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Personal practical theory in early childhood education and care as an essential element of professionalism

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Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract <p>Personal practical theories (PPTs) of early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals have not been widely studied. Personal beliefs, values and theoretical knowledge form the PPT that affects the decisions a professional makes in everyday work. Therefore, PPT can be considered as an integral element of professionalism in the ECEC field. Professionals' PPTs are often hidden and if not acknowledged and discussed, mutual understanding among professionals may be difficult to achieve. This qualitative study aims to provide some insight into the beliefs, values and knowledge of ECEC professionals, and describe the commonalities found in the PPTs of professionals.</p> <p>The data in this study was gathered from nine (9) semi-structured interviews in Finland. The respondents equally represented different disciplines that prevail in ECEC: pedagogy, social pedagogy and child nursing. The 'onion model of levels in reflection' developed by Fred Korthagen (2017) was utilised as a framework in formulating the interview questions and when interpreting the data with reflexive thematic analysis.</p> <p>The main finding in this thesis was the complexity and paradoxical nature of ECEC work which the professionals described. Similarly, the PPT of ECEC professional could be described as a region with a variety of complex dimensions. There were some common themes to be found in the data, one of them being advocating the best interest of children. Another important finding was the understanding of the cruciality of teamwork in ECEC. Consequently, the various PPTs of ECEC professionals should all be valued equally as this enables striving towards shared goals. Furthermore, discussing about PPTs among team members in genuine dialogue may foster the well-being of employees, and ultimately of children in the group. This study suggests that all ECEC professionals should engage self-reflection in order to recognise their underlying beliefs and values that affect their everyday work. This is a practice which enables professional development and also demonstrates ethical responsibility.</p>		
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Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract Henkilökohtaisia käyttöteorioita ei ole juurikaan tutkittu varhaiskasvatuksessa. Henkilökohtaiset uskomukset, arvot sekä teoreettinen tieto muodostavat yhdessä henkilökohtaisen käyttöteorian, joka vaikuttaa ammattilaisen päätöksiin jokapäiväisessä työssä. Näin ollen henkilökohtainen käyttöteoria kytkeytyy kysymykseen varhaiskasvatusalan ammattilaisuudesta. Varhaiskasvatusalan ammattilaisten uskomukset, arvot sekä tietopohja ovat usein piileviä ja ne tulisikin tunnistaa sekä tuoda yhteiseen keskusteluun, jotta ammattilaiset voivat ymmärtää toistensa ajattelutapoja. Tämän laadullisen tutkimuksen tavoitteena on kuvailla varhaiskasvatusalan ammattilaisten uskomuksia, arvoja sekä tietopohjia. Lisäksi tämä tutkimus pyrkii selvittämään mitä yhteneväisyyksiä ammattilaisten henkilökohtaisista käyttöteorioista voi löytää. Tutkimusaineisto koostui yhdeksästä (9) puolistrukturoidusta haastattelusta, jotka toteutettiin Suomessa. Haastateltavat edustivat tasapuolisesti varhaiskasvatusalan eri ammattiryhmiä: pedagogiikkaa, sosiaalipedagogiikkaa ja lastenhoitoa. Teoreettisena viitekehystenä hyödynnettiin Fred Korthagenin (2017) luomaa 'reflektoinnin sipulimallia' niin haastattelukysymysten luomisessa kuin refleksiivisessä temaattisessa analyysissä. Tulosten perusteella varhaiskasvatusalaa voisi kuvailla monimutkaiseksi alueeksi, jossa on laaja kirjo erilaisia, jopa paradoksaalisia, ulottuvuuksia. Tämä monimutkaisuus näkyy ammattilaisten henkilökohtaisissa käyttöteorioissa. Aineistosta oli havaittavissa joitain yhdistäviä teemoja, joista yksi oli lasten edun puolustaminen. Toinen keskeinen löydös oli ammattilaisten ymmärrys tiimityön ratkaisevasta merkityksestä varhaiskasvatuksessa. Varhaiskasvatusalan ammattilaisten erilaisia henkilökohtaisia käyttöteorioita tulisikin arvostaa yhdenvertaisesti, jotta yhteisiä tavoitteita kohti voidaan kulkea. Lisäksi henkilökohtaisista käyttöteorioista keskusteleminen aidossa dialogissa voi edistää työntekijöiden hyvinvointia, ja siten lopulta myös lasten hyvinvointia ryhmässä. Kaiken kaikkiaan varhaiskasvatusalan ammattilaisten tulisi harjoittaa itsereflektiota, jotta he voisivat tunnistaa omat piilevät uskomuksensa ja arvonsa, jotka kuitenkin vaikuttavat päivittäiseen varhaiskasvatustyöhön. Tämä mahdollistaa ammatillisen kehittymisen sekä on eettisesti vastuullisen ammattilaisen merkki.		
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1 Introduction

Can education be considered as science? How can theory be applied to education which is very practical in its nature? These are some of the questions that arose in this thesis process. Education as a field of science is complex as it may be examined from various perspectives of multiple disciplines. One interesting aspect is the relation between theory and practice. Some researchers in fact consider the relationship between theory and practice as the perennial question in educational science due to the fact that the theory-based approach is limited when resolving concrete challenges in educational contexts (Säntti, Puustinen & Salminen, 2018, p. 5).

Theoretical knowledge is, however, important if education is to be considered as science. Theory in education also lays the foundation for professionalism in education as professional educators utilise theoretical knowledge as part of their educational activities. But in addition, professional educators' unique personal experiences gained throughout their life histories are at least as important. Therefore, education should be viewed with an open mind for multitude of realities and interpretations. This thesis aims to describe how the theory and practice merge in educational context with the concept of personal practical theory (PPT). In this thesis the focus is on early childhood education and care (ECEC), which may be even more challenging to regard as science as the care aspect brings yet another dimension to the equation. However, during this thesis process it has become apparent that education may be viewed as science when its context dependent nature is acknowledged. Consequently, ECEC is just like all human sciences - complex and situational, but on some aspects also universal.

PPTs of professionals in ECEC have something in common but they are also all unique. PPTs consist of beliefs about e.g. children and learning, values that guide the professionals' actions, and knowledge that derives from theoretical and practical experience. As professionals in ECEC have various educational and personal backgrounds, accordingly their PPTs consist of diverse opinions and understandings. PPTs are often tacit, and professionals may not even be aware of them. However, as PPTs affect the ECEC work practices in various ways, they can be regarded as essential elements of professionalism in ECEC. PPTs should be examined with reflective practices due to their tacit nature. Many scholars have in fact suggested that reflective practices may be the most salient marker of professionalism in educational field. Exposing PPTs by self-reflection is particularly crucial in ECEC settings as the work is usually actualised in multi-disciplinary teams. Unless the potentially very diverse perspectives of team members are exposed, conflicts and misunderstandings are likely to arise.

In this thesis the focus is on ECEC field in Finland. Moreover, this thesis concentrates on the multi-disciplinary ECEC work carried out in day care centres in child groups with usually three (3) professionals in one group. In the recent years the importance of early years has been recognised across the globe (Fonsén, Varpanen, Strehmel, Masayo, Inoue, Marchant, Modise, Szecsi & Halpern, 2019, p. 267; Trodd & Dickerson, 2019, p. 357; Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas, 2017, p. 11), but as an area of study ECEC is still fairly limited. Thus, there are many uncovered areas of study in ECEC, and professionals' PPTs is one of them. The theoretical part in this thesis, therefore, consists of literature about professionalism in ECEC, perceptions about children and childhood, ECEC as a societal activity, some core elements of ECEC, and theory about PPTs that is mainly from research gained from teacher education.

In this thesis I conducted a qualitative inquiry that consisted of nine (9) semi-structured interviews with ECEC professionals in Finland as I aspired to make professionals' tacit PPTs explicit. I analysed the data with reflexive thematic analysis in order to find answers to my research problem: what kind of personal practical theories ECEC professionals possess and are there some common traits to

be found in them. Moreover, I discovered how these PPTs develop, and are they likely to change over time.

In the first part of theoretical section, I discuss professionalism in the ECEC field. This is important as it builds the foundation for later more abstract theoretical part about PPTs. Professionalism and PPTs are intertwined, and both are difficult to describe. Therefore, I discuss both of them as the concepts are still developing in the field of ECEC. The ultimate reason for researching this topic lies in my permanent interest to discover the underlying motives people have. Why do we act the way we do? What kind of principles guide our actions? Human beings' behaviour may seem irrational in many instances, but there is always a more or less coherent logic behind every action. Examining PPTs may offer a window into the logics ECEC professionals possess. Furthermore, by investigating these various logics, ideas and perspectives become available for exchange in a genuine dialogue. As already Socrates phrased it, the conversational goal is not to find a fixed knowledge but to continue the conversation (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 592). Accordingly, I invite the readers of this thesis to ponder their own perceptions about ECEC as a professional field, and the values that are attached to it.

2 Early childhood education and care as a profession

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been in a state of flux during recent years across the world (Kangas, Ukkonen-Mikkola, Sirvio, Hjelt & Fonsén, 2022, p. 72). ECEC has become the subject of many reforms and increased investments in national contexts as the importance of ECEC for societies' future has been acknowledged (Fonsén et al., 2019, p. 254; Nolan & Molla, 2018, p. 258). However, several international scholars ponder on what professionalism precisely in the early years consists of, and what it should look like (Osgood, 2010, p. 121). Therefore, it is easy to agree with Brock (2012, p. 29) that definitions of professionalism are complex in the ECEC field.

The issue of quality has become alongside with professionalism a particular focus of interest in ECEC. In Finland there have been attempts to assure quality by renewing legislation regarding contents and staff qualifications of ECEC. (Kangas et al., 2022, p. 72.) These administrative steps have contributed to the professionalisation process of ECEC. However, it seems that ECEC is still developing as a true profession (Kinos, 2008, p. 233). Spodek (1995, p. 67) for instance uses the term semi-profession regarding ECEC work as it has lower status than commonly approved professions, such as medicine and law. Moreover, ECEC professionals have shorter training, and less autonomy and power than in traditional professions. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the history, some challenges, and specific features of ECEC work. Lastly, I describe why reflexivity is considered as a crucial element of professionalism in ECEC.

2.1 Some historical background concerning professionalism in ECEC and terminology

Professionalism as a concept is not easy to define. One way to define professionalism is to recognize a qualified employee as opposed to an amateur (Kinos, 1997, p. 18). Thomas (2012, p. 87) has identified professionalism to encompass such elements as qualifications, autonomy, relationships, and adherence to a

code of ethics. Glascott (1994, p. 132) again has defined more specifically professional educator as a person who is able to analyse situations, identify children's needs within their contexts, and subsequently apply the most suitable learning strategies.

Although currently expertise and professionalism are considered as dynamic and changing over time and space, some universally common dimensions in professionalism in ECEC can be found across different professionals. These shared dimensions include e.g. ethical competence, early childhood education competence, understanding the core tasks, competencies in interpersonal skills, and cooperation and continuous development. (Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi, 2021, pp. 74–75.) However, the ECEC expertise has not been considered through the above-mentioned competencies for long. Husa and Kinos (2005, p. 134) point out that the whole concept of early childhood education has been in use only from the beginning of 1970s onwards. Thus, the idea of ECEC as a professional arena is understandably still developing. In this thesis the concept ECEC refers to educational activities among children who are not yet attending school, i.e. are usually under 7 years of age (Husa & Kinos, 2005, p. 133).

The many terms and concepts used in scholarly literature regarding ECEC also demonstrate that ECEC as an academic discipline is still evolving. In my literature review, I noticed various terms which referred somewhat to similar phenomena. Some scholars use the term ECE (early childhood education) whereas others use ECEC (early childhood education and care). In this thesis I use the term ECEC as it recognises care as an integral part of educational activities carried out with small children. In addition, the term ECEC is found in the Finnish legislation (see Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018), and in the prevalent principle of *educare*, where education and care are intertwined (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2023a).

Another issue is how to address professionals in the ECEC field. Most scientific articles concentrate on ECEC teachers, whereas in many sources from English speaking countries, the term early childhood practitioner is utilised. As professionals in the ECEC field in Finland have various educational backgrounds with

different levels of formal training (Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi, 2021, p. 71), the term early childhood educator (see e.g. Ahonen, 2015; Melasalmi, 2018) may be useful. With this term all professionals are equally appreciated as experts in their field, even though their level of formal training might differ. In this thesis, however, I use mainly the term ECEC professional for the sake of clarity. The term professional educator is used a few times as some sources are from the class teacher field and the term refers to educational philosophy.

2.1.1 ECEC in Finland

The development of ECEC field in Finland has entailed many turns and events. As ECEC is in constant interaction with society, politics and legislation affect ECEC in numerous ways. In Finland, ECEC has its origins as a universal societal service, where the child's overall well-being has been the guiding principle (Karila & Kinos, 2012, p. 55). Consequently, the term *day care* often appears when discussing about ECEC in Finland. Previously the ECEC facilities were called kindergartens, but currently the proper term is day care centre.

The Finnish economic structure went through a drastic change in the late 1960s as Finland shifted from agricultural society to a more industrial society. Consequently, women were required to participate to labour market, and in 1973 a state-run daycare system was launched to provide children the nurture and care they needed (see Laki lasten päivähoidosta 36/1973). At this time Finland was remodelled into a Nordic welfare state with functional social services that enabled women to participate work life fulltime. The early Finnish day care was strongly influenced by Frobelian kindergarten practices and principles. (Kinos, 2008, p. 226.)

In 1995 the kindergarten teacher training was shifted to university level which laid the foundation for the formation of the academic field of ECEC (Kinos, 2008, p. 236). However, it was not only until 2012 when ECEC was defined as an educational institution, and thus was shifted from the governance of Ministry of Social

Affairs and Health to under governance of Ministry of Education and Culture (Karila et al., 2017, p. 18). Finally, in 2018 the new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (i.e. Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018) was enacted (Fonsén et al., 2019, p. 255). It aims to improve the quality of ECEC work by raising the personnel's educational qualifications to higher level, and clarifying the work tasks (Heikka, Suhonen & Kahila, 2022, p. 15). From 2030 onwards at least two out of three of the personnel in a child group must have a bachelor level degree from university or university of applied sciences (Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018 § 37). Currently, this requirement is for one out of three in the personnel (Karila et al., 2017, pp. 79–80).

The complicated history of the Finnish ECEC has perhaps affected the current need to develop ECEC field on many issues. One of them is clarifying the special expertise and tasks of different ECEC professionals as it would benefit the work atmosphere, functionality of teamwork, and sense of control over own work (Ranta, Heiskanen, Heiskanen, & Syrjämäki, 2023, p. 161; Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi, 2021, p. 65; Karila & Kupila, 2010, p. 66; Karila & Kinos, 2012, p. 68). For the past decades the Finnish ECEC culture could have been characterised by the idea of 'everyone does everything', where responsibilities of different professionals have been distinctively unclear. (Karila & Kinos, 2012, p. 68). However, now ECEC is being developed on many levels as demonstrated in the previous paragraphs.

