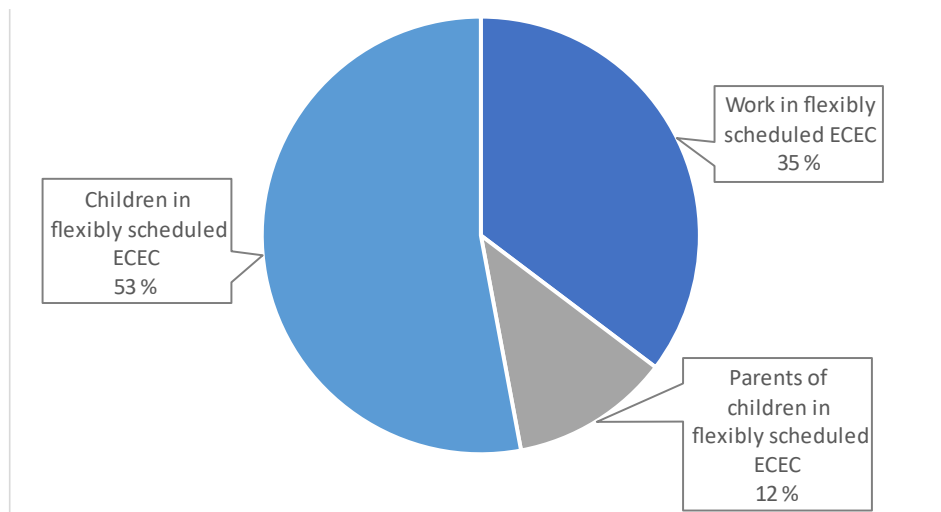


FIGURE 2. The distribution of the coarsely divided groupings of the studies used.

3 OVERVIEW

This section will discuss the studies concerning flexibly arranged ECEC from various perspectives. First, it focuses on the parents and their experiences, and then the children, their development, well-being and participation. Lastly the studies on educators, pedagogy and working in Flexibly scheduled ECEC will be discussed.

3.1 Parents of Children in Flexibly scheduled ECEC

Many studies noted the specialities of the life situations of the parents whose children are in flexibly scheduled ECEC, in comparison to those whose children are in daytime ECEC, to some degree. However, only one study discussed the parents' experiences with flexibly scheduled ECEC, mentioning how the parents view flexibly scheduled ECEC as a part of the chain of childcare.

A difference in life situation can be seen between the parents of children in daytime ECEC to those of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC according to a parental survey by Rönkä et. Al. (2019). Regarding their professional lives, the number of working hours and the amount of short notice changes in schedules were similar within both groups, however, the differences were significant regarding the personal lives of the parents (Rönkä et. Al., 2019). Parents of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC are suggested to generally be younger and have a lower level of education than those whose children are in daytime ECEC. Additionally, there are notable differences in family structure as well, with statistically more one-parent families and less children per family in flexibly scheduled ECEC (Rönkä et. Al., 2019; Sevón et. Al., 2017)

Peltoperä et. Al. (2022) interviewed parents whose children are in flexibly scheduled ECEC to learn how they position said service in the chain of care of their child. The study gives us insight into how parents feel about flexibly scheduled ECEC, and what moral and practical decisions and opinions have

occurred, in order to decide to place one's child in it. Their study recognized three discourses the parent surrounding flexibly scheduled ECEC discussed, both moral and practical: equality of opportunities, labour market and a child's best interest.

In flexibly scheduled ECEC the times which a child spends in ECEC is determined by the need for care rather than the schedules of the ECEC centre. Parents felt the imbalance in the amount of organized activity happening in the morning and evening shifts led to inequality of the children depending on what shift their parents are working. This shows the parents value the pedagogical possibilities being in organized ECEC provides. (Peltoperä et. Al., 2022).

