JECER

VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

Teamwork as a cornerstone of a child's educational support in early childhood education and care in Finland

Samuli Ranta[a], Noora Heiskanen[b],
Nina Heiskanen[c] & Marja Syrjämäki[d]

[a] *Philosophical Faculty, University of Eastern Finland, corresponding author,*
e-mail: samuli.ranta@uef.fi, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0241-3437
[b] *Philosophical Faculty, University of Eastern Finland, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2785-5346*
[c] *Philosophical Faculty, University of Eastern Finland, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1652-6464*
[d] *Philosophical Faculty, University of Eastern Finland, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8489-8852*

ABSTRACT: This research investigates how consulting early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) perceived teamwork in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers. The following research questions were set: (1) What constructs or prevents the functionality of teamwork in ECEC according to ECSETs experiences, and (2) what are the perceived consequences of teamwork in ECEC as experienced by the ECSETs? We arranged 13 group discussions in which 35 ECSETs discussed their own experiences of successful teamwork in ECEC. Using a phenomenographic approach, we identified four factors that impacted the functionality of the teams: external, unit-specific, team-specific, and employee-specific factors. ECSETs described how teamwork specifically affects the quality of ECEC and the implementation of educational support for children. Our research will help in understanding the factors and functions of teamwork as well as to develop team strengths and practises in ECEC centers.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, teamwork, early childhood special education teacher, phenomenographic approach*

Introduction

Supporting a child is a collaborative duty that requires cooperation and a shared commitment. As part of this, successful teamwork among professionals working with a child is essential. If the professionals are unable to find functional ways of working together, there is a danger that they will not be able to construct a shared vision and agree on how to support the child in the everyday life of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Melasalmi & Husu, 2019; Ranta & Uusiautti, 2022). Therefore, for the child's support to be effective, the teamwork of the professionals working with the child needs to be functional.

In this study, we investigate teamwork as multiprofessional collaboration among ECEC professionals and especially in relation to a child's educational support. Teamwork can be defined as an action in which team members' inputs become the outcomes of a team, such as the successfulness of a child's support. Teamwork includes various processes, such as goal setting, organization of the work, communication among team members, and team development (e.g., Driskell et al., 2018; Morgeson et al., 2010). Teamwork has a multidimensional structure with an ever-changing nature that makes its research challenging. For this reason, it is relevant to understand the context in which teamwork takes place. (Salas et al., 2000.) A great amount of research on teamwork in general has been conducted, but not that much has been researched about teamwork in the context of ECEC, especially from the perspective of children in need of support (Ranta & Heiskanen, 2022). Understanding the nature of teamwork in the right context is important for supporting the development of teamwork, and a team's ability to function effectively is a prerequisite (Salas et al., 2000).

The functionality of teamwork has many consequences to the organization of a child's support and the work of ECEC professionals. It affects employees' performance and well-being at work (Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Nislin et al., 2016; Paakkanen et al., 2021) and may affect a group of children's learning atmosphere, behavior, and interrelationships, such as the prevalence of bullying, child involvement, learning, and behavior (Duckworth et al., 2009; Köngäs & Määttä, 2020; Ranta, 2020). Several studies have stated that teamwork has a major impact on the position of children and that, if attention is not paid to the effectiveness of teamwork, this could dramatically affect children's well-being and learning. It has been found that the challenges of teamwork, such as conflicts and a stressful atmosphere, degrade the quality of interactions and could make staff actions appear inconsistent to children. (see, e.g., Aloe et al., 2014; Kalleberg et al., 2009; Köngäs & Määttä, 2020; Ranta, 2020.)

From previous research we know that teamwork is a rather sensitive and silent topic in the ECEC and pre-primary education context. Teamwork evokes different feelings among employees, and employees may find it challenging to discuss dissenting opinions (Melasalmi, 2018; Ranta et al., in press). However, research shows that team interaction and a culture of open discussion promote the functionality of teamwork (Paakkanen et al., 2021; Ranta & Uusiautti, 2022) and that silence surrounding problems may lead to an increase in teamwork challenges (Heikka, et al., 2021; Melasalmi & Husu, 2019).