In addition to reforms in legislation and qualifications, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care is regularly revised, and renewed when necessary (see EDUFI, 2023b). Since 2018 the National Core Curriculum for ECEC has been a binding document instead of being a recommendation (Paavola & Pesonen, 2021, p. 4), and it is prepared by various professional experts (Rajala, Rainio, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Kurenlahti, 2022, p. 28). One of the purposes for creating and implementing a national core curriculum is to ensure equally high quality in ECEC across the country. However, as Schiro (2013, pp. 2–6) points out, curriculums are not value-free but instead they are designed to serve different ideological goals. Furthermore, often the educational visions portrayed in curriculums are in fact contradictory with each other, such as meeting

the needs of society (Social efficiency ideology) or individual (Learner centred ideology). In sum, there are various laws and documents that guide and obligate the ECEC work carried out by professionals. This places pressure on how the professionals can meet all the obligations that society sets on their work.

2.1.2 Women dominated field of expertise

ECEC in Finland is nowadays highly regulated, but the issue of expertise in ECEC is complex. The training programs for becoming ECEC professionals are open for both men and women alike, but early childhood services are dominated by women all over the world (Rodd, 2013, p. 75; Campbell-Barr, 2019, p. 139). Interestingly, ECEC practices are pervasively also connected to discourses about motherhood. Even today the concept of care, and image of an employee as a substitute mother appear at the ECEC field. (Salamon, Sumsion, Press, & Harrison, 2016, p. 437.) Spodek (1995, p. 77) also suggests that perhaps in the early years ECEC was defined as a profession to raise the status of mothers, children and child rearing. With the tradition of selflessness, women have not been too concerned about earning a decent income. This background and attitude might affect the status of ECEC as a profession, and therefore, the differences between teaching small children and mothering should be made explicit.

In Finland Maija Meretniemi (2015) has examined in her doctoral thesis how spiritual motherhood and good home have been historically kindergarten ideals. From the history such ideals as selflessness, homely atmosphere, and personal calling (Meretniemi, 2015, pp. 172, 208, 276) have prevailed until today's ECEC work. However, the issue of motherhood in relation to ECEC is not unproblematic. As Kinos (2008, p. 227) points out, mothers have experienced collective guilt for having to utilise state subsidised day care centres, and let their small children be educated outside their homes. On the other hand, nowadays as ECEC is considered more as an opportunity for a child to learn, such guilt may not be as prevalent. In addition, Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 139) claims that modelling the ECEC profession on a mother-like ideal may in fact reinforce gender segregation.

2.1.3 Hierarchies and conflicts of interest

ECEC seems to be a fruitful terrain for professional battles, not just in Finland, but according to research, worldwide (see e.g. Rodd 2013; Oberhuemer 2005; Kinoshita 1997). Perhaps due to the ECEC work's semi-professional nature, conflicts are likely to arise among professionals as the roles and responsibilities are somewhat vague. One important aspect is to consider can human work altogether be regarded as a profession. Ethical philosopher and theologian Martti Lindqvist for instance was wary on defining any human work as a pure profession. According to Lindqvist (1990, p. 49) one prerequisite for building a true profession is the unanimity on how the qualification for certain position is reached. Although a certain training might seem as a convenient solution to this dilemma, it is not as obvious that the public opinion would agree on the justification of such criteria. Similarly, ECEC raises many opinions in the public discussion year after year. This is important to recognise when attempting to define who is qualified as an ECEC professional and why.

Similarly, Verity Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 137) has argued that concepts of professionalism in ECEC involve different images of children and childhood, and these have had implications for the ECEC knowledge base. Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 137) continues that professional knowledge in ECEC is not about standardisation and rationality, let alone universal understandings altogether, but rather about multiple ways of knowing and debating about what the knowledge base is. According to Yarrow Andrew (as cited by Campbell-Barr, 2019, p. 137) some forms of knowledge are favoured over others in ECEC, in Western education systems that being *episteme* (pure knowledge) that is related to pedagogy on the expense of *techne*, which is associated with skills. Consequently, Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 138) suggests that multiple forms of knowledge should be appreciated in ECEC when defining professionalism.

The balance between different approaches in ECEC has concerned other researchers as well. Melasalmi, Hurme and Ruokonen (2022, p. 617) for instance note that although the concept of care prevails in the Finnish ECEC curriculum, its dominance has faded. Melasalmi et al. (2022, p. 617) consider alarming also

the notion that in Denmark the ECE policy had resulted the focus to shift from children's play and general well-being to enhancing their academic skills.

In Finland, ECEC work is usually carried out in multi-disciplinary teams. Although expertise from various disciplines can be regarded as a strength, there are also tensions that affect the well-being of personnel as well as the quality of work. (Ranta, Harju-Luukkainen, Kahila & Korkeaniemi, 2022, p. 23.) In Finland the renewal of ECEC legislation and staff qualifications has provoked widespread, sometimes quite heated debate, which may be interpreted as battle of position between different professional groups in ECEC (Koskinen, 2021, p. 6). This phenomenon seems to be pervasive in ECEC, and it dates back to the early years when the ECEC field began to formulate. Kinos (1997) has described how there is a long historical background involved with the discussion about the professionalism of ECEC. According to Kinos (1997; 2008) territorial fights between occupations have resulted from unclear responsibilities and work tasks. Therefore, the reforms in ECEC field are necessary although implementation and adjusting to them takes time.

2.2 Specific features of ECEC work

ECEC work can be summed as complex. There is a variety of factors that influence the everyday work of ECEC professionals. Historical, cultural, and political forces alike are affecting ECEC field on many levels. (Trodd & Dickerson, 2019, p. 357; Karila & Kinos, 2012, p. 64.) Furthermore, ECEC is 'a messy business' as there are so many interactions between children and adults, families and communities, groups and individuals, and also laypersons and professionals. All these actors pursue their own interests, which often are contradictory. (Urban, 2008, p. 144.) In this section I examine some of the complexities involved in ECEC work that are relevant in relation to professionals' PPTs.

2.2.1 Holistic approach and children's well-being

In the Finnish ECEC the activities are designed with a holistic approach, where the overall well-being of the child is the overarching principle (EDUFI, 2023b). This principle applies not only in ECEC, but in the education sector as a whole (see Maaranen, Pitkäniemi, Stenberg & Karlsson, 2016, p. 82). The National Core Curriculum for ECEC emphasises interpersonal skills, play, curiosity, and attempts to avoid school preparation approach. Moreover, in the Finnish model compassionate ethos and sensitivity towards children's initiatives and multitudinous needs are considered as essential elements in ECEC. (Rajala et al., 2022, p. 28.)

It seems that similar principles are common across cultures in the ECEC environments. Verity Campbell-Barr (2017, p. 50) has investigated the attitudes needed in the ECEC work in UK, Hungary and Italy. According to her findings, several commonly shared attitudes among ECEC professionals include such terms as: patience, compassion, teamwork, caring, reflective practice, motivation for keeping up to date with policies, open dialogue with colleagues, meeting children's individual needs, acceptance of diversity, political awareness, social inclusion and active citizenship. Similarly, Rodd (1999, pp. 22–24.) states that such common principles among ECEC professionals as being committed to child-centred philosophy, providing safe, caring and stimulating environment, aiding children in learning pro-social behaviour patterns and play, interpersonal relationships between adults and children, and respecting and valuing the uniqueness of every child.

Moreover, in the Nordic countries such values and principles of the society are specifically cherished as equality, democracy, participation, solidarity, warm social relationships, and naturalness of childhood (Kangas, Ukkonen-Mikkola, Harju-Luukkainen, Ranta, Chydenius, Lahdenperä, Neitola, Kinos, Sajaniemi & Ruokonen, 2021, p. 2). Thus, these values can be considered as integral elements of professionalism of ECEC.

2.2.2 Collaboration as a core element in ECEC

Evolution psychology offers one interesting viewpoint on the importance of collaboration in raising small children. Human beings as a species are not raised in isolation but communally as people have various important family connections in their lives. Usually there are many participants, such as parents and grandparents, involved in the upbringing of a child. Such communal style of raising descendants is rare among other species. In fact, many researchers estimate that communal upbringing has enabled the human race to thrive as the mother and the child have received help and support from the community. Thus, the importance of mutual support and communal character of children's upbringing should not be underestimated (Rotkirch, 2014, pp. 13, 15). Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2011, p. 77–78) also points out that across the world where traditional lifestyles still prevail, shared care is the rule. It is beneficial for children to be cared by all members of the community, and in many indigenous cultures alloparenting is a common practice.

The tradition of communal upbringing is important to remember when e.g. examining the professionalisation process of ECEC; although ECEC is an institutionalised form of raising and educating children, it does not exist in isolation from the basic principles of human life. Moreover, collaboration also extends beyond the relationships between ECEC professionals. Rodd (2013, p. 221) notes that quality learning environments for young children require a strong connection between ECEC professionals and children's families. Engaging families by welcoming and respecting everyone is important, and encouraging dialogue with families may offer alternative perspectives on children. Altogether, ECEC professionals have numerous stakeholders to interact with; colleagues and children's families, but also e.g. other professionals from healthcare and school.

2.2.3 Multi-disciplinary teamwork

The ECEC work in Finland is based on multi-disciplinary teamwork where usually the three-employee modelled team is formed from a teacher(s) with one or two

child nurses. The team is responsible for the care, nurture, and education of a child group in cooperation with children's parents. (Karila & Kupila, 2010, p. 25; Ranta et al., 2023, p. 160.) Multi-disciplinary teamwork seems to be common in other countries as well. For example Trodd & Dickerson (2019, p. 357) state that ECEC workforce comprises professionals with various backgrounds in many European countries. There is a great variety in professional titles, but three main categories for grouping these by responsibilities may be recognised as educational, care or auxiliary tasks. Similarly, Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 137) notes that there are huge variations in the ECEC services particularly when it comes to analysing workforce requirements. Moreover, Osgood (2010, p. 120) also discusses how heterogenous workforce in ECEC creates confusion about what ECEC precisely encompasses.

Multi-disciplinary teamwork in the Finnish ECEC context may be regarded as an ideal, but also as a challenge (Kangas et al., p. 83; Ahonen, 2023, p. 16). Generally, ECEC professionals agree that high quality ECEC has its foundation on well-functioning teamwork (Ahonen, 2023, p. 16). Multi-disciplinary teamwork may be considered as a solution for complex problems ECEC professionals face, as professionals with training from different disciplines (i.e. early childhood pedagogy, social pedagogy and child nursing) may contribute their specific expertise to shared problem-solving (Karila & Kinos, 2012, p. 58).

Currently the ECEC professionals indeed have various educational backgrounds and different professional titles. There are such professional groups as child nurses, ECEC teachers, ECEC social pedagogues, ECEC special teachers and assistants. Moreover, professionals from different generations perceive ECEC work somewhat differently, and this may influence their pedagogical ideals and goals. In addition to variances in educational backgrounds and generation, professionals naturally possess individual personal characteristics and experiences. Thus, professionals have various perceptions e.g. about childhood, and ideas about children's best interests may differ. (Ek, 2022, pp. 48–49; Karila & Kupila, 2010, p. 21.) Moreover, as there is shortage of qualified personnel (particularly of ECEC teachers) in many parts of Finland (see e.g. Karila et al., 2017, p. 97) many positions are filled with unqualified employees. This again poses more challenges

to mutual understanding and achieving shared goals in a child group, as there may not be common language shared by professionals working in the ECEC field.

There is a lot of research upon teamwork in general, but not that much in the context of ECEC. However, existing literature implies that there is strong evidence from various studies that functionality of a team is crucial. Therefore, this aspect of ECEC work should gain more attention. The functionality of a team affects employees' well-being at work, and consequently has an impact on the emotional atmosphere in a child group. This in turn may have consequences on children's learning experiences, interrelationships, and behaviour. (Ranta et al., 2023, p. 159; Ahonen, 2023, p. 18.) Unfortunately, teamwork is somewhat sensitive topic in the ECEC context, and it often evokes intensive feelings among employees. Therefore, employees are sometimes reluctant to discuss dissenting opinions, although a culture of open discussion would benefit the functionality of a team. (Ranta et al., 2023, p. 160.)

2.3 Reflective practices and communication in ECEC

In recent years, it has been recognised that there is a need to develop the ability to evaluate professionals' own current practices in ECEC. Reflective practices involve thinking and talking about what is done and why, and over time, this enables the professionals to see their perceptions, values and beliefs more clearly. Engaging in self-reflection honestly may be uncomfortable, even emotionally painful, but worthwhile as it not only permits improving practices but also supports empathy towards feelings of others. (Lindon & Trodd, 2016.) Salminen (2020, p. 8), however, warns not to rely too much on professional educator's self-reflection as the solution to improve quality of education as then society's structural boundary conditions may be ignored.

Different values and beliefs become visible in everyday ECEC work. This results from professionals' different generational, educational and other personal backgrounds. If the professionals' views differ greatly, it is difficult to strive towards common goals. Therefore, it is important to discuss and search for shared vision

and concepts. (Ek, 2022, p. 53.) Similarly, Ranta et al. (2022, p. 22) note that communication is vital for effective teamwork. However, the personnel in day care centres seldom have the opportunity to discuss together without having children around. This increases the risk of misunderstandings. (Venninen, 2007, p. 23; Ranta et al., 2023, p. 172.) Communication is obviously regarded as an essential element for well-functioning teamwork in ECEC. But even if there is time available for discussing about values and beliefs, the discussion becomes fruitful only if professionals are aware of them. Reflexivity is here the key.

Apart from Lindon and Trodd's (2016) contribution, there is not much literature about reflexive processes among ECEC professionals as a group. Therefore, in this section many sources are concentrated on teachers, but I assume that the same principles may be applied to all ECEC professionals at least to some extent. To begin with, Saracho (1988, p. 53) points out that the focus in teaching expertise has shifted first from teacher's personal characteristics to teacher performance. And later on, the focus has been on teacher's thought processes. Saracho (1988, p. 54) continues that teaching is a creative process, and it cannot be carried out mechanically with one model. Similarly, Maaranen et al. (2016, p. 89) state that reflective teacher education has been a global trend in many teacher education programmes for several decades, although a consensus has not been reached on what is meant by reflection and where it should lead.

2.3.1 Reflexivity, professionalism and PPTs

Reflection is regarded in many studies as a marker of high standard professionalism, as critical analysis and evaluation of everyday work practices enable necessary improvements to be made (Karila & Kupila, 2010, p. 14). Ek (2022, p. 155) considers that practicing deep reflection about work is a key element in ECEC professionalism as it enables detecting and evaluating educational activities with deeper understanding. Whereas Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 138) in fact suggests that the main feature of professionalism is the ability to implement scientific knowledge towards solving current problems by using reflective ability. Self-reflection is essential also as professional educators may become complacent in

their practice, and thus can unknowingly fall into habits that are not optimal (Kremenitzer, 2005, p. 3). With reflection, unconscious and unthought habits can be uncovered (Nolan & Molla, 2018, p. 264), and it is also a means for connecting theory and practice (Ribaeus, Enochsson, & Löfdahl Hultman, 2020, p. 4).

Reflective practices are obviously connected to professionalism in educational field as a whole. But furthermore, reflective practices are linked specifically with PPTs. For instance Männikkö and Husu (2019, p. 127) estimate that reflective practices are closely linked to teachers' PPTs. Reflection enables teachers to make their beliefs explicit and available for examination. Thus, reflecting is an integral part of the teaching process. Altogether, Männikkö and Husu (2019, p. 127) consider that teachers' reflections may be regarded as systematic ways of thinking, and they consequently develop their PPTs.