There was dispersion on whether parents working irregular shifts found flexibly scheduled ECEC as a social service either as a facilitator or an obstacle to their position in the labour force. The positive experiences had to do with the availability of flexible childcare, enabling them working in their professions, while the negative ones wishing for more flexibility in the system due to challenges in implementing last minute changes to schedules (Peltoperä et. Al., 2022)

Discourse about whether the parents see flexibly scheduled ECEC as being in the best interest of the child was also divisive according to the study. Others want their children to only be in institutional ECEC as little as possible, mentioning relatives as childcare help and an unwillingness to have their children in a daycare centre overnight, while others see the daycare centre as a safe and serene place for the child, with a rhetoric of flexibly scheduled ECEC being more home-like present (Peltoperä et. Al., 2022).

3.2 Children in Flexibly Scheduled ECEC

A majority of the studies reviewed for this thesis were child-centric in nature. A coarse divide into studies concerning flexibly scheduled ECEC's effects on children's development, wellbeing and participation has been made for the purposes of this overview.

3.2.1 Development of the Children

Two studies focused on how participating in flexibly scheduled ECEC affects a child's development have been conducted by the same researchers (Anme & Segal, 2003, 2004). These studies took place in Japan and were nationwide in nature, being conducted in all governmentally recognized ECEC centres that provide evening and nighttime care. The data for both was gathered via parental and educator surveys, and the children's development was assessed via a standardized scale.

According to Anme & Segal (2003) there is a significant correlation between nighttime care (between 23:30 and 02:00) and delays in cognitive and motor development as well as the development of social skills. However, the children in nighttime care were also less likely to play with their parents, go to the store with them or be read to, for example, which also have a significant correlation to the results of the developmental assessment. It is worthy of note that in this study, nighttime care does not refer to overnight care, but the ECEC centre closes at 2 o'clock, which makes this study less relevant in a Finnish context, where night care extends to the following morning.

Children in flexibly scheduled ECEC are more likely to have longer days than children in daytime ECEC (Rönkä et. Al. 2019). The latter study by Anme and Segal (2004) focused on whether long days, meaning over 11 hours, in a ECEC institutions affected the development of children. This study found that long days in ECEC did not have significant positive or negative correlation with a child's cognitive, motor or social development, however, parental activity had a significant positive correlation regardless of the length of days spent in ECEC.

3.2.2 Wellbeing of the Children

A wide array of variables came forth overiewing literature on studies researching how flexibly scheduled ECEC affects the wellbeing of children in it. This echoes a professional interest in the same subject parents are concerned about as mentioned earlier. Is flexibly scheduled ECEC for the benefit of the child, and how can educators and parents support children's wellbeing in flexibly scheduled ECEC the best?

Sevón et. Al. (2017) conducted a study where the moods of children in daytime ECEC and the moods of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC were recorded. The results were interesting as they suggested that children in flexibly scheduled ECEC portrayed more positive and less negative emotions during the day when compared to their peers in daytime ECEC. However, unlike with children in daytime ECEC, there was no discernible common pattern in moods regarding times of the week. The parents of children from flexibly scheduled ECEC reported significantly less hurried or chaotic mornings to the researchers when compared to the parents of children in daytime ECEC (Sevón et.al.,2017.) Hurry can be a stressor which affects mood negatively (Almeida, 2005.), which may be a contributor to these differences. Moreover, the children in in flexible ECEC having differing schedules to each other, leads to an even spread of emotions amongst the groups, while the effects of a week's build up can be witnessed as a spike in negative moods on Fridays in daytime ECEC. Unlike the children from daytime ECEC, weekends did not affect the mood of children from flexibly scheduled ECEC (Sevón et. Al., 2017).

Arrival to daycare is a transition, which can act as a stressor when challenging situations cannot be effectively responded to by the educators or parents. The less-consistent nature of social environment in flexibly scheduled ECEC creates challenges when the child arriving is less familiar with the educator welcoming them, or the children present or immediately visible that day, which may lead to a feeling of not belonging. Familiar adults and close friends, however, can make the transition very easy, even enthusiastic. Flexible arrival times challenge the possibilities of peer support in transitioning from home to daycare, when children arrive at a time when they cannot go and play with their friends due to the daily rhythm of the daycare, such as naptime. Material context can also support a sense of belonging and therefore ease the transition. This includes familiar environments and objects the child knows how to interact with (Salonen et. Al., 2016)