Multiprofessional teams in Finnish early childhood education and care

In Finland an ECEC team combines a diverse range of talents, while the professional background of team members often vary. Usually, an ECEC team follows a three-employee model with one or two teachers and a childminder. In addition, the team may include an ECSET, a bachelor of social services, and/or an assistant. Each professional has common competencies, which include, for example, an understanding of the basic task and education, as well as differentiated competencies that have been learned through their education and tasks (Ranta, 2020; Varhaiskasvatusten Koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi [VKF], 2021). The common competencies of ECEC professionals are linked to the understanding of ethical principles, the operating environment, and the basic ECEC tasks, as well as interaction and collaboration skills (Karila et al., 2017; VKF, 2021). Each occupational group also has specific competencies for which their formal education and work experience have prepared them. For instance, the specific skills of childminders are related to care and health, while the skills of a bachelor of social services focus on community-based pedagogy, family and social work, and the knowledge of the social sector. The competence of an early childhood education teacher who graduated from a university is related to the knowledge of children's development and learning, teaching, and pedagogical planning, assessment, and development (Karila et al., 2017; VKF, 2021). ECSETs, on the other hand, are experts in child support and individual solutions that support learning (Karila et al., 2017; VKF, 2021). In addition to teacher training, ECSETs have specialization studies or master's degrees in special education.

A tradition of multiprofessional teamwork in Finnish ECEC is long, even though the practices of cooperation and the professional roles have varied throughout history. In 2010s and 2020s, the governance of ECEC in Finland was first moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture, followed by a reform on the Act on ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). Legislation, together with the national curriculum (EDUFI, 2022), sets objectives for and regulates the quality of ECEC, simultaneously defined the key principles to which the staff had to commit. Multiprofessionalism, knowledge, and expertise brought by each professional group member on the team are seen as a valuable and important factors for implementing

high-quality and holistic ECEC and pre-primary education (Edwards, 2010; Melasalmi, 2018). Clarity of the staff's responsibilities supports the functionality of teamwork (e.g., Morgeson et al., 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). The need to develop teamwork practices and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of different professional groups in Finnish ECEC is identified in many studies and reports (e.g., VKF, 2021; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2016). This is of especially high importance as the latest developments of Finnish ECEC legislation further highlighted ECEC professionals shared role and responsibility to ensure the functionality of a child's support (Government of Finland, 2021).

This article sheds light on the factors that ECSETs consider as requirements for the success of group work and its consequences in Finnish ECEC. In ensuring the functional support for a child, ECEC teams, including teachers, childminders, bachelors of social services, and teaching assistants work together in child groups, implementing a child's support together (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). In addition to this support from ECEC teams, children in Finnish ECEC have the right to receive ECSETs' support (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). This support can be actualized as consultation for teams, co-teaching with the child's own teacher, and/or special education and individual teaching. Finnish ECSETs support ECEC teams to develop pedagogical practices to meet the needs of all children. Even though ECSETs can be members of ECEC teams and act as special education teachers in a child's own group, in more typical case, ECSETs participate in planning, implementation, and assessment of support as members of the team or in a consulting role (Neitola et al., 2021). This also means that Finnish ECSETs typically work with multiple teams (Neitola et al., 2021), given them an outsider perspective to teamwork and a vantage point into the activities of several teams.

Research questions

Since working in a team in Finnish ECEC under compulsory curricula is a scarcely studied phenomenon, we wanted to take a closer look at how ECSETs describe functional teamwork in relation to a child's support in ECEC. The multiprofessionalism of Finnish ECEC and the recent and ongoing changes in the tasks and roles of different professionals also make this research context favourable. This makes it possible to study the phenomenon in a situation where teamwork is potentially being restructured and also to identify the basic constructs that underlie the functionality of teamwork. As ECSETs work with multiple teams in different settings of ECEC, they can be seen as having a vision to multidimensional set of factors affecting teamwork's success. Moreover, they observe teamwork from a unique position, as they work closely with multiple teams as individual

members, yet simultaneously as external and consultative experts. We aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What constructs or prevents the functionality of teamwork in ECEC according to ECSETs experiences?
2. What are the perceived consequences of teamwork in ECEC as experienced by the ECSETs?

Methods

Research data

We asked the ECSETs who work in a consultative role in ECEC to participate in a small group discussion on teamwork in ECEC. We invited people who "had considered the issues of teamwork in their work and wanted to discuss them with colleagues". Participants were recruited by distributing the questionnaire through the e-mail list of the Pedagogical Association for Early Childhood Special Education Teachers in Finland and their closed Facebook group. For ECSETs, conversations offered the possibility for professional discussion and support from other colleagues from different parts of Finland. The small groups were formed, taking into account that the participants would represent different geographical areas in Finland. A total of 13 focus group discussions included 35 ECSETs. The number of participants in one discussion varied from three (10 discussions) to two (three discussions). The discussions lasted about 45 minutes.

All of the participants were women from 28 different municipalities representing all the geographical areas of Finland. The majority of the participants (60%) worked with over 10 ECEC groups, and all had multiple groups with which they collaborated. The participants' work experience in the field varied from a couple of years to over 15 years.