2.3.2 Reflexivity and dialogue

Many of the aspects discussed in previous chapters describe how essential reflection is for teacher's professionalism. ECEC, however, is distinctively different from teaching profession in school environment as classroom teachers usually work individually whereas ECEC is fundamentally based on teamwork. Therefore, in ECEC the reflective practices constitute an integral part of well-functioning teamwork, as professionals need to be aware of their beliefs and then communicate about them with each other. Moreover, Kangas et al. (2021, p. 11) point out that different theoretical conceptions and values may cause biases unless they are critically and dialogically considered. Thus, dialogue is needed among ECEC professionals.

Dialogue is an ancient form of communication, most notably renowned perhaps by Socrates (Heikkilä & Heikkilä, 2001, p. 61). It can be described as negotiation where all stakeholders have their own voice (Karila & Kupila, 2010, p. 14). Additionally, dialogue is an important mechanism that allows new knowledge to emerge, when a diverse team of experts engage in exchange of thoughts and settle differences of opinion (Tsoukas, 2009). However, a true dialogue is not

easily reached. According to Heikkilä & Heikkilä (2001, p. 9) dialogue always begins within a person, and everyone must first work with his/her own thinking processes, preferably with the aid of others. In that sense, self-reflection is the starting point for a true dialogue.

Nonaka (1995, as cited in Roman, 2005, p. 18) states that dialogue is a means that enables transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. In dialogue, people can exchange opinions, integrate them into their own thinking, and create shared meanings (Roman, 2005, p. 19). Roman (2005, p. 40) explains that the purpose of dialogue is to expose the incoherence of our thought. Therefore, dialogue can be considered as an exploration. Subsequently, Heikkilä and Heikkilä (2001, p. 20) note that everyone has his/her own inner ecology, a web of thoughts and emotions, according to which one behaves. In other words, there is always a logic behind all actions. With open dialogue, these logics may become explicit and mutual understanding becomes possible. Maintaining and fostering dialogue requires not just self-reflection but also respecting all opinions. Heikkilä and Heikkilä (2001, p. 78) conclude that when people with different age and educational backgrounds in an organization engage in dialogue, all opinions need to be treated as equal. Otherwise, if certain views are disregarded, dialogue ends.

Dialogue is necessary in ECEC field particularly as the professionalism debate has been ongoing basically for many decades. Philosopher Martin Buber emphasises tireless dialogue as a solution for any possible conflicts (Morgan & Guilherme, 2014, p. 25). The term dialogue in Buber's philosophy refers to a unique kind of immediacy and connection between two beings who are not intending to influence each other (Gordon, 2011, p. 210). When people can see each other as fellow *Thous* instead of *Others*, they can seek points that they have in common and share, and hence, conflicts can be defused. (Morgan & Guilherme, 2014, pp. 41–42.)

Dialogical attitude is noteworthy also because ECEC professionals are role models for the children they raise. Martin Buber accentuates dialogical education as he considers the purpose of education to be the cultivation of *character*. Thus, in his opinion, the main task in education is to raise children who are able to live

humanely and in social peace and harmony (Morgan & Guilherme, 2014, p. 56). Consequently, in ECEC genuine dialogue could ease the arising tensions, and ultimately, foster a healthy atmosphere that improves the well-being of both children and adults alike in ECEC.

3 Personal practical theory (PPT)

Personal practical theory (PPT) is a concept that is not easy to define. There are various terms used to describe somewhat similar ideas. Levin and He (2008, p. 55) illustrate that for instance Elbaz (1981) coined the term practical knowledge to describe how teacher's actions are guided by rules of practice, practical principles, and images. Moreover, Levin and He (2008, p. 55) add that such terms as practical theory, practical reasoning, theory of action, schema, practical philosophy, practical arguments, and personal practical knowledge have been used by other researchers to describe similar structures of knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Obviously, the concept of practical theory is not yet used systematically (Niemi, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2015, p. 599), and therefore the research on PPTs is fairly young. In this thesis I use the term personal practical theory (PPT) that was introduced by Cornett, Yeotis, and Terwillider in 1990 (Levin & He, 2008, p. 56). With the term personal practical theory, I refer to a concept where professional's personal knowledge is enriched with personal values, beliefs and understandings that guide the professional's actions in the ECEC context. Moreover, Palojärvi, Mård-Miettinen, Koivula and Rutanen (2021, p. 125) suggest that aims, ideals and pedagogical tact may be considered as ingredients of PPT. Pedagogical tact refers to teacher's skill to take into consideration children, their needs and experiences and consequently flexibly adjust own actions according to situation.

Several researchers have concluded that teachers' actions are ultimately guided by their practical knowledge that is derived from experiences, and their personal beliefs and theories (Levin & He, 2008, p. 56). Therefore, the concept of personal practical theory (PPT) has become a focus of interest for many scholars in the educational field. Due to scarce material on ECEC, most of the theoretical background in this thesis is related to school environment instead of ECEC. Research on PPTs has concentrated so far mainly on school teachers and teacher students, and research on PPTs in ECEC environments has been minimal (Palojärvi et al., 2021, p. 126). Similarly, Rodd (1999, p. 22) observes that there is little empirical data concerning the articulated philosophies that guide the work of ECEC professionals.

3.1 PPT and professionalism are intertwined

In the previous chapters I have discussed some aspects of professionalism in ECEC. PPT and professionalism in ECEC may not seem closely related, but I have concluded that in fact they are intertwined. Rodd (1999, p. 21) for instance states that the key for creating high quality early childhood programs is the development of a professional philosophy. Therefore, acknowledging and evaluating the underlying values and beliefs among ECEC professionals is imperative. Rodd (1999, p. 21) continues that a philosophy of ECEC refers to professionals' beliefs about children's learning and development, appropriate pedagogical decisions and professionals' aims that guide their actions. Consequently, in a professional philosophy all of these should be based upon an appropriate theoretical model.

However, professional philosophies as the basis for decision making in everyday practices have been rarely identified by ECEC professionals. This is problematic, as a clearly defined philosophy of ECEC is the key to professionalism in ECEC. (Rodd, 1999, p. 22.) Therefore, it is essential that all ECEC professionals comprehend the connection between professionalism, quality, and a philosophy of ECEC as the foundation for successful ECEC services. Furthermore, Rodd (1999, p. 22) argues that the importance of educational philosophy has been recognised throughout history by such authors as Plato, Dewey, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori. Altogether, Rodd (1999, p. 22) considers philosophy as the core element of ECEC by stating that "In reality, philosophy should be in the forefront of every early childhood professional's thinking, with decisions and actions in day to day work with young children being active expressions and endorsement of professional values."

Philosophy as the basis of all educational work is recognised also by Jantunen and Ojanen (2011, p. 6) when they point out that the whole essence of pedagogy is the interaction between people – both children and adults alike. Jantunen and Ojanen (2011, p. 6) continue that for some reason there is not enough discussion about the values that lie beneath all education although they should be at the

centre of attention. Altogether, Jantunen and Ojanen (2011, p. 8) state that educational work should form a constant interaction between theory and practice, where values play a key role.

3.2 Theory and practice meet in PPTs

PPTs are dynamic by nature. They evolve and develop as professionals gain practical experiences, reflect them, acquire theoretical knowledge, additional training and engage in collegial interaction. Moreover, PPTs are influenced by context, e.g. the child group and situation, where the professionals work. (Palojärvi et al., 2021, p. 125.) PPTs are often tacit and constructed on reflection of experience. Theoretical knowledge is not opposite to PPT, but instead they complement each other, and together act as a framework for teachers in planning, interacting, adapting, and reflecting their teaching. (Maaranen et al., 2016, pp. 81–82.) Moreover, PPT is directed towards practice and tested in practice. Thus, PPT is both realistic and idealistic framework for professionals in education as there are always some ideals and goals that the professionals wish to achieve with their everyday actions. (Pitkäniemi, 2010, p. 160.)

PPTs consist of various elements. Stenberg, Karlsson, Pitkäniemi and Maaranen (2014, p. 214) note that teacher's PPT is comprised of a complex set of understanding. One particularly important element in a PPT is the set of personal beliefs professional possesses. Stenberg et al. (2014, p. 214) point out that because personal beliefs are subjective, they are rarely open to evaluation and criticism. In the following paragraphs I describe how self-reflection is the key to acknowledging PPTs, and thus opens them up for evaluation.

3.3 Importance of acknowledging PPTs

'Real problems arise from self-deception, never from knowing yourself' says Lindqvist (1990, p. 36). With this idea the late ethical philosopher and theologian Martti Lindqvist referred to the notion that knowing one's deepest motives and

shadows, is essential for all human professionals. Lindqvist (1990, p. 43) continues that training seems to be suitable method for learning the factual contents of a profession. However, it is delusional to imagine that it would be sufficient in order to handle everything that the profession entails. Similarly, teacher education researchers have pointed out that teachers are aware of themselves only to some extent (Arndt, Urban, Murray, Smith, Swadener & Ellegaard, 2018, p. 98), and acknowledging PPTs enables professional development (Männikkö & Husu, 2019, p. 127). Only when PPTs have become explicit it becomes possible to evaluate them in relation to the aims and objectives of educational activities (Pitkäniemi, 2010, p. 163).

Philosophy and values are clearly linked with PPTs on many levels. Jantunen (2011, p. 131) for instance sees that in this current 'vacuum of values' it sometimes feels desperate to defend the value of childhood. With this notion Jantunen refers to the neoliberal values that prevail in our current society. Therefore, the professional faces a dilemma: if in ECEC one defends 'soft values' and attempts to raise children with humane approach, will the children in future cope in a competition driven society? (Jantunen, 2011, p. 131). Värri (2011, p. 247) in turn considers that the challenges of our time are fundamentally pedagogical in nature. The relationship between an individual and society must be redefined in this multicultural civilisation where ecological threats are continuously present. Moreover, Värri (2011, p. 248) sees that the fundamental goal in education is to offer hope and trust on the meaningfulness of life for children. Clearly, the values that professional educators possess should be identified and examined with more depth.

Values form one dimension of PPTs that need to be acknowledged, but another dimension is consisted of the beliefs professional educators possess. Beliefs can be related to e.g. morals, politics, efficacy or social issues. According to Stenberg et al. (2014, p, 207) beliefs may influence teachers' professional decisions and actions. Similarly, Cornett (1990, p. 249) claims that individual teachers implement curriculums in manners that are consistent with their personal beliefs. Accordingly, as ECEC work is fairly autonomous by nature, it is important to examine to what extent professionals agree with the principles stated in the National Core Curriculum for ECEC.

3.4 Korthagen's onion model as a framework for reflecting PPTs

Fred Korthagen is a professor emeritus whose academic fields are the professional development of teachers and teacher educators (Korthagen, 2023). He has developed an onion model that illustrates the levels of reflection in a visual schema (see Figure 1). In this study I used Korthagen's onion model as a framework for finding the essential elements of professionals' PPTs in ECEC. As the topic, PPT in ECEC, has not been much studied previously, there were not readymade questions for me to utilise. Thus, I had to formulate my interview questions by myself. However, I found Korthagen's onion model useful in this task, and I created my questions by utilising loosely the dimensions described in Korthagen's model (see corresponding questions in Appendix 1).

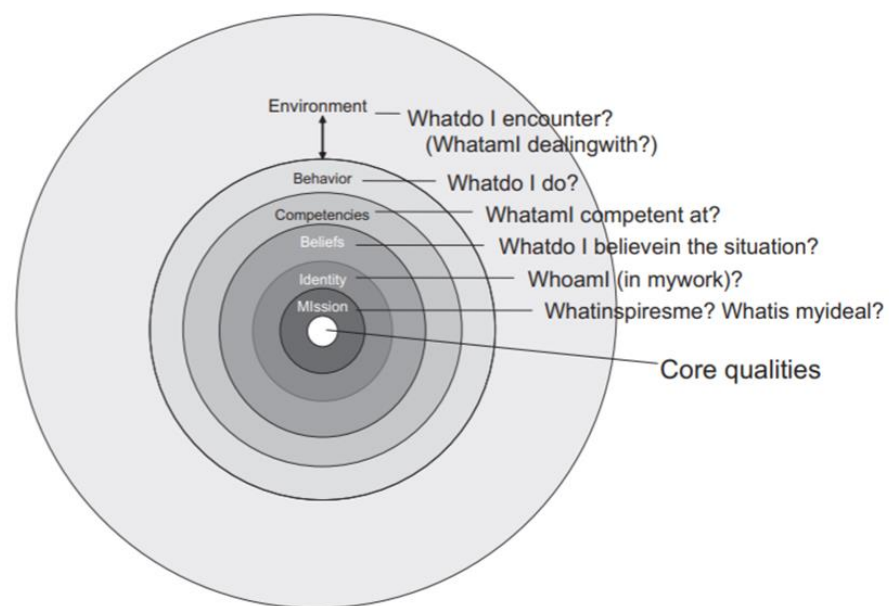


Figure 1. Korthagen's onion model of levels in reflection (Korthagen, 2017, p. 395)

In the middle of the onion there are *Core qualities*, that are somewhat changeless over time. The second layer is *Mission*, which is about what inspires a person and what ideals does the person possess. Third layer is *Identity*, and it deals with such issues as who the person is at work. The fourth layer constitutes of *Beliefs*,

and it is about what does a person believe in a given situation. Fifth layer is called *Competencies*, and it consists of person's perception what she/he is competent at. Sixth layer is called *Behaviour* and seventh *Environment*. The questions I was most interested in were concentrated on the most inner layers, although some elements from the outer layers were also impinged on. The layers are somewhat overlapping, and as such to be interpreted only as guiding tools for self-reflection.

Korthagen (2017, pp. 387–388) states that there is a massive amount of research indicating that a huge gap exists between theory and practice among teachers. Consequently, teacher's behaviour is unconsciously guided by emotional, motivational, and cognitive dimensions instead of theoretical knowledge. Therefore, reflection on these dimensions is crucial. Korthagen (2017, p. 389) attempts to integrate practice and theory by giving the professional educator a more central position by suggesting that the professional and personal aspects are intertwined in educational actions. In addition, Korthagen (2017, p. 391) reminds that three dimensions are always influenced by the social context. Therefore, professional educators cannot be viewed as purely autonomous specialists in their field but instead as members of specific circumstances and settings. This is particularly important notion when considering how can a pre-planned, fixed curriculum be implemented in various educational settings. Korthagen (2017, p. 391) therefore claims that teacher education programmes should acknowledge these inconvenient truths and re-evaluate the rational approach to teacher learning.

In the previous sections I have demonstrated that professional educators are often unconscious of their own behaviour patterns and their sources. Therefore, reflection is an indispensable element in professional learning. In fact, regular reflection has become a strong indicator of professionalism as it enables learning from experience, and hence improvements in future behaviours. (Korthagen, 2017, p. 392.) In addition, Korthagen (2017, p. 395) criticises the competency-based approach in describing the qualities of good teachers. Instead, Korthagen (2017, p. 396) suggests the focus should be on teacher's core qualities and her/his awareness of them.

4 Research task and research questions

The research task of this study is to describe, analyse and interpret personal practical theories (PPTs) ECEC professionals have.