Familiarity comes with stability. Due to the logistical realities, the time period when flexibly scheduled ECEC is at its most stable in terms of routine, staff and peer attendance is the times when daytime daycares are open. This leads to children with more need for the flexible schedule of flexibly scheduled ECEC, to have more individual educators per day, which has been shown to have a

negative effect on a child's wellbeing (De Schipper et. Al. 2003). Interestingly, being at ECEC at non-standard times, and therefore when there is less staff present, does not affect the possibility of the presence of a trusted educator, which supports a child's wellbeing. This suggests that many educators in flexible ECEC groups can be considered as trusted by a child, but switching through them at several parts of a day is taxing to the children. This extends to informal care settings as well, where shifting through several care arrangements and carers has a negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of the child (De Schipper et. Al., 2003).

Salonen et. Al. (2019) suggests that it is possible for a child to learn to manage the variability of daily life that operates on an irregular schedule. This leads to an understanding of the flow of the daily rhythm in flexibly scheduled ECEC, and a trust of adults with less regard to their familiarity. Children can learn to verbalize their understanding of time and to confirm their understanding of their individual schedules from the educators and parents (Salonen et. Al. 2019).

Tiredness and associated feelings, as well as confusion and uncertainty, are commonly seen in children who attend ECEC in non-standard shifts. Shifting between different daily schedules can create dissonance between the rhythm of the daycare and the rhythms of the individual children, which may lead to more strain on the children. This can happen when the child's rhythm does not synchronize with naptimes, for example. The additional tiredness from changing shifts may lead to difficulties when it comes to performing daily tasks. Flexibly scheduled ECEC can work in favour with a child's daily rhythm as well, enabling sufficient rest and therefore supporting the wellbeing of the child, for examples with later wake-up times after evening shifts (Salonen et. Al., 2018).

Attending flexibly scheduled ECEC can also provoke feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction, especially in relation to evening-time and weekend ECEC. This was linked to more educator attention, increased play possibilities due to a smaller number of children present, and possibilities to play with different age siblings and peers. The calmness and lack of hurry of the environment lends to a more peaceful ECEC experience during those days (Salonen et. Al., 2018).

Working cooperation between the home and the educators can work as a barrier between the child and the risk factors on their wellbeing, making ECEC more enjoyable, and supporting a sense of belonging (Koivula et. Al., 2023).

There are several child responsive practices for both parents and educators to use in order to support a child's wellbeing.

Observing and answering to the needs arising from the tiredness of the child can help increase the amount of rest gotten. Parents might adjust the time of arrival to daycare to ease the transition and enable full naptime, for example, while the educators might pedagogically choose calm but activating activities in the late evenings, to keep children awake, but not too active to make falling asleep at home hard. Educators in ECEC can also answer the increased emotional needs of tired children with attention and closeness (Salonen et. Al., 2019).

Another way to respond to the needs of the children is to enhance the predictability and familiarity of the child's life both in ECEC and at home. Salonen et. Al. (2019) reported parents applying their ECEC centre's day structure at home as well, which is meant to ease the transitions from home to daycare when attending in irregular shifts by creating a stable routine. Applying this to common practices and rules was also brought up as a way to increase predictability in a changing environment through working cooperation between the parents and educators (Salonen et. Al., 2019; Koivula et. Al., 2023). Visualisation and explaining of future events can be used to enhance the predictability of the day schedule to the children (Salonen et. Al., 2019).

A child's temperament also has an effect on their socio-emotional wellbeing in flexibly scheduled ECEC settings. Reserved children, and children who have not attended flexibly scheduled ECEC for long, show more distress (Salonen et. Al., 2019), while easy-going children tend to be more adjusting to irregularities and less familiar social situations (De Schipper, 2003). However, studies have also shown that flexible care times can affect a child in a way that makes them less compliant to caregivers (De Schipper et. Al., 2003).