The purpose of this study is to describe what kind of ideas, values and beliefs ECEC professionals have that constitute their PPTs. Many of these thoughts may be even unconscious, but yet they have an impact on the decisions professionals make in their daily work. Thereby exposing these hidden beliefs and values is important. This study has two main goals. Firstly, it aims to discover are there some common themes among ECEC professionals that can be found in their PPTs, and that all ECEC professionals could accept as an integral part of their professionalism. Secondly, professionals may have even quite different views and beliefs, and if this is not recognised, misunderstandings and conflicts are likely to occur. Therefore, this study aims to expose the various views, values and beliefs ECEC professionals possess. Ultimately exposing these ideas may improve open discussion and dialogue between professionals about these values and beliefs. Thus, **the research problem** in this study is to examine and describe PPT as an integral element of professionalism in ECEC – what does it constitute of and how does it develop on a personal level?

The more detailed **research questions** are:

1. *What kind of personal practical theories (PPTs) do ECEC professionals have?*
2. *Are there common themes in these PPTs (regardless of educational / age / etc backgrounds)?*
3. *In what way do PPTs develop among ECEC professionals?*

5 Research work

The philosophical foundation affects all aspects of the research process, and therefore the ontological and epistemological positions the qualitative researcher possesses should be acknowledged. As the qualitative researcher is after meaning, for instance the topic selection, question formulation, and research design are impacted by researcher's personal understandings. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, pp. 4–5.) Consequently, Twining, Heller, Nussbaum and Tsai (2017, p. A7) instruct qualitative researchers to discuss in their reports their personal biases, values, assumptions, and other relevant interests that may influence the research. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 69) suggest reporting qualitative research in first-person active tense as preferable. Thereby, in this section I describe the phases and methodological choices I made in first-person tense. In the following paragraphs the decisions I made as a researcher are described in detail, and the issues concerning positionality are examined. Moreover, as the topic of this thesis emphasises the multitudinous nature of PPTs, it seems highly relevant to stress the position from which I as a researcher have interpreted the gathered data.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 38) note that there are no correct paradigms or worldviews but instead various ways of seeing the reality. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 37) the decisive measure is to acknowledge the philosophical assumptions researcher has concerning the nature of social world. Indeed, self-awareness of the researcher is quintessential from the perspective of credibility of qualitative inquiry (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utrainen & Kyngäs, 2014, p. 4). My paradigmatic approach could be described as humanistic one that recognises the interconnectedness of all beings and all phenomena. I believe that the cooperation, personal growth through self-reflection and compassion lie at the core of all human work. This worldview of mine undeniably impacts the interpretations in this thesis. In addition, this topic is important to me personally as I have been working in the ECEC field for about 20 years now. My educational background is perhaps a little bit unusual as I have completed two different degrees that qualify me to work as an ECEC teacher. My first degree was from

the discipline of social pedagogue (Bachelor of Social Services and Health Care) from Diaconia University of Applied Sciences in 2006. And my second degree was from the discipline of early childhood pedagogue (Bachelor of Arts / Teacher in Early Childhood Education and Care) from University of Helsinki in 2012. Therefore, it is easy for me to comprehend what kind of expertise these different disciplines may offer to the ECEC field.

Moreover, this thesis can be described as constructivist and dialogical. Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018, p. 124) discuss how in constructivist approach researchers attempt to gain increased knowledge about their area of interest by interpreting how the subjects understand and interact within a particular social context axiology. Epistemologically inquirer and inquired are merged into a single entity as the findings are created in the process of interaction between these both participants. (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 115). The interviews I conducted were dialogical to some extent as the respondents were familiar to me and interview situations reminded ordinary conversations. Thus, I consider this thesis also dialogical in its nature.

5.1 Research strategy and design

This research has a qualitative approach and can be considered to represent phenomenography as a design.

5.2 Methods for data collection

The data in this research was acquired by conducting semi-structured interviews. I chose interview as a method due to several reasons. Firstly, my research questions were broad, and I was seeking to gain understanding on a relatively little examined phenomenon. Secondly, interview as a method was the most suitable for this study as practical theories are very personal and not easy to grasp. Thirdly, interviewing seemed as an easy way to gather data as the respondents reserved the time for my interview, but they did not have to do any other preparations beforehand (e.g. write their perceptions about education or evaluate their professional practices). Therefore, it served as ethically suitable method but also the most likely method for receiving participation to my study. Sometimes it can be difficult to get people to attend to studies as they require time and effort from their participants. For example, Levin & He (2008, p. 57) collected written PPTs from 94 postbaccalaureate teacher candidates. Personally, I have also written similar reflective texts during my teacher studies, and I know how time-consuming effort that is, and thus not a very convenient option to gain data. In addition, in this study I particularly aspired to study the PPTs of professionals with different educational backgrounds. Therefore, the most suitable method to obtain such data was to personally contact possible respondents and ask for an interview.

5.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews seemed appropriate form of interviewing for my study as they enabled individual respondents to talk freely about what they regarded as important. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask certain set of questions in a naturally flowing conversation. This is beneficial as it enables the conversation to proceed into unexpected directions, and consequently new topics that are relevant may arise. Thus, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee may be characterised as reciprocal. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, pp. 102, 105.) Specific research questions are covered in semi-structured interviews, but these questions are employed by the researcher as guiding tools, and as such are not all necessarily asked in every interview. Altogether, the semi-

structured interview situation should be open for following the respondents' lead. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 128.) I had created a list of interview questions (see Appendix 1) that were loosely inspired by Korthagen's (2017, p. 395) onion model of levels in reflection. Few questions I had formulated based on my literature review on professionalism, and one question I decided to ask from participants on the basis of my first interview, as the idea for that question came up during that interview situation.

5.2.2 Sampling procedure

The sample in my study consisted of nine (9) respondents who were familiar to me beforehand from my own networks. This was due partly to convenience, as respondents were relatively easy to find in this manner. I chose respondents on the basis of having as wide range of professionals as possible. The main criterion was that the respondents were trained and qualified to work as ECEC professionals. I contacted 10 ECEC professionals personally, and nine of them agreed to participate in my study.

As my paradigm in this study was dialogical and multidisciplinary in its approach, I wanted to have an equal representation of professionals of different educational (disciplinary) backgrounds as respondents. Therefore, I interviewed three professionals from the three major professional groups that operate in the ECEC field in Finland at the moment. Thus, I conducted interviews with: three professionals with a degree from pedagogical training and are labelled in Table 1 as ECEC teachers (i.e. university or previous kindergarten teacher training), three with a degree from social pedagogue (i.e. Bachelor of Social Science), and three with a degree as a qualified child nurse.

Moreover, as age may affect the PPTs of ECEC professionals, I wanted to hear the perceptions of professionals of different ages. Therefore, the respondents were chosen age-wise as visualised in Table 2. All respondents were female and

native Finnish speakers, and the interviews were conducted in Finnish. The respondents had work experience within the range of 2 years to 30 years, and they lived in the capital area or middle-sized towns in different parts of Finland.

Table 1. Respondents according to professional title

Professional title	Participants
Child nurse	3
Bachelor of Social Science	3
ECEC teacher	2
ECEC teacher and day care centre manager	1
Total	9

Table 2. Respondents' age distribution and work experience

Age group	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-64
Participants (N=9)	1	3	1	4
Average work experience (years)	2	11	13	25

Total work experience years of respondents: 148

5.2.3 Interview situations

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person (N=7) or by phone (N=2) in Finnish. The majority (N=5) of interviews that were conducted in person were carried out in libraries' meeting rooms that I had reserved beforehand for this purpose. One of the in-person interviews was carried out at respondent's home, and one at the respondent's workplace. Two interviews were carried out via telephone, as this enabled the respondents to discuss with me regardless of long distance or of convenience regarding personal schedules. I had offered all respondents the possibility to participate via telephone partly because of conven-

ience as I aspired to cause as little burden as possible to the respondents. Moreover, during autumn 2022 the COVID issues were still current, and therefore I wanted to emphasise the flexibility in possibilities for participating in my study.

Although many interviews are nowadays conducted via phone, there are some possible challenges in interviews mediated in this manner. Interviews conducted via telephone may lack the interpersonal contact and conversational flexibility that in-person interviews enable (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 578). In addition, when interviews are not happening face-to-face, paying attention to such valuable pieces of information as gestures and eye contact, is not possible (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 99). I found, however, that the interviews conducted by phone were very rewarding. Possibly because I knew the respondents, interviewing via telephone seemed very natural and I also learned about technicalities involved in interviewing by telephone.

I had formulated 13 interview questions partly in relation to Korthagen's onion model, such as "What is essential in ECEC?", "What does a child learn in ECEC?", and "How did you come to think this way?" (see Appendix 1). The questions were broad, and acted more as themes that guided the conversation in interview situations. Some questions were not asked from all respondents as the same issues arose in association with some other question. Moreover, the questions were not asked always in the same order as some issues came up once the respondent spoke about something else. Thus, the order of questions varied to some extent, but basically, I asked the same questions from all respondents. I did not offer the interview questions to the respondents beforehand as I wanted to avoid possible preparation for the interviews. In this study I aimed to discover the PPTs of respondents, and therefore my interest was not in the commonly accepted professional ideas and principles in ECEC, but instead the genuine opinions the respondents possessed.

I conducted the interviews in a period of time from October 2022 to January 2023. The lengths of the interviews varied from 38 minutes to 99 minutes, average length being 66 minutes. However, as I knew all the respondents personally in some way, the interviews were quite relaxed and informal. Subsequently, due to

the relaxed atmosphere of the interview situations, occasionally the discussions strayed a little bit off topic. Thus, the lengthiest interviews contained some material that was not so relevant regarding my research questions. Moreover, some respondents replied in a wordy manner, whereas others were more concise in their answers. The respondents expressed their ideas openly, and they seemed to be glad that someone was interested in their opinions.

In the beginning of the interview, I reminded that there were no correct answers, but instead the purpose of the interview was to expose the views respondents had at that current moment. As an interviewer, I tried to listen as actively as possible. Sometimes the respondents asked my opinion on the topics, and then I had to also reflect my own thoughts and discuss them. Therefore, the interviews were reflective and dialogical by nature. The dialogical approach was apparent for instance in the very beginning of my interviewing phase when the first interview guided me to develop one additional interview question for the coming interviews. Similarly, Brinkmann (2018, p. 579) points out the dialogical potentials for knowledge production which are inherent in human discussions. In constructivist paradigm the knowledge is produced dialogically. Therefore, the somewhat reciprocal nature of the interviews seemed as a justified epistemological choice.

5.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was applied to data as an analytical framework, and more specifically reflexive approach to TA as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2023; 2021; 2012). TA seemed suitable method for analysis as I was looking for shared meanings in the data, and my data was descriptive in its nature. In general, TA as a method involves searching and identifying common threads that run across the set of interviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013, p. 400). The analysis followed the suggested footsteps by Braun and Clarke (2012, pp. 60–69; 2023): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and later reviewing these potential themes. Ultimately the themes were defined and named to their final forms, and analytic narrative was weaved together in relation to relevant literature. However, Braun and

Clarke (2021, pp. 329, 331; 2023) emphasise that the fluid and contingent process is crucial within TA, and therefore the phases are not intended to be followed rigidly as a set of 'rules'.

After the interviews, I wrote immediately initial impressions and thoughts about the key concepts the respondents had expressed. I also wrote the initial remarks and basic information (age, work experience etc.) immediately to a matrix that was convenient for having a general overview on the interviews. In other words, the analysis process began immediately after the interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2017, p. 7) remind that anonymity of respondents is crucial to ensure confidentiality in research. Therefore, I labelled all respondents (R) as R1 to R9 chronologically from the beginning of analysis process. Impressions and notes I wrote were such as:

Note: Eagerness to learn new and develop professionally, strong sense of justice, responding to children's needs and planning activities in ECEC accordingly. Respondent expresses pride about own profession, learned a lot from colleagues. What is quality in ECEC work? Is learning the main focus in ECEC or caring and joy? How do society's neoliberal values affect ECEC work? (R4)

The second phase of the analysis was the transcription of the audiotaped interviews the following day. I used the 'transcribe' function in Microsoft Word Office for initial transcriptions with the first two interviews, and then read the transcripts carefully through. However, I soon discarded this strategy as there were so many mistakes in the transcribed text that had to be manually corrected. Thus, the following interviews were transcribed completely manually. The transcripts were written in Calibri, font 11, with single-line spacing, and saved as Microsoft Word Office document files. Altogether there was audio recorded material for 594 minutes. The corresponding transcripts ranged from 7 to 17 pages, average amount being 12.3 pages. After transcribing the data, I deleted the audio files in order to safeguard the anonymity of the respondents. Altogether there was 111 pages of transcribed material. Because the data material was so vast, I decided to utilise computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) ATLAS.ti in managing my transcribed data. Using software as part of analysis can

be beneficial as it aids in organising and grouping similar ideas or themes (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 39). Similarly, ATLAS.ti was particularly useful in adding notes, memoing the data, and in the coding phase. However, as my data was in Finnish language, I did not create possible charts to visualise my analysis process to this thesis as this is written in English.

5.3.1 Coding

In reflexive TA the observations from the data are conceptualised first by codes that are analytic units developed by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 340). Alhojailan (2012, p. 43) explains that coding aims to create connections among different parts of the data. Accordingly, after the transcription of the data, I familiarised myself further with the data by reading and re-reading the transcribed texts. Subsequently I began to recognise items that seemed relevant regarding my research questions, and thus I generated initial codes from the data. They were such as:

Initial codes: possibility to make a difference or sense of meaning; giving support to all kinds of children; equity; justice; collaboration is the key; teamwork is everything; professionalism = ability to reflect?; balance in activities (all-round development of children, not just academic skills); goals in the big picture (why we do certain things); giving tools for the future life for children; professional role; participation and agency; social and emotional skills; positive self-image and self-esteem; happiness; friends and meaningful relationships; individual needs and attention; constant learning; ability to change; flexibility; everyday skills (learning for here and now, not just future); personality; time and being present; nurture and safety; group (how to manage it); improvising; acknowledging risks; anticipate situations; legislation and core curriculum; Finnish values; courage to intervene; appreciation of different skills and personalities; children's joy; willingness to help.

After the first coding phase I had formulated 291 rough initial codes. Thereafter I reviewed these preliminary codes, merged some of them, and deleted the ones

that seemed irrelevant regarding my research questions. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, p. 89) advice that themes and patterns can be discovered from the data by connecting codes. After the initial coding I used code group manager function in ATLAS.ti, and clustered codes into 34 groups. Gradually I began to form a narrative from my data, and thus, I generated broader themes by clustering codes. Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 341) describe themes as patterns of shared meaning, which are united by a main idea or concept. In other words, themes may draw together data that at first might seem disparate.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 47) note that the point of theoretical saturation of a sample is reached if the researcher learns nothing new from new individuals. However, in qualitative inquiry there is no commonly accepted sample size as the optimal sample size is dependent on the richness of data as well as the purpose of the study (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). My data did not saturate either in that sense as multiple perspectives and ideas arose from the data throughout the process. The challenge in the analysis process was in fact to decide what to focus on and what to report. Moreover, in reflexive TA the aim is to generate a narrative from the data instead of a comprehensive summary. As Vaismoradi et al. (2013, p. 403) describe, the analysis process should be recursive with frequent reviews, and in the end should result a story where the researcher discusses about the data in relation to the research questions. Altogether, the data analysis process I conducted was not linear where one phase followed the other, but instead a creative continuum where I juggled the concepts and ideas that emerged from the data and the literature for several months.

5.3.2 Themes

The analysis is often presented in a categorization matrix (Elo et al., 2014, p. 2), and thus, the main themes generated from my data are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. A summary of core themes

Main research problem	Research questions	Themes
Personal practical theory (PPT) as an integral element of professionalism in ECEC – what does it constitute of and how does it develop?	1. What kind of personal practical theories (PPTs) do ECEC professionals have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘paradoxes and complexities’ • advocates of children • guardians for the unforeseen future
	2. Are there common themes in these PPTs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘teamwork is everything’ • ethics as core quality • interpersonal skills form the base for professional identity
	3. In what way do PPTs develop among ECEC professionals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continuous learning (collaboratively) • self-reflection and critical thinking as tools of professional development

6 Research results and their interpretation

The answers to my research questions vary in terms of richness and extent. Therefore, I discuss them beginning from the most straightforward one, that being Research question 3: In what way do PPTs develop among ECEC professionals?

6.1 Learning from colleagues and reflective processes

From the data in this study, it became apparent that PPTs and professional identities develop in dialogue with colleagues, particularly in the beginning of career. Respondents expressed that their professional thinking evolved when they gained work experience and learned from everyday situations with children. Some respondents discussed how they learned professional practices from their colleagues that were useful when interacting with children.

Mä tuun sellasesta työharjoittelusta missä mulla oli tosi ihana ohjaaja, joka tarjos mulle juuri nää niinku käytännön tavat toimia. ... Siis ihan oikeesti, silloin must, mä koin et mä opin siis suurimman osan mitä mä oon niinku, silloin must tuli, mä koin et must tuli ammattilainen. [I come from such work placement period, where I had such a wonderful supervisor who offered me the practices on how to act. ... I mean seriously, I felt that then I learnt the most of what I am, then I became a professional]. (R5)

Kokemus on tuonut noi vastaukset aika lailla, mutta myöskin niinkun pitkäaikasimmilta työkavereilta oppinu paljon tätä työtä ajatellen. [Experience has brought these answers quite much, but I have also learned a lot from my long-term colleagues regarding this work]. (R3)

Niinku mallioppimisen kanssa toiselta työkaverilta. Et sit on niitä työkavereita joiden kanssa jokaisen pitäis päästä tekee töitä. ... Mullakin on eräs tiimikaveri, jonka kanssa olen monta vuotta tehnyt töitä, niin hän opettaa mulle tietämättään semmosia luonteenpiirteitä mitä mä oikeesti omaksun vaikka ei mulla oo sillee tarkoituksena et mä tässä haluan oppia häneltä rauhallisuuden lasten kanssa toimittaessa, mut mä alan niinkun tietämättä, niinku matkimaan, varmaan alitajunnassa mä huomaan. [Like model learning from a colleagues. There are those workmates that everyone should have the opportunity to work with. ... Like I have one teammate, with whom I have worked for many years. And she unknowingly teaches me such characteristics of personality that I in fact absorb although that is not my intention that I am trying to learn her calmness when interacting with children. But somehow, I kind of begin to imitate her, subconsciously]. (R6)

Several respondents described how vital it was to discuss with colleagues about practices in ECEC, and solutions to tricky situations with children. Many respond-

ents also expressed that in this profession one is never fully finished and complete, but instead this profession demands continuous learning, and the ability to be flexible. Moreover, some respondents highlighted that training alone does not guarantee professional expertise but instead personality, willingness to be open for new ideas, flexibility, and the values of an employee are more crucial regarding professionalism. Knowledge from work and altogether life experience was also mentioned.

Aina voi oppia uutta. Ja oppiikin. Ikinä ei ole niin sanotusti valmis [You can always learn something new. And you do. You are in a way never finished]. (R2)

Vaikka ihmisellä on se koulutus, niin se ei välttämättä osaa toimia niitten lasten kanssa silleen kasvatuksellisesti, elikkä se koulutus ei oo aina se ratkaiseva asia siinä. ... Vaan tän ihmisen omat arvot, ja lähtökohdat, omassa elämässä. Arvot ja oma elämänkokemus ja ne lähtökohdat, niin ne, et minkälainen se ihminen on, ja mitä ajattelee muista ihmisistä ja just tällöinen onko empatiakykyä ja tällöinen vaikuttaa. [Although an employee has formal training, it does not necessarily mean that the person is competent in acting with children in an educationally appropriate manner, in other words the training is not the crucial factor there. ... Instead, the person's own values and life experience, and what the person is like, how does she think about other people and does she have empathy. These things matter]. (R1)

Ja sitten on ollu paljon sellasia koulutuksia ja ammattikirjallisuutta mitkä sit taas tukee sitä omaa ajatusta tai tavallaan saa sitä, ja sitten on ehkä ollut muutama, semmonen työpari kenen kanssa on pystyny peilaamaan näitä ajatuksia ja juttelee tästä ammatista vähän niinku samalla tasolla, niinku sillä tavalla että et on voinu tuulettaa omia ajatuksia ja kertoo omia mielipiteitä et sit ne omat mielipiteet on ehkä muovautunu siinä matkan varrella. [And then there have been many trainings and professional literature which support my own thinking, or in a way increase it, and then there have been a few colleagues with whom it has been possible to share these thoughts and discuss about this profession on a same level and tell my own opinions. And then my own opinions may have changed along the way]. (R8)

Kyl sitä (työtä) tehään niinku persoonalla ja niinku kyl se et minkälainen sä oot, niin kyl sul on ihan tietynlainen työtapa. [You do the work with your personality, and what you are like, you have accordingly a certain work manner]. (R3)

Persoonallahan sitä suurimmalta osin tehdään. ... Koulutus ei takaa sitä et sä olisit hyvä varhaiskasvattaja. Jotkut jotka on käyny koulut, niinku varhaiskasvatuksen opettajan tai lastenhoitajan koulun niin, välillä ihmettelee et miks hän on päiväkodissa töissä. [You do the work mostly with the personality. ... Training does not guarantee that you would be a good ECEC educator. Some who have completed trainings, such as ECEC teacher or child nurse, well, sometimes you wonder why is she working in a day care centre]. (R6)

Therefore, one answer to research question 3 is professionals' *PPTs develop by learning continuously collaboratively*. Ek (2022, p. 160) also recognises continuous learning as a vital element in ECEC profession as ECEC is interconnected

to the constant changes that take place in society. Pitkäniemi (2010, p. 166) again describes that stimuli for professional development may come from such resources as mentors, educational books and journals, educational research, and colleagues. This notion is in accordance with my findings. However, unfortunately as Venninen (2007, p. 23) points out, team members do not have often enough the opportunity to discuss together. In my data some respondents agreed.

Se on mun mielestä kans oikeestaan aika iso ongelma, missä välissä ehtii keskustelemaan näistä. Ja sit niitä helposti huudellaan siellä lasten yli. [I think actually that it is quite a big problem, that there is not time to discuss about these. And then what easily happens is that employees talk about these when children are around]. (R1)

Another answer to Research question 3 is that *PPTs develop with the aid of self-reflection and critical thinking as tools for professional development*. Throughout the data the respondents expressed self-reflection and critical thinking in their answers. This demonstrated that the respondents had high levels of self-reflection, and autonomous thinking regarding their profession.

Ainakin viikoittain, no kyllä joskus tulee päivittäinkin pohdittua. [At least weekly, well sometimes I reflect daily]. (R2)

Oon ohjannut niitä opiskelijoita ja kun opiskelija yllättäen kysyy jotain sellaista mitä sä et oookkaan ajatellut. ... Sitten itsekin rupee miettimään, että niin joo, että miksiööhän mä muuten teen noin. Ja siellä on saattanut tulla jopa semmoisiakin oivalluksia, että niin että miksi muuten teen niin että eihän mun tarvii. Että mä voisin tehdä sen järkevämminkin. [I have supervised students and when a student suddenly asks something that you have not thought about, then you begin to wonder that indeed, why do I act this way. And then there have been these insights that I don't need to act this way, that I can act in a more sensible way]. (R4)

Et melkein kyl mä joka päivä kun mä töistä läksin niin jos en siinä kotimatalla, niin sitten jossain vaiheessa sit kuitenkin kävi sitä päivää mielessään niinku läpi. Et vitsi se oli kiva tilanne ja se oli niin mukavaa. Tai et miten ihmeessä toikin meni toiseen [naurua], et mites tos olis voinu toimia toisin. [Nearly everyday when I left work, if not on the way home, then at some point during that day I went through the day's course in my mind. That how nice was that one situation or how did that situation go the way it did [laughter], that how I could have acted differently in that situation]. (R8)

Altogether, according to my data, PPTs build on various elements, most notably personality, lived experiences with other people, and training to some extent. PPT develops with training and experience, but willingness to learn new and develop own expertise is more important. This is vital, as Feldman (1992, pp. 17, 34) notices that practical theories can be difficult to change. Self-reflection allows the

professional educator to become aware of possibly problematic pre-judgments that may in fact be harmful. This, according to Männikkö and Husu (2019, p. 127) enables professional educators to adapt their decisions, and hence be a source of professional development. Therefore, one conclusion is that professional training alone is not sufficient marker of professionalism in ECEC.

6.2 Teamwork is everything

Research question 2 was about finding possible common themes in ECEC professionals' PPTs. Due to such small sample size the results generated from my data cannot be generalised. However, I discovered some interesting themes although there was huge variance in the respondents' answers. Firstly, the most substantial notion was how all respondents stressed *the importance of well-functioning teamwork*. Respondents in fact used very similar phrases regarding teamwork and how crucial it is in the ECEC environment. This result is very similar to the findings of e.g. Ahonen (2023) and Ranta et al. (2023).

Se yhteistyö on, sehän on oikeestaan niinkun kaiken a ja o, niinku että se homma toimii. Ni sillonhan, eihän siellä voi ruveta kuka vaan sooloilee omiaan. [Cooperation, that is in fact everything. No-one can work by herself there]. (R1)

Vaan se, että tiimissä asiat on hyvin ja et on toimiva tiimi, niin silloin ne lapsetkin voi hyvin. Et sil on tosi iso merkitys. ... Kukaan ei jaksais tehdä tätä työtä jos se ei toimis. Se vaikuttaa ihan työssä jaksamiseen. Ja jos siel on jotain hullusti, niin se näkyy myös lapsissa heti. [But that things are well in a team and team functions well, then children are also well. So it is really significant. ... No-one would have the energy to do this work if it did not function. Teamwork affects well-being at work. And if something is wrong there, you can see it immediately in the behaviour of children]. (R3)

Verrattuna opettajatyöhön, mun mielestä siis, mä oon kyl nykyään ihan sataprosenttisesti sitä mieltä, että se kun sä käyt niitä asioita läpi ryhmässä niin sä saat siitä paljon enemmän kuin, että sä yksin vaan, kun niinku mietit ja puuhaat niitä hommia. ... Kyllä se tiimityö on niinku ihan a ja o. [Compared to teaching at school, I think nowadays with 100 percent that when you discuss those issues in a group, you get so much more that you would by wondering and working alone ... So teamwork is everything]. (R4)

Kaikilla meillä on jotain annettavaa tälle alalle. ... Sehän täs alassa on kans hienoo et kaikkia voidaan niin sanotusti hyväksikäyttää [naurua], niinku hyödyntää. ... Autetaan niinku tiimeittäin toisiamme, ja tiimeissä, ja siis sehän on niinku a ja o. ... Meitä tarvitaan meitä kaikkia, ja se et sä saat kuulla muitten ajatuksia ja ideoita. Ja et sä uskallat sanoa ääneen et vitsi et tää mietityttää mua, et mä tarviin apua. Ja just se yhteistyö, et ollaan vastaanottavia, ja autetaan toisiamme ja hyödynnetään kaikkien osaamista. [We all have something to offer to this field. ... That is also so wonderful at this field as everyone can

be exploited [laugher], like utilised. ... We help each other in teams and that is like most important. ... We are all needed, and you get to hear the thoughts and ideas of others. And you can express that I really wonder this and I need help. And the cooperation, that we are able to receive and help each other and benefit from everyone's expertise]. (R5)

Se on mun mielestä tällä alalla melkein niitä tärkeimpiä taitoja mitä on, että pitää pystyä tehdä yhteistyötä muiden kanssa. [I think that in this field it is almost the most important skill, the ability to cooperate with others]. (R7)

Ei siel kukaan oikeestaan voi sooloilla yksin, et sehän on tiimityötä, ryhmätyötä. Ja mitä enemmän sitä ryhmätyötä ja tiimityötä on, niin semmosta, avointa keskustelua ja näin, niin sitä paremmin se työyhteisökin voi. [No-one can work by herself there, it is teamwork, groupwork. And the more there is that groupwork and teamwork, open discussion, the better the work community atmosphere is]. (R8)

No, ilman yhteistyötä eihän tämä ole silloin, mitään. ... Me tarvitaan niitä eri ammattiryhmiä, koska kaikilla on se omansa (erityisosaaminen), me tarvitaan niinku erilaisia osaajia, eri ikäisiä koska meillä on erilaisia vahvuuksia. ... Niin jos nyt aattelee et puhutaan laadukkaasta varhaiskasvatuksesta, niin eihän se ilman sitä yhteistyötä niinku toimi. Et jos niinku kaikki vetäis omaa juttuansa niin, eihän lapset vois hyvin kun niillähän ois hirveen turvaton olo. Et siin yhteistyössä on niinku se voima. [Well, without cooperation, this is nothing. ... We need different professional groups because all of them have their specific expertise, we need different kinds of experts, people of different age because we have different strengths. ... And if we discuss about quality in ECEC, well, it does not actualise without cooperation. If everyone did their own thing, children would feel insecure. So the cooperation is the strength]. (R9)

Teamwork is everything. This response that arose in my data several times seems to entail very valuable information about ECEC profession. Teamwork might, in fact, be considered as the key ingredient in PPTs, as they are actually formed in collaboration with colleagues. This is a major difference when comparing ECEC professionals' PPTs to class teachers' PPTs. Moreover, as children are very susceptible to sense the emotional atmosphere, teamwork aspect as an integral part of PPTs should be carefully considered. This is particularly important e.g. when students in ECEC training programs participate work life in their work placement periods, or when novice ECEC professionals enter work life. The importance of teamwork should also be widely recognised when planning and implementing curriculums for ECEC professional training programs, both on vocational and on higher educational level. This aspect of collaboration and teamwork should be emphasised and validated e.g. by having collaboration already during studies between different institutions that train professionals to the ECEC field. Ranta et al. (2022, p. 33) similarly emphasise the focality of teamwork as part of professionalism in ECEC, and therefore in the pre-service training programs this

aspect should be highlighted both in theory and practice. Moreover, Melasalmi (2018, pp. 93, 96) suggests that teacher educators should consider carefully how they can support the development of students' self-reflective skills that enable the exploration of personal values.

This thesis suggests as a result that *professionalism in ECEC is the sum of the team*. The individual employees are all unique and possess unique PPTs, but together through teamwork, they can fulfil what professionalism in ECEC stands for. There is such a profession as ECEC teacher (and a lot of literature on this), but however, the teacher does not work alone. ECEC work is carried out in a team, and all team members need to know each other's thinking at least on some level, otherwise they may create false assumptions that affect the functioning of the team. Thus, *reflecting PPTs is the key for functional teamwork*.