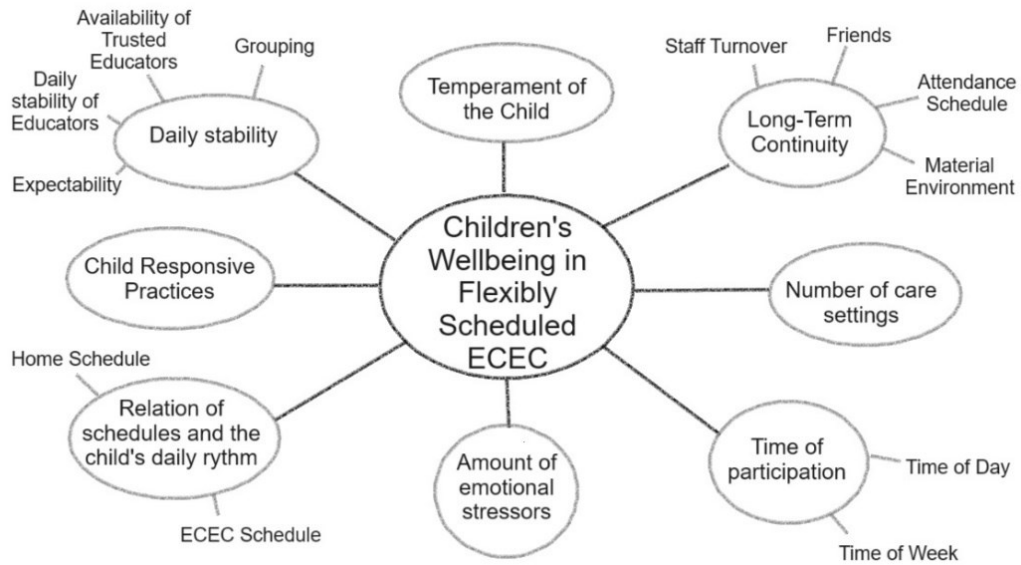


FIGURE 3. Variables that affect children’s wellbeing in flexibly scheduled ECEC1

3.2.3 Children’s Participation

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Opetushallitus, 2022) obligates Finnish ECEC professionals to further the possibilities of participation of children in implementing, planning and assessing ECEC. This echoed in the Law on Early Childhood Education (Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018). Flexibly scheduled ECEC brings forth unique challenges and possibilities to the participation of children.

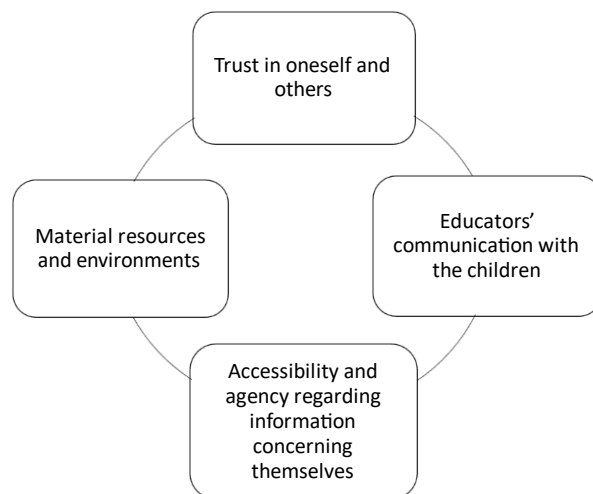


FIGURE 4. Prerequisites of Children's participation according to Turja (2016)

In order to implement the prerequisites of participation in flexibly scheduled ECEC settings, special attention must be given. For children to find trust in themselves, the educators and their peers a sense of belonging needs to be fostered (Turja, 2016). As discussed before, this can be achieved by building structures that support continuity and stability (Salonen et. Al., 2016; Turja, 2016) as well as making individual children visible in the group even when they aren't present (Turja, 2016). However, especially evening time provides difficult in terms of stability due to the changing nature of the staff and children present (Salonen et. Al., 2021).

Repetition of the information and customs of an ECEC group might be more needed in flexibly scheduled groups due to the fluid nature of the group and staff composition. Visual communication and documentation are especially important to children in flexibly scheduled ECEC, due to the high possibility of absences and irregular participation. For communication, it is integral to support children in processing information of subjects important to them. Participation in communication can be dependent on the activity of the educators (Turja, 2016).