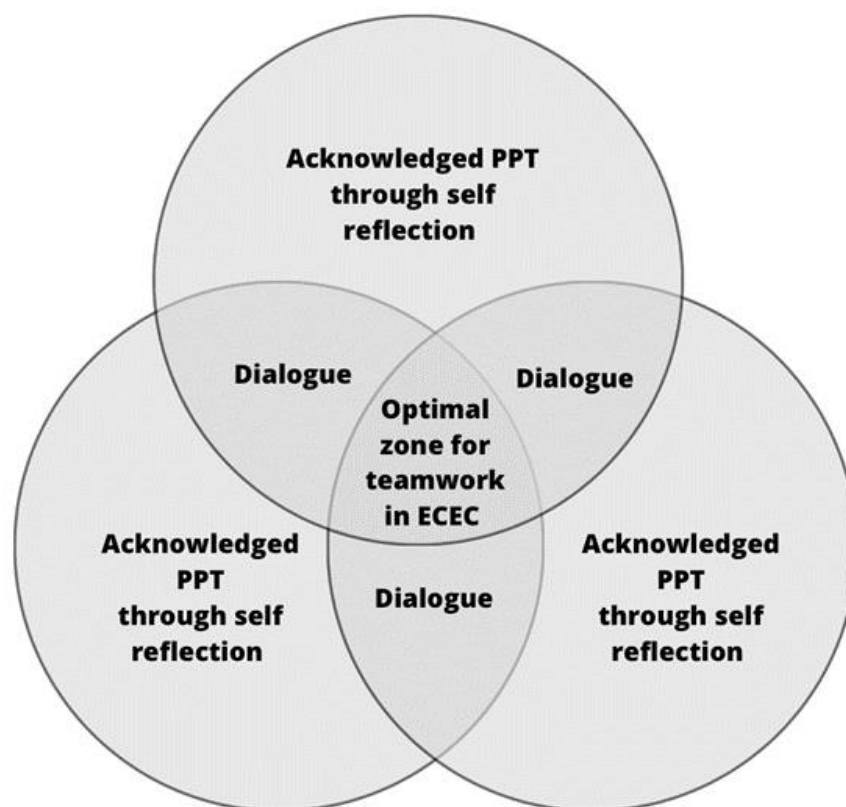


Figure 2. PPTs' relevance in ECEC context

In Figure 2 I have conceptualised this dynamic interrelatedness of teamwork and PPTs of ECEC professionals. The circles represent the individuals that constitute a team. Moreover, the circles are parallel to Korthagen's (2017) onion model where all levels of reflection are present. Consequently, in an ideal situation, team members in ECEC context would have the skills to reflect their own views, values and beliefs on different levels.

The PPTs are important to recognise as they affect the everyday work in educational contexts as literature widely implies (see e.g. Pitkaniemi, 2010; Stenberg et al., 2014; Cornett, 1990). Moreover, making PPTs explicit for instance by interviewing colleagues with the questions I have formulated (see Appendix 1), professionals may engage in a fruitful dialogue that may result an optimal zone for teamwork in ECEC (see Figure 2). Through dialogue a common ground is possible to find, and shared goals and work practices may become more achievable. Naturally the National Core Curriculum for ECEC guides the practices and goals of ECEC work, but every context and child group is unique. Therefore, sharing thoughts through dialogue among professionals is essential. By engaging into reciprocal dialogue it becomes possible to identify and examine the different perspectives that constitute the ECEC region. Perhaps this is the path to discovering and creating the philosophy of ECEC that Rodd (1999, p. 21) has called for. A shared philosophy that surpasses the whole ECEC field and entails all the disciplines involved in it indeed seems to be needed as there have been battles between different professional groups like e.g. Koskinen (2021) and Kinos (2008; 1997) describe.

Another viewpoint on research question 2 regards ethics. The data suggested in my interpretation that if framed with Korthagen's (2017) onion model, *ethics form the core quality of all ECEC professionals*. It seems that ethics is a dimension that all ECEC professionals share regardless of their educational or other background. Such values were commonly expressed throughout the data that all people are equal and that ECEC may diminish inequality in society. Also sense of responsibility was obvious in many answers.

Miten mä sen sanoitan, siis muiden ihmisten kunnioittamisesta. Ja sitten just se mun oma arvo, et kaikki ihmiset on samanarvoisia. [How do I put it into words, respecting other people. And then my own value, that all human beings are equal]. (R9)

Se tunnelma, et sil lapsella on hyvä olla. ... Itsehän me ollaan aina vastuussa siitä tunnelmasta. [The emotional atmosphere so that the child could feel good. ... We are always responsible of that atmosphere]. (R6)

Vaadin itseltäni aika paljon, että hoidan työni niinku kunnolla. [I demand quite a lot from myself, that I do my work properly]. (R3)

Some scholars consider that the code of ethics is what sets a profession apart from a mere occupation (Rodd & Clyde, 1990, p. 472). Similarly, Ek (2022, p. 157) sees ethical competence as an integral part of ECEC professional's expertise. The results generated from my data indicate accordingly that the respondents adhered to the code of ethics that seem to be quite similar across disciplines that are represented in the ECEC field.

Lastly, one answer to research question 2 relates to the social nature of ECEC work. In my data interpersonal skills were mentioned in so many instances and in so many different ways that it could be stated that *interpersonal skills form the base for professional identity*. This does not mean that all ECEC professionals need to extrovert by personality, but instead sensitive enough to recognise children's individual needs as well as colleagues' intentions. Moreover, some respondents expressed how all learning occurs in interaction. Therefore, interpersonal skills are crucial not only regarding the emotional atmosphere and communication but also when considering how children learn.

Varmasti on aina erilaisia näkemyksiä asioista. mutta se että se liittyy siihe ammatillisuuteen, että oli sulla mikä ryhmä vaan ja ketä vaan siinä, sun täytyy pystyä kommunikimaan. [Surely there are always different opinions on issues, but it is part of the professionality that no matter what kind of group you have and who belong to it, you must be able to communicate]. (R4)

Kaikkihan aina liittyy semmoseen vuorovaikutukseen et siinä me opitaan aina. ... Kaikkihan tehään jollain tapaa yhdessä. [Everything relates to interaction; we always learn there. ... Everything is always done somehow together]. (R6)

6.3 Paradoxes of ECEC work

My research question 1 was 'what kind of personal practical theories (PPTs) do ECEC professionals have'. This question was so vast that the analysis required a high level of reflexivity in order to create a somewhat coherent narrative as an answer. The data could be described as abundant with a variety of perspectives and opinions. Obviously, as all PPTs are unique, it is difficult to describe how they appeared to me as a researcher. However, such common sets of beliefs were recognisable as ECEC professionals perceiving themselves as *advocates of children* and *guardians for the unforeseen future*. These dimensions of PPTs could be framed in Korthagen's (2017) onion model as professionals' *mission*.

The theme *advocates of children* describes how several respondents discussed that they saw the ECEC work as protecting social equality and safeguarding the best interests of children. Also many respondents described how they aspire to meet the many needs children have.

Ja sitten kyllähän se lapsen etu, niin se on tärkein. [The best interest of the child, that is most important]. (R6)

Meillä on tosiaan paljon erityislapsia, niin myös tavallaan auttaa heitä. Siihen toimintaan ja miettiä tapoja millä he pystyy olla mukana toiminnassa. [We have many children with special needs, so in a way helping them. To think ways how they can participate]. (R7)

Jos se vaarantaa sen lapsen kasvua ja kehitystä, niin siinä vaiheessa sun on pakko tehdä jotain et sä et voi vaan jättää sitä vaan noin. [If it endangers the child's growth and development, at that point you must do something, you cannot just leave it as it is]. (R4)

Kaikki lähtee siitä lapsesta mitä me tehdään. Mikään ei lähde meistä, vaan et se on se ryhmä, mitä he tarvitsee. Tukea, turvaa, mitä he tarvii oppia, minkälaisen ympäristön he tarvitsee, et kaikki niinku lähtee siitä. [Everything we do derives from the child. Nothing begins with us, but it is the group and what the children need. Support, safety, what they need to learn, what kind of environment they need, everything begins there]. (R5)

The theme *guardians for the unforeseen future* refers to the notion that respondents expressed in many instances that their goal is to offer children with supplies that they will need in the future. The problem is that no-one knows what the future holds for the children, so professionals seem to agree to offer such timelessly

valuable 'gifts' as warmth, support, curious attitude towards life, safe environment, and social skills to children.

Sellaisia oppimaan oppimisen taitoja, jotka voi tuntua välillä vähän hassultakin mitä siellä päiväkodissa tehdään, mutta sillä on suuri merkitys sitten kuitenkin myöhemmällä iällä. [Such learning to learn skills that may seem at times a bit funny when carried out at the day care centre, but it has a great significance later on in life]. (R4)

Mut kunhan niillä on ne sosiaaliset taidot, lähtökohdat siihen et me voidaan olla kiusaamista vastaan ja et heillä on mahdollisuus siihen, että saa ystäviä ja kavereita, et meillä on se pohja tulevaisuutta varten. [When children have the necessary social skills, that is the foundation for avoiding bullying, and they have the opportunity to make friends so that we have the base for the future]. (R5)

Interestingly only three (3) respondents mentioned the National Core Curriculum for ECEC as a guiding instrument in their work. The National Core Curriculum for ECEC has been binding document since 2018 (Paavola & Pesonen, 2021, p. 4), and understandably it takes time to become familiarised by professionals. However, as only three (3) respondents discussed about the National Core Curriculum for ECEC as a guiding document, the question rises of how much it in fact affects the actual decisions professionals make in their everyday work. Perhaps also the clarification of not just the work tasks performed by different professional groups, but also of the whole function of ECEC should be clarified. ECEC cannot provide service that fulfils all possible needs of children and the society. Similarly, Karila et al. (2017, p. 72) state that in order to provide children the supplies they need in the future, professionals need to consider the values on which future is built on. Therefore, more discussion on the values and philosophies of ECEC is needed.

As a whole the data offered an insight into the mindsets of highly competent ECEC professionals who took their work seriously and were very conscientious. It is important to recognise that any kind of list of 'core beliefs' associated with PPTs is problematic, as these kinds of lists can only provide a limited framework for interpreting the logic and values a professional has. Therefore, in my analysis the reflexive TA became particularly appropriate method for analysis. All respondents demonstrated critical thinking, and thus, recognised the many *paradoxes and complexities* that inevitably are intrinsically part of the ECEC profession. To sum up my analysis, the theme *paradoxes and complexities* seems appropriate

in describing the PPTs of ECEC professionals. The complexity of ECEC work has been identified e.g. by Brock (2012, p. 29) and Klevering and McNae (2018). Paradoxes, however, as a term adds the intensity to the controversies ECEC professionals have to deal with.

Jillian Rodd and Margaret Clyde (1990) use the concept *ethical dilemmas* when referring to the many controversies ECEC professionals face in their everyday practice. Similarly, Jari Salminen (2020) discusses about *wicked dilemmas* that exist within education in school context. Salminen (2020, p. 115) demonstrates that values, worldviews, political ideologies, educational traditions and professional educators' personal beliefs all create tensions, i.e. dilemmas that professional educators face. I use, however, the term paradox in this thesis partly in equivalent meaning.

Paradoxes of educational, and human work altogether, have been identified by some scholars. Veli-Matti Värrä (2004, p. 26) states that the ancient *Meno's paradox* is in fact permanently the most significant problem in education. Meno's paradox refers to the ideal of good life and how can education respond to it. In order to carry out ethically justified educational activities, the professional educator must have a vision about what good life is like. However, the professional educator cannot know what good life is for the child now or in the future. Thus, the paradox is obvious. Furthermore, Lindqvist (1990, p. 47) points out the basic paradox of all human professions. On the other hand, there is the work that is done to people, e.g. interventions or people are evaluated. At the same time a societal task is fulfilled in the name of common interest. But on the other hand, in the human professions the employee's primary task is to be human for another human being, to develop as a human being, and share the human life with clients. This basic paradox is at the same time the most consuming but also the most rewarding aspect in any human profession.

In ECEC the paradoxes mentioned by Värrä (2004) and Lindqvist (1990) are constantly present, but there are also some distinctive paradoxes in this particular field. Janet Moyles (2001) has discussed the many paradoxes in early childhood education, but mainly from politically based perspective. Moyles (2001, p. 83) has

identified some paradoxical dimensions in ECEC, such as the low level of salaries against expectation of professionalism. My interpretation of paradoxes in ECEC builds on and extends Moyles' idea with paradoxical dimensions that are apparent in professionals' PPTs. Paradoxes that I discovered in my data are described in the following part.

6.3.1 Individual child's needs vs. conforming to group's needs

In the data I found that respondents emphasised the importance of meeting the individual needs of children and the respondents expressed high levels of sensitivity in noticing these needs. However, at the same time there is the demand to teach children social skills and conform to the interests of the group. It seems that the basic paradox is about supporting individual growth and nourishing the unique potential that lies in each child but at the same time the individual child must learn how to follow norms of the society. Moyles (2001) describes somewhat similarly this paradox as the tension between serving society as opposed to fulfilling individual aspirations.

Kaikista tärkeintä on se et me kasvatetaan niinku hyviä, kunnollisia ihmisiä tänne maailmaan niinku kellä on hyvät käytöstavat ja ne tietää mitä on toisten huomioon ottaminen. ... Et miten olla ryhmässä tai ylipäätänsä tääl elämässä ja maailmassa niinku, että ei vaan kaikkea aina saa yksinään ja ei voi omistaa niinku ittekseen vaan pitää oppii se jakamisen taito. [The most important thing is that we raise good, decent people to this world who have manners and they know how to take other people into consideration. ... That how to be in a group or altogether here in life and world, that you cannot have everything to yourself but you need to learn the skill of sharing]. (R3)

Se sosiaalisuuteen kasvattaminen ja tämmönen, et kyllähän me aletaan siellä niinku varhaisessa vaiheessa kasvattaa heitä niinku yhteiskunnan jäseniksi. [Raising into sociality, that we begin very early on raising children to become members of society]. (R6)

Kaikki asiat tapahtuu silleen, ei ne tapahdu mitenkään sellasella lapsen normaalilla, luonnollisen kulun kautta niinku. Et kaikki on vähän semmosta niinku, se on ryhmäkasvatusta, siis se on semmosta, mulla tulee lähinnä mieleen joku intti [naurua]. [Everything happens so, not at all in a manner that would be normal or natural for the child. Everything is like, group education, that it reminds me mostly of some kind of military [laughter]]. (R1)

In the Finnish ECEC the uniqueness of every child is recognised and for instance the ECEC teachers are required to prepare a personal early childhood education

and care plan for each child (see Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018, § 23). This approach that emphasises the individual needs of each child may be considered as an embodiment of Western, neoliberal values. However, this appreciation of individualism creates a paradox as belonging to a group is a deep human need. Indeed, many respondents expressed that children and adults also are nowadays more selfish than before, and this created a lot of frustration in the ECEC environment.