The environment, and the inspiration it gives, guides the ideas children pursue. While evening and night shift children might generally not have access to as large number of environments due to trips happening in the mornings, evening care provides greater flexibility to pursue children's ideas and ask for materials usually not at the reach of children (Turja, 2016).

Evening shifts in flexibly scheduled ECEC provide an interesting context in which to observe children's possibilities of participation. In a study conducted by Salonen et. Al. (2021), it was discovered that situations where children's agency in participation was disregarded were rare and were often connected either to the unchanging routines of the ECEC centre or to situations, where the educator present was concentrating on another child. Opposingly, situations where the educator actively supported the participation of children were common within the recorded data. This was contributed to the small number of children in evening time care and to the ability to give personal attention.

3.3 Working in Flexibly Scheduled ECEC

Educators in flexibly scheduled ECEC face challenges in their work that are due to the unique nature of it. Planning and team meetings are challenging when it is logistically impossible to have the whole team at work simultaneously (Rönkä et. Al., 2019; Peltoperä & Hintikka 2016). Communicating with families can be challenging due to changing schedules making it hard to communicate with parents when long instances might occur without the possibility to meet face-to-face, moreover, diverse and changing family situations require sensitivity from the educators (Rönkä et. Al., 2019).

Childcare nurses working in flexibly scheduled ECEC feel challenged by the amount of time they work alone, and therefore have to operate and make decisions independently (Rönkä et. Al. 2019). ECEC teachers seldom work evenings, nights or weekends, and therefore are not present during a large part of the ECEC day (Malinen et. Al., 2016). Working alone in environments not originally designed with the needs of flexibly scheduled ECEC in mind sometimes prove challenging, due to the location of different spaces, for example (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016).

Educators experience work in flexibly scheduled ECEC to be straining. There are situations where the number of educators does not match the number of children, due to unpredictable changes in the parents' schedules. Educators feel a need for more peer support and wish for more stability in staff when straining with the realities every worker with non-standard work hours faces (Malinen et. Al., 2016).

3.3.1 Pedagogy

Flexibly scheduled ECEC is directed by the same steering documents and legislation as daytime ECEC, (Varhaiskasvatuslaki, 2018) however, there is sparse information on implementing these same recommendations and rulings in flexibly scheduled ECEC specifically. The only specific mention of flexibly scheduled ECEC in the curriculum is the notion to take the irregular nature of children's participation in flexibly scheduled ECEC into account when planning

and implementing pedagogy (Opetushallitus, 2018.) It, however, seems to be a point of discourse how this should practically be executed.

Challenges regarding pedagogy in flexibly scheduled ECEC are commonly highlighted in the conversation surrounding it. Peltoperä & Hintikka (2016) lists the most commonly mentioned challenges as being educational equality, executing pedagogy diversely and providing support to children with special needs. These difficulties are highlighted especially during evening and weekend times. Combining flexible need for ECEC with compulsory pre-primary education is considered a challenging factor as well.

Peltoperä et. Al. (2020) describes broader tensions visible in the way educators in flexibly scheduled ECEC talk about pedagogy in their field. A point of conflict was the dichotomy between the right to learn and the need for care. There was discussion on whether formal pedagogy should take place during the times most people spend relaxing with their families, such as weekends or evenings (Peltoperä et.al., 2020) This is connected to parents' worries of children in evening care being in an unequal situation compared to their peers attending during the daytime (Peltoperä et. Al., 2022) with educators balancing between equal opportunities and the children's socio-emotional needs and an ideal of home-likeness (Peltoperä et. Al., 2020). Teachers, who are pedagogically in charge, seldom working during the evenings (Malinen et. Al., 2016.) complicates the situation further. This argument forgoes the value of the every-day pedagogy utilized commonly in flexibly scheduled ECEC (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016). Two perspectives can be recognized in how pedagogy is constructed in flexibly scheduled ECEC. There is a notion of equality through standardized pedagogical activities for all, contested by the notion of individual and situational implementations of pedagogy. Situational pedagogy was supported with notions of the flexible nature and home-likeness of flexibly scheduled ECEC. (Peltoperä et. Al. 2020).