Yhteiskunta on muuttunut, mehän eletään hirveen individualistisessa maailmassa, sehän näkyy, et lapset on tosi itsekkäitä, ja tota, vanhemmat on itsekkäitä. [Society has changed, we live in a really individualistic world, it is obvious, that children are really selfish, and well, parents are selfish]. (R9)

Kun tuntuu et jokainen haluaa, että: minä, minä, minä. [When it feels like everyone wants: me, me, me]. (R2)

6.3.2 Educating children vs. offering care and nurture

Janet Moyles (2001) discusses about the paradox between caring and teaching children. Similarly, the data in this thesis suggests that there seems to be a discrepancy between education and care, i.e. the principle of *educare* may not be as prevalent after all in reality. This is in accordance with the findings of Melasalmi et al. (2022). Some respondents, however, described how they were interested particularly in the teaching aspect, and that had been one motivation for them to choose a career in the ECEC field. This does not imply that these ‘teaching orientated’ professionals would regard ECEC primarily as a venue for teaching e.g. primary skills for future school path, but as ECEC is now seen as part of lifelong learning path instead of a social service, there is a possibility that ECEC becomes too goal orientated. Indeed, some respondents expressed their worry about ECEC becoming too ‘school-like’, and they were worried that children may not be able to be children anymore as learning is over-emphasised.

Se koulumaisuus tulee koko ajan yhä enemmän. ... Mut en mä tiedä onko se huono vai hyvä. Siis nyt mä luulen, että se rupeaa menemään huonompaan suuntaan kun sitä ruvetaan niinku nuoremmille ja nuoremmille vaan. ... Et ihmiset luulee et kun aikaistetaan esikoulua niin sitten se ennaltaehkäisee jotenkin näitä ongelmia mikä ei todellakaan kyllä pidä paikkaansa. [The school-likeness is coming more and more. ... But I don't know whether it is a bad or a good thing. At the moment I think it goes worse when even

younger and younger are. ... That people believe that when preschool begins earlier, then somehow these problems are prevented. But indeed this is not the case]. (R4)

Mä oon sitä mieltä, että kun lapsi saa rauhassa kasvaa, turvallisten aikuisten kanssa, henkilöitten kanssa jotka laittaa rajat, niin silloin lapsi vapautuu just siihen omaan itseensä ja siitä tulee se luovuus esille, kaikki taidot, ne vaan alkaa sitten tulla kun se saa olla vapaasti, ei sillä tavalla että vapaa kasvatus niin, et lapsi sais tehdä mitä vaan, eihän se sitä oo, vaan aikuisen tehtävä on vapauttaa se lapsi niinku toteuttamaan itseään, turvalisissa raameissa. ... Lapsi oppii ilman sitä pakko-opetusta, mä oon sitä mieltä. [I think that when a child can grow in peace, with safe adults, with people who place boundaries, then the child is liberated into becoming her/himself, and then the creativity is released. And all the skills, they just appear with that freedom, not in a way that the child could do anything but instead it is the adult's task to liberate the child to fulfil her/his potential. ... The child learns without teaching by force, that is what I believe]. (R1)

Some respondents expressed that they particularly enjoyed teaching children and that was one of the reasons they had chosen a career in ECEC. However, the care dimension was highlighted in most of the respondents' thoughts. Interestingly, the issue of motherhood was apparent in all interviews although I did not ask about it. Even the respondents who did not have own children, discussed about motherhood.

Mul on niin voimakas hoivavietti ja sellanen et on ihana hoitaa ja huolehtia. [I have such a strong will to nurture, I enjoy nurturing and caring]. (R3)

Mut sit esimerkiksi äitiys, omakohtainen kokemus äitiydestä, se on mun mielestä ensiarvoisen tärkeätä tässä työssä. ... Se ei oo mitenkään niinku poissulkevaa, mut siinä on ihan hirveen paljon mun mielestä niinku voimavaroja ja resursseja et sä oot itse äiti. Sä pystyt asettuu vanhemman rooliin. ... Et ne on vähän semmosta niinku hiljaistakin tietoa mitä sä et kirjoista opi. [But for instance motherhood and personal experience about it, I think it is really valuable in this work. ... It is not excluding in any way but instead being a mother provides some many strengths and resources, you are able to position yourself into parent's role. ... That is a bit like tacit knowledge that you cannot learn from books]. (R8)

This finding is in accordance with Meretniemi's (2015) description how being a substitute mother has historically been an ideal in ECEC. Some respondents expressed that their own children had been their greatest teachers in becoming ECEC professionals. The same respondents were quite critical about the many demands and sense of rush that seem to be present in today's ECEC work. Perhaps this paradox deals fundamentally with the issue of seeing childhood as valuable in itself vs. childhood as a phase where necessary skills for the future are learnt. Korthagen (2017) also criticises the present tendency to approach education with a discourse that emphasises teaching skills to children. If the overall

well-being of a child is the main goal in ECEC, then this is a paradox that needs to be considered carefully.

6.3.3 Play for learning vs. fun and joy

Play is a fundamental element in a child's world, and hence in ECEC environments on so many levels that in this thesis it is not possible to discuss in depth. However, as play is so integral element in ECEC work, it needs to be noticed. This paradox relates to the previously mentioned paradox about valuing childhood in itself and being present in the moment vs. learning skills in childhood for the future. ECEC professionals face the question of how to understand the role(s) of play in ECEC environment. Should play be valued as a child's way to interact and interpret this world? Is it enough that a child plays for fun or should the child learn something through play that the ECEC professionals aspire? This paradox entails the question about child's autonomy vs. adults beliefs about what the child needs. The respondents discussed about play and its role in various ways and it seems that play in ECEC contains even controversial meanings.

Kun leikitään niin siinä taustalla on semmoinen opetuksellinen tavoite. [When playing, there is always a kind of pedagogical goal behind it]. (R4)

Et oppii olemaan ryhmän jäsenenä, sit saa sieltä kavereita kenen kanssa niinku leikkiä, ja sit toivon mukaan sit jos ei jonkun kanssa löydy sopivaa leikkiä, niin oppii myös sen miten niis semmosissa tilanteissa niinku toimitaan. [That one learns to be a member in a group, then one finds friends to play with, and then hopefully if a suitable play is not found with someone, then one learns how to act in such situations]. (R8)

Play was described as a means to learn and for instance currently such term as pedagogical play is utilised broadly in ECEC. Many respondents perceived play primarily as a social activity where children learn social skills. On the other hand, one respondent emphasised the importance of providing joyful experiences and sense of wonder in ECEC for children. This respondent highlighted the importance of nurturing and cherishing children's imagination with creative activities in a playful atmosphere. Thus, professionals place various meanings and functions on children's play that may be even contradictory.

6.3.4 Planned activities vs. presence and improvising

There are many goals in ECEC nowadays, some mandated by legislation and guiding documents, such as National Core Curriculum for ECEC, others set by local circumstances. In order to achieve goals, the activities carried out in ECEC should be planned beforehand. However, the reality of ECEC work often makes careful planning difficult due to e.g. limited time for planning. On the other hand, it is difficult to predict how children learn and behave. There are so many uncontrollable factors involved with ECEC work that improvising is a key ingredient of professionalism as many of my respondents mentioned.

Pitää ymmärtää se, että ei ole sellaista taikakirjaa, jossa sanotaan, että kun sä teit näin ja näin, niin sä pääset näihin ja näihin tuloksiin, vaan sun täytyy luovia koko ajan, niin sulla täytyy olla niitä vaihtoehtoja minkä välissä luovit. [You need to understand that there is no magic book which tells you do this and this, and you get these results. Instead, you need to constantly navigate, you must have options and navigate between them]. (R4)

It seems that one fundamental paradox in ECEC involves the relationship between being present and giving time to children vs. planning and carrying out planned activities.

(Tärkeintä varhaiskasvatuksessa) Mun mielestä niinku läsnäoleminen. Sä oot kumminkin läsnä siinä lasten kanssa mitä sä ikinä teetkin. Sillä pääsee jo monessa asiassa pitkälle, siinä tekee paljon erilaisia huomioita. ... Ehkä vuosien saatossa on oppinu et yrittää ehkä kestää ja sietää, et ei se vaan mee aina niinku on suunnitellu. [(The most important thing is ECEC) I think presence. You are anyway present there with children whatever you do. That takes you a long way as you make a lot of observations. ... Perhaps during the years I have learned that I try to manage and tolerate that sometimes it just does not work out the way it was planned]. (R2)

Presence is fundamental in ECEC for various reasons. Many respondents described being available for children as the most important aspect in ECEC. However, as there are many laws and other obligating documents that guide ECEC work, most respondents described sensations of inadequacy and disharmony.

Ja sehän on se mikä tätä alaa riivaa, siis se et koko ajan on se tunne et jotain on tekevä. ... Kun nykyään vaaditaan tosi paljon, et jos on vaikka niinku varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmassa et sun pitää pitää huolta tästä ja tästä ja tästä, sit niinkun kaikki kehittymisen osa-alueet ottaa huomioon ja niinku kartotat sitä ja tätä ja tota. Ja siihen suunnitelmaan täytyy laittaa et tämä toteutuu ja yksilöllisesti joka lapselle niinkun. Et jos oikeasti tekis noin, niin mun mielestä sä et ehdi kohdata sitä lasta yhtään. Et sä näät kyllä sitten et osaako hän pitää saksia kädessä ja osaako hän heittää palloa ja näin, mut että tiedätkö sä sit sen lapsen luonteesta ja kiintymyssuhteista tai niinkun kehityksestä sit kuitenkin kun sulla on vaan kiire täyttämään niitä papereita ja suunnitelmia. [And that is what is wrong with this field, I mean the feeling that there is always

something that needs to be done. ... Nowadays so much is demanded, that e.g. according to core curriculum you need take care of this and that and that, take all aspects of child's development into consideration and monitor this and that. And then you must write in the document that this is implemented individually. That seriously, if you did that, I think you are not able to really see the child. That you may know how the child uses scissors or throws a ball, but do you know anything about the child's character and relationships and overall development if you are in a hurry to fill out all those papers and plans]. (R6)

Viime aikoina oon kokenut oman työn semmoseksi, poukkoilevaksi ja hektiseksi et tavaltaan se oma mieli on sellasta dzzzzz, sekamelskaa. ... Et sit helposti unohtuu et hei nyt nää (lapset) tarvis nyt tän ajan, et nyt ihan rauhotutaan ja näin. ... Et ei tarvis ajatella et kohta mun pitäis ehtii sinne ja sinne palaveriin. Et kun vois keskittyä siihen olennaiseen, et vois olla niitten lasten kanssa. [Lately I have felt my work tortuous and hectic. ... That it is easy to forget that these children need this time now, that we should just calm down. ... That you didn't need to think that soon I have to be in a meeting, but you could concentrate on what is relevant, i.e. being with children]. (R8)

Another important aspect regarding presence is the issue of safety. Many respondents emphasised providing safety for children as their main task. Following rigidly all the requirements placed on today's ECEC seems to create stress to professionals, and thus may distract the focus from being present with children to various demands that need to be met. As children are unpredictable in many occasions, ECEC professionals need to be constantly aware about what is going on. So this raises a question how well can the professionals guarantee the experience of safety to children if their attention is captured so often with the documents that need to be filled or various requirements that should be met.

Ja yllätyksiä tulee aina. Et se on semmonen mikä pitää kanssa tajuta, että siis vaikka sä miten vahtisit niitä, niin aina voi joku tippuu jostain tai juosta keinun alle vaikka olisi miljoona kertaa sanottu että ei saa. [And there are always surprises. That you need to also understand that no matter how carefully you oversee children, still someone may fall from somewhere or run under a swing although it has been instructed a million times that you should not do that]. (R4)

Altogether, it seems that ECEC work entails various paradoxes that may be difficult to handle. In my data all respondents were highly motivated and committed to ECEC work, and many e.g. expressed how the work itself gave them meaningfulness and purpose in life. But many also described how they experienced sensations of inadequacy as they felt that they could not meet all the requirements that children's needs, parents' expectations or core curriculums posed. Moreover, some respondents expressed that they could not work in a manner that corresponded their own values and these situations created frustration and tensions to arise.

The paradoxes of ECEC can be difficult to handle, and the conflict between the reality and own ideals may become too overwhelming. One respondent wondered how the passion and love she had experienced towards the ECEC work, how rewarding it had been for so many years and how now she was so exhausted about the work that the motivation to continue the work was "zero". She really wondered how did it come to be this way? How was it possible that now she was in this situation? In fact, three of the respondents had quit their long careers within ECEC, and it seemed that the reason for this was at least partly due to the controversial nature of the work. So altogether, the paradoxical nature of ECEC work needs to be further examined.

7 Validity and ethical considerations

Assessing validity in qualitative research is a matter of providing the reader with strong arguments to support the findings and interpretations the researcher has made (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 48). Accordingly, I have described the steps I have taken as a researcher in detail. I have also explained my worldview and positionality as a researcher that inevitably affect the choices and interpretations I have made. Moreover, Alhojailan (2012, p. 42) notes that quotations are often presented to increase the validity of interpretations. Therefore, I have provided several excerpts from my data. However, as this study is bilingual, the translated quotations for non-Finnish speakers in this thesis are prone to some inaccuracy.

Another issue to acknowledge regarding validity is the dialogical approach I have utilised. Although I did not have any hypothesis in the beginning of this thesis process, I had some presumptions about the opinions these selected respondents might tell me. This is probably quite natural, so it was interesting to notice how the respondents surprised me many times with their opinions. I learned a lot from the insights respondents shared with me, and from the questions they posed to me during the interviews that challenged my own views. Therefore, I think I managed to maintain an open mind towards the data and critical attitude to my own interpretations.

Ethical issues are related to validity issues, and they should be considered carefully on every stage of conducting qualitative research. Brinkmann and Kvale (2017, p. 4) emphasise that it is impossible to distinguish fully the values and facts when researching human experiences. Therefore, the researcher must ask ethical 'why' and 'how' throughout the research process. Such questions as 'why the research is done', 'for whose benefit', and 'how can it be ensured that no-one is harmed' are important to bring up repeatedly (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 4). However, sometimes it is extremely difficult to anticipate possible harms for the participants even if precautionary practices have been employed (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018, p. 12). In this study I considered ethical issues as scrupulously as I could, and how the respondents experienced my interviews in particular.

Iphofen and Tolich (2018, p. 14) state that research is inevitably intrusive, but the level of intrusiveness depends on how much of the participants' time and energy is required, as well as how intimate the research questions are. I had the benefit of knowing all my respondents beforehand, and this probably enabled them to express their views openly. Some respondents in fact described that talking was easy as I was familiar to them. All respondents expressed that they liked or valued my interview, and they seemed to regard my topic as important. Therefore, I believe that my interviews did not cause harm to the respondents in my study.

On the other hand, although the respondents were open about their opinions, there lies a potential ethical dilemma. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2017, p. 7) describe, the interviewees may tell too much and then regret it later on. This possibility I had anticipated by informing respondents with the informed consent letter I had sent them before the interviews. In the consent letter I stated that the respondents had the right to withdraw their participation from my study at any time. Moreover, I offered respondents the possibility to ask questions at any time as Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 100) suggest. However, Brinkmann (2018, p. 588) points out that in general an interview is a one-directional questioning. A research interview is ultimately an instrument in providing the researcher data that serves the researcher's ends. Thus, I expressed my deep gratitude to the respondents for taking part to my study. To my surprise, several respondents expressed that the interviews gave them new ideas and aspects to think about.