Building a home-like, safe psycho-social environment is seen as pedagogically important during early mornings, evenings and the night. Educators view these times as sensitive for the child, but also describe closeness and meaningful interaction. These times of day are emotionally taxing to some children, when it comes to difficulties in daily rhythm. Additionally, upholding

predictability by weaving consistence to how each educator operates during these times is integral (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016).

A challenge common in flexibly scheduled ECEC is interruptions to children's play. These are often because of the group structure changing due to different arrivals or departures. As mentioned earlier, educators and children in flexibly scheduled ECEC live in rhythms and schedules that may differ drastically from each other. Differences in schedule lead to an everchanging group composition, providing challenges to educators trying to balance stability, children's interests and logistics. Supporting children in forming social relations and a sense of belonging is integral in planning grouping. Schedule differences also lead not only to the differences in vitality and tiredness of the children, but also to the possibility of long time periods when children or adults might not meet someone in the same group due to differences in schedules (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016). Difficulties in transferring of information when it is not possible to have the full team present for team meetings are common, which also makes planning pedagogy difficult (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016; Rönkä et. Al., 2019).

Daily rhythms of individual children are another cornerstone in constructing pedagogy in flexibly scheduled ECEC. While daytime schedules largely mirror that of daytime ECEC, evening time flexibility is often utilized to provide children with opportunities for activities that fit the rhythm they are in. When the more rigid daytime structure seems unfitting to a child, possibilities in shifting arrival times are charted (Peltoperä & Hintikka, 2016).

3.3.2 Evening and Weekend work.

Salonen et. Al. (2020) looks at the practices of evening time ECEC through the positionality of children's belonging. The study notes that a educators' evenings often include managing unique and changing groups. In the evening time, a group might have children from a wide age range, and with vastly different schedules. Managing groups includes helping the formation of small groups according to child interest and safety, adjusting the groups to structural changes, such as a child arriving or an educator departing, and regrouping when needed (Salonen et. Al., 2020).

Fostering a home-like environment during the evenings is visible in a large part of the actions an educator does during the evenings. Through familiarity of the children and sensitive observation educators answer to the emotional needs and the wants of the children. This might include physical closeness, or on the other hand, answering to children's initiations towards activities or materials not available during the daytime and larger groups. Educators also arranged voluntary educator-guided activities, and adjusted routines, such as evening snack times, according to the needs of the children. Interestingly, the study found that maintaining routines was not often the focus of educators' actions during the evenings (Salonen et. Al., 2020).

As mentioned before, childcare nurses are often working alone during the evenings, with the teachers pedagogically in charge of the group outside of their own work hours and days. There is dispersion of opinion on whether pedagogy should be left to the teachers, who often only work during the daytime hours, or whether every educator should execute pedagogy in the group (Peltoperä et. Al., 2020).

3.3.3 Educator's accounts

There is ongoing worry on whether flexibly scheduled ECEC is for the benefit of the child. This was visible on all three categories used in this research, both explicitly and implicitly. A study by Peltoperä et. Al. (2017) charted the rhetoric on how educators working in flexibly scheduled ECEC position themselves and children within it. Positionality in the debate on the wellbeing of children in flexibly scheduled ECEC, and the accounts ranged from flexibly scheduled ECEC being a necessary evil to it being a privilege to the children within it.

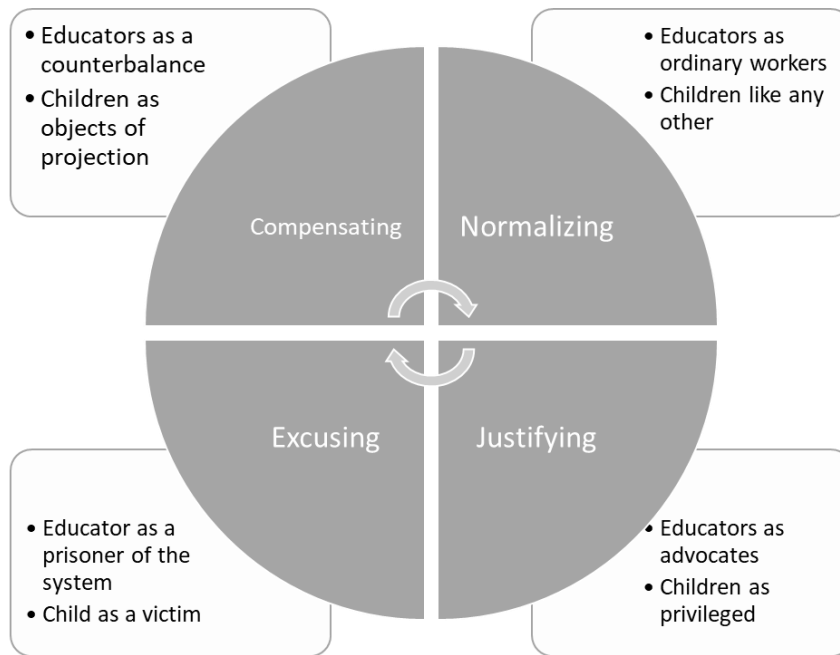


FIGURE 5. Accounts of Educators working in flexibly scheduled ECEC according to (Peltoperä et. Al., 2017).

A portion of the educators' rhetoric betrayed feelings of flexibly scheduled ECEC being inherently bad for children. They felt sorry for the children for the decisions of their parents or how they feel society mistreats them. A passive position was taken by the educators, exhibiting feelings of inability to affect the children's situation. In direct opposition, other educators felt children in flexibly scheduled ECEC as being more fortunate than children in daytime ECEC. They praised the flexibility, shorter days, greatest inter-personal familiarity between the children and educators and individual attention as factors that make flexibly scheduled ECEC superior to daytime ECEC, positioning themselves as enablers of this high quality ECEC (Peltoperä et. Al., 2017).

Two other types of accounts were also recognized, these ones less polarised than the previously mentioned. Some educators recognized the possible negative effects of flexibly scheduled ECEC on the wellbeing of the children, however, placed the educators, and the practices used, in flexibly scheduled ECEC as barriers, protecting the children from the risk factors. Lastly, a minority gave the account normalizing flexibly scheduled ECEC as merely another part of the Finnish ECEC system. They saw themselves and the children

as similar to their peers in daytime ECEC, and flexibly scheduled ECEC as routine (Peltoperä et. Al., 2017).

4 CONCLUSION

Flexibly scheduled ECEC is a divisive subject on many fronts, and the ongoing debate seems largely moral and lacking individualism and sensitivity to circumstance. Parents' worries are proven valid by the educators' struggles with the same topics, albeit from a different, nuanced perspective. However, the positive experiences reported by parents are also mirrored in many articles. The burning question behind the text in many of the papers overviewed is whether flexibly scheduled ECEC is good for children or not.

Attending flexibly scheduled ECEC does pose risks to the socio-emotional wellbeing of the children, however, the educators have multitude of pedagogical structures in place to lessen the severity of those risks. Cooperation between the home and ECEC, sensitivity, home-likeness and predictability are heightened in flexibly scheduled ECEC. Close inter-personal bonds between a child and their peers and educators, as well as familiar environments, routines and customs support a sense of belonging. However, there are still times when a child feels uncertain for not seeing a familiar face at arrival, or abandoned when their parents don't arrive to pick them up at the time they usually do, as well as times of tiredness and moments of mistimed activity.

The balancing of the schedules of several educators and even more children is a key-component of the work of every educator in flexibly scheduled ECEC. While daytime functions much the same as in any other ECEC centre, apart from children arriving and departing with more variance, evenings and weekends provide challenges to the nurses working without teachers, while also proving highly rewarding due to differences in the work.

Flexibly scheduled ECEC is an increasingly needed service, the accessibility of it in Finland being unique in the context of the rest of the world (Salonen et. Al., 2018). More research is needed to chart how we can better support different children with changing schedules as the need for flexibly scheduled ECEC increases.

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