Niin kiitos kun kutsuit! Mä tykkään ihan hirveesti kaikesta tämmösestä, et saa niinku uutta mietittävää vähän, et tästä sain itsellenikin paljon. [So thank you for inviting me to this interview! I really like this kind of things, that I get something new to think about, so this gave also me a lot]. (R6)

Another respondent expressed that we should continue cooperation also later on as the discussion was so fruitful. Therefore, I truly consider that the knowledge formulated in this thesis project as jointly constructed in dialogue. And I also believe that this thesis process may enable many fruitful collaborations with the respondents in the future as well.

8 Discussion

PPTs may be regarded as manifestations of professional philosophies. As mentioned in the literature review, Jillian Rodd (1999, p. 21) states that the key for high quality ECEC is the development of a professional philosophy. A shared philosophy could also improve the status of ECEC and accelerate the professionalisation process. According to my results creating such a professional philosophy in ECEC is a demanding task. PPTs of ECEC professionals are all unique although some commonalities appear in them. ECEC as a professional field is complicated partly due to the many different disciplines involved in it, and partly due to the complex nature of the work. Perhaps the professional philosophy could be developed by considering how to tackle the paradoxical nature of ECEC work, and also by concentrating on the issues that currently need to be addressed in educational field as a whole.

8.1 Tackling the paradoxes and finding equilibrium

PPTs of ECEC professionals seem to consist multiple paradoxes and complexities. These may become a source of sensations of inadequacy, and thus, act as demotivational factors in ECEC work. Is it possible to solve these paradoxes and reach some kind of equilibrium? What kind of balancing act could be appropriate? Perhaps these sensations of inadequacy could be mitigated by understanding that along with the professionalisation process of ECEC, more expectations have been subjected upon ECEC. As National Core Curriculum for ECEC obligates the professionals in day care centres, there is less space for freedom to carry out ECEC activities in resonance with professionals' own PPTs. This is a trajectory that is important to be acknowledged. Thus, one possible answer to create a shared professional philosophy in ECEC is to clarify the core task of ECEC. This measure could also reduce the sensations of inadequacy among professionals as then they would not have to balance between such enormous amounts of multiple demands. The creation of shared philosophy, however, demands a lot of dialogue and therefore more time for discussions among professionals should be

provided. Moreover, professional development through self-reflection as Fred Korthagen (2017) suggests, seems vital.

Another possible answer is to highlight the value of multi-disciplinary teamwork. Perhaps *the interaction between different discourses and disciplines IS the philosophy of ECEC*. The various discourses, opinions and beliefs are necessary in ECEC field as they may complement each other. Several researchers have expressed their concern on how ECEC may become too 'school-like' on the expense of other approaches to ECEC, such as care dimension (e.g. Melasalmi et al., 2022; Melasalmi 2018, p. 14). Moreover, as education is never value free, there are always ideologies and educational visions (see e.g. Schiro 2013; Salminen 2020) that influence the ECEC work. The prevalent discourses and practices are always connected to the policies that dominate in a society. *Thus, different approaches to ECEC are necessary as they may balance each other and advance finding equilibrium between different ideologies and educational visions.*

8.2 PPTs and society

The basic paradox in all education, Meno's paradox, illuminates that professionals cannot know what kind of skills or knowledge children of today need in the future. There exists quite unanimous consensus on the wicked problems of today's global world, such as climate change and how to live sustainably. Consequently, various scholars among educational sciences have discussed about ongoing eco-crisis and how the idea of human-centred education should be examined critically (e.g. Valtonen, 2022; Wolff, Skarstein & Skarstein, 2020; Block, Gominne & Van Poeck, 2018; Jimenez & Moorhead, 2021; Weldemariam, 2020; Värri, 2019; Pihkala, 2017.) Therefore, it would have been quite natural to hear respondents' thoughts about such issues as sustainability or other environmental issues. Hence it was an interesting notion that apart from one respondent who mentioned how trash was picked up with children, none of the respondents discussed about issues concerning climate change or sustainability as a subject of relevance in ECEC. On the other hand, the lack of appearance of certain issues

may also be due to the fact that I did not specifically ask about e.g. environmental issues. Therefore, it might be that the respondents did not verbalise their sentiments on these topics. However, this notion may also derive from the values that prevail in our society.

PPTs are always culturally and context bound. Although they are dynamic, they resist change as beliefs and values are often culturally 'binded'. The PPTs presented and discussed in this thesis are dominated by 'Western paradigm', in which individuality and autonomy are usually regarded as virtues. Moreover, it is influenced by neo-liberal zeitgeist where efficiency and productiveness are appreciated. It is important to be aware of these premises as there are various other possibilities to view education, good life and altogether human beings' purpose and position in the world. For instance, education as a concept among indigenous traditions seems to be quite different from our Western tradition. In many indigenous systems the idea of relationality of everything is dominant. The ethics, beliefs, practices, moral precepts, and worldviews are in many indigenous cultures embedded to the understanding that human beings are in relationship to the natural world, and thus hold a lot of responsibility towards all living and non-living entities alike. (Moreno-Dulcey, Alcalá, Keyser, & Elliott-Groves, 2022, p. 2.) Similarly, Timothy Reagan (2017, p. 7) notes that perhaps it is time to start challenging the prevalent paradigm in the educational field where Western epistemological ethnocentrism and academic tradition has dominated.

Consequently, if ECEC professionals are regarded as guardians for the unforeseen future, then how can we prepare children for a future that seems to hold many wicked, global problems? The data in my study provided interesting insights into the PPTs of ECEC professionals that naturally reflected the Western values that emphasise individuality and the many needs children have. Indeed, respecting all children and meeting their personal needs is a trajectory that we should be proud of. However, perhaps this trend needs to be re-considered as in my data many respondents expressed how selfish people are nowadays. Therefore, to tackle the many wicked global problems of our time, we need dialogue more than ever about the values and beliefs we have.

At the moment, pedagogy is emphasised in the ECEC field as it is believed that it is a guarantee for better quality. However, some scholars (e.g. Farquhar, 2010; Urban, 2008) criticise if the actual motif behind this tendency is the neo-liberal philosophy where children are educated to become obedient members of capitalist, consumer centred society. Therefore, it is essential that all ECEC professional keep a genuinely open mind about their values and exercise self-reflection continuously if they are the advocates of children. Self-reflection is at the core of professionalism, but it also enables a true dialogue between professionals, and also all other stakeholders concerning ECEC in society. As Verity Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 142) mentioned, ECEC should be considered as a region instead of a discipline. Moreover, as Rodd (2013, p. 152) notes, instead of defending the approach of individual disciplines, we should work on creating a multi-disciplinary ethos that could become the consistent philosophy of ECEC. Therefore, it might be necessary to rethink the values in ECEC if we as professionals wish to foster the holistic well-being of our children, our communities, and in fact, our planet earth.

In this thesis the main finding is that ECEC is fundamentally based on teamwork on all levels. It may be in fact regarded as the core principle of professionalism and also integral part of professionals' PPTs. Dialogue as a paradigm is valuable if we wish to live in harmony with each other. The world is full of many kinds of people and in this globalized era, this is a fact we should acknowledge and accept. Thus, building bridges by engaging in dialogue and leaning towards each other with curiosity is something to strive for. As dialogue begins with knowing oneself first, self-reflective practices are essential in acknowledging own values and beliefs. But self-reflection is not enough as we need to extend the sight from ourselves to our fellow beings. I truly wish that in addition to asking 'who am I' we could extend our vision further and ask each other 'help me to understand your world'. As Arndt et al. (2018, p. 112) put it, "early childhood practitioners, in all their diversity, have more in common than what separates them. Now is the time for solidarity."

8.3 Limitations of the study

As this is an academic paper, the vast majority of the sources presented in this thesis are academic publications. This set-up may reinforce the academic discourse upon the topic. Therefore, some concepts and texts may be exclusive to some potential readers. Moreover, as one major argument in my thesis is the necessity of dialogue, there should be more dialogue between epistemologies when it comes to professionalism in ECEC. In this thesis the academic epistemologies dominate at the expense of others, such as research produced by universities of applied sciences or materials produced by vocational training institutions. Moreover, there were no respondents in my study who did not have formal qualification for working in the ECEC field. However, many employees in ECEC do not have formal qualifications but still manage to work as team members and are competent in their work. Their efforts are just as important in the ECEC field.

There are also limitations associated with sampling. The interviews were quite homogenous in the sense that there were no male respondents or non-Finnish respondents. Moreover, all the respondents were trained in Finland, and they were familiar to me. This background can be considered both as a benefit as a challenge. On the other hand, respondents provided me a lot of interesting material as they spoke so openly, but on the other hand perhaps they told me what they thought I wanted to hear. Moreover, all respondents were selected and contacted by my own preferences. Although I was aware of my position as a researcher, it is possible that there has been a bias when selecting possible respondents. As Gadamer (2004, p. 278) points out, “self-awareness of an individual is only a flickering”.

Another limitation is the language. All interviews were conducted in Finnish and this thesis is written in English. The literature review contained both English and Finnish sources as the context of this study was Finland. Thus, many sources were available only in Finnish, and I had to translate them into English. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in Finnish and the quotes from the respondents in this thesis report are freely translated excerpts. Hence, something may

have been lost in translation. However, although language poses certain challenges, it also enables discussion across cultural boundaries. Thus, this thesis is written in English for a reason. The professionalism in ECEC is very much under progress, both in Finland and internationally. In this thesis I have presented reflective, dialogical teamwork as an essential core of professionalism in ECEC. Therefore, it would be fruitful to engage in dialogue with relevant stakeholders on the issue of professionalism in ECEC across cultural boundaries.

8.4 Suggestions for further research

In this study, it was not possible to follow the respondents in real-life educational settings and make observations, so it was impossible to evaluate how their expressed beliefs and values actualised in reality. Thus, these data could be complemented by observing the respondents' actions in real-life. Similarly, Ek (2022, p. 166) suggests more research on tacit knowledge and wisdom as interesting areas for future interest.

All respondents regardless of their educational background stated that collaboration is the essence of ECEC work. This finding reassures the understanding that raising small children is essentially a communal task. There is over generational wisdom across cultures that we should not ignore, although at the moment educational and pedagogical aspects of ECEC seem to be dominating. However, the famous African proverb "it takes the whole village to raise one child" carries perhaps some universal truth that should be examined more also in the research regarding professionalisation of ECEC.

This thesis has been conducted in the Finnish context. Finnish ECEC has its unique historical roots that affect the PPTs of ECEC professionals. Moreover, in the Finnish ECEC field, the National Core Curriculum for ECEC mandates the principles that professionals need to follow. In other contexts, the PPTs of professionals may be very different from the ones discussed in this thesis. Therefore, it would be fruitful to further investigate PPTs in various contexts, and thus reveal

perhaps more the essences of ECEC as a profession. There are multiple dimensions from which ECEC may be examined, further research and consequently dialogue between these findings could be beneficial for the ECEC field developments.

Moreover, as the importance of ECEC is more and more renowned worldwide, the professionalism is studied continuously, and there is a need to clarify what professionalism in ECEC stands for. In Finland the renewal of legislation and qualifications is one step towards this direction. However, values in ECEC seem to be the most crucial element in the professionalisation process of ECEC. Therefore, PPTs in ECEC should be studied worldwide in different cultures and contexts, particularly if we are to accept Fred Korthagen's (2017, p. 400) inconvenient truth that perhaps professional development is primarily value-based, and hence it begins with self-reflective practices. This thesis offers one insight to PPT as an integral element of professionalism in the ECEC field in the Finnish context. It would be valuable to have studies conducted in other contexts and look for more possible dialogues between these PPTs professionals have internationally.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions

There are no correct answers to these questions as opinions change during life course. In this interview I would like to hear what you think at the moment about these issues. Before we begin, do you have any questions regarding my research?

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your background, i.e. how you came to work at ECEC and where you had your training for this profession? (also respondent's age and work experience were covered here)
2. Why did you want to work in ECEC? (*Core qualities / Mission*)
3. What kind of early childhood educator do you think you are? And would you like to be different in some way? What are your strengths as an early childhood educator? Do personal characteristics matter, and if yes, how? (*Core qualities / Identity*)
4. What do you think is most important in ECEC? What inspires or motivates you at your work? (*Mission*)
5. What is the difference between a professional and a layman in ECEC? I.e. why is training needed in ECEC work? (*Professionalism*)
6. Why are adults needed in ECEC? (*Beliefs*)
7. What does a child learn in ECEC? (*Beliefs*)
8. What kind of principles do you have at work that are not negotiable? (*Identity*)
9. What do you think about collaboration in ECEC? (*Beliefs / Teamwork*)
10. Where or from whom did you get these ideas you have expressed? (*Argumentation / Self-reflection*)
11. How did you end up thinking like this? Has your thinking changed during the years, if yes, how? (*Argumentation / Self-reflection*)
12. How much do you reflect these kinds of questions? (*Professionalism / Self-reflection*)
13. How did you experience this interview?
14. Is there anything you would like to add or ask?

Thank you very much for giving this interview!

Appendix 2: Haastattelukysymykset (interview questions in Finnish)

Näihin kysymyksiin ei ole oikeita vastauksia, nämä näkemykset muuttuvat elämän varrella. Tässä haastattelussa haluaisin kuulla mitä sinä tällä hetkellä ajattelet.

Ennen kuin aloitetaan, onko sinulla kysyttävää tähän tutkimukseen liittyen?

1. Kertoisitko vähän taustastasi eli miten päädyit alalle ja missä opiskelit? (Selvitä tässä myös vastaajan ikä ja työkokemus)
2. Miksi olet halunnut töihin varhaiskasvatuksen pariin? (*Ydin ominaisuudet / Missio*)
3. Millainen varhaiskasvattaja olet omasta mielestäsi? Ja millainen haluaisit olla? Mitkä ovat vahvuuksiasi varhaiskasvattajana? Onko luonteenpiirteilläsi merkitystä / miten ne vaikuttavat? (*Ydin ominaisuudet / Identiteetti*)
4. Mikä on sinusta tärkeintä varhaiskasvatuksessa? Mikä motivoi / inspiroi sinua työssäsi? (*Missio*)
5. Mikä on maallikon ja ammattilaisen ero varhaiskasvatuksessa? Eli mihin koulutusta tarvitaan varhaiskasvatuksessa? (*Ammatillisuus*)
6. Mihin aikuista tarvitaan varhaiskasvatuksessa? (*Uskomukset*)
7. Mitä lapsi oppii varhaiskasvatuksessa? (*Uskomukset*)
8. Millaisista periaatteista et tingi? (Miten periaatteesi näkyvät käytännössä?) (*Identiteetti*)
9. Mitä ajattelet yhteistyön merkityksestä varhaiskasvatuksessa? (*Uskomukset / Tiimityö*)
10. Mistä / keneltä olet nämä ajatukset saanut? (*Argumentointi / Itsereflektio*)
11. Miten olet päätenyt näihin ajatuksiin? Onko ajattelusi muuttunut vuosien saatossa? Jos on, miten? (*Argumentointi / Itsereflektio*)
12. Miten paljon pohdit näitä kysymyksiä? (*Ammatillisuus / Itsereflektio*)
13. Miten koit tämän haastattelun?
14. Onko vielä jotain mitä haluat kertoa tai kysyä tässä haastattelussa?

Kiitos paljon!