Phenomenographic approach

In this study, we used the phenomenographic approach to research and analyze ECSETs' different experiences regarding teamwork in the support of children in the context of ECEC. In phenomenographic research researchers understand that people experience, process, and think about things in different ways (Richardson, 1999). Phenomenographic research is interested in people's different experiences and ways of understanding the phenomenon. The aim is to describe the world as it is experienced and understood. (Åkerlind, 2005.) We chose a phenomenographic approach for this research because we were interested in exploring individuals' different ways of describing, interpreting, and conceptualizing various phenomena.

In phenomenographic research, data collection is typically conducted through individual or small group discussions (see Bruce, 1994). In our study, we employed group discussions to collect data. This method has been utilized in previous phenomenographic research, such as that conducted by Cossham (2017). According to Cossham (2017), group discussions can provide diverse perspectives and experiences of the studied phenomenon, giving the researcher the opportunity to comprehend its multiple meanings and experiences, and for this reason we have judged the data collection to be well suited for our research. However, group discussions also have weaknesses that researchers must take into account. These include, for example, dominance, where certain participants may overpower the conversation, and subjectivity, where participants' personal opinions and thoughts can impact the responses of others (Creswell, 2009; Qu & Dumay, 2011).

We conducted 13 online group discussions with 35 consulting ECSETs. The amount of our data is common in phenomenographic research (Bowden, 2005). In group discussions, one of the researchers welcomed the participants and sought their permission to record the conversation for research purposes. After obtaining permission, the researcher turned off the camera and microphone, allowing the participants to continue their discussion together. We wanted to create a discussion situation where ECSETs can freely and openly express their views on teamwork. Participants were left with two questions, for which the purpose was to evoke discussion by emphasizing to the participants that they are free to express their own experiences and thoughts. These questions were as follows: 1) Discuss your experiences of successful teamwork in ECEC groups, and 2) what factors have contributed to the success of teamwork? The recorded material has been transcribed by researchers and research assistants.

Phenomenography uses categorization that is meant to represent different ways of experiencing the phenomenon. By categorizing the data, it is possible to examine the collective experiences of individuals with a phenomenon, despite the fact that individuals may experience the phenomenon differently and under different conditions. Experience is a process that leads to the development and refinement of one's understanding, and it is reflected through an individual's perceptions (Niikko, 2003). By analyzing the data, we sought to interpret from group discussions how a participant experienced the phenomenon in question. Ideally, the results will provide a comprehensive representation of the various ways in which the ECSETs experiences the phenomenon. (Åkerlind, 2005). The data were searched for participants' significant differences that clarify how ECSETs define and experience a certain part of the phenomenon (see Marton, 1986; Åkerlind, 2018). We evaluated the respondents as professional and having special knowledge about the subject under study, which is why we used phenomenographic analysis, which represents horizontal categorization. In the horizontal categorization, the

ECSETs' perceptions were understood that different categories are equally valuable in relation to each other (see Uljens, 1989). First, the research data was analyzed by searching for different units of meaning, concurrently exploring differences in the definitions of experiences of the ECSETs.

Based on this work, the units of meaning were grouped into preliminary subcategories and shared for review with the research team. With the research team, the categorization was reviewed and worked out word by word. In the research group, the categorization was reviewed, and any necessary changes were made, such as revising the names of the subcategories. After that, the results and main categories were created by the research team. Finally, at the stage of compiling and finalizing the subcategories, the analysis was carried out together with the research team, which increased the reliability of the study. In addition, the examination of different stages of the analysis was conducted together with the research team to confirm the quality of the results (see Leedy & Omrod, 2001).

Results

Based on the analysis, four different categories were created that reflect the experiences of consultative ECSETs regarding effective teamwork: external factors, unit-specific factors, employee-specific factors, and team-specific factors. Through these categories, we describe how ECSETs experience these different factors affect to teamwork and what consequences ECSETs described of team-specific factors. The main categories, along with their results categories, are described in Table 1. Next, we describe the contents of the main categories in more detail and how they affect teamwork in ECEC groups.

TABLE 1 Factors affecting the functionality of teamwork

EXTERNAL	UNIT-SPECIFIC	TEAM-SPECIFIC		EMPLOYEE-SPECIFIC
		TEAM PROCESSES	TEAM PERFORMANCE	
Unit structures	Directorship	Organization	Noticing teammates	Personal capital
Documents	Work culture	Shared mission	Team development	Expertise
Requirements	Team coaching		Team interaction	

External factors describe factors outside the ECEC centers that the staff's own activities cannot influence. These include, for example, the structures of the ECEC unit and the documents defining the operations (e.g., curricula), as well as the requirements for ECEC activities. *Unit-specific factors* include factors that indirectly affect teamwork. Such factors

include the ECEC director's skills to manage and lead the ECEC center, the work culture of the ECEC center, and supporting the competence of employees. *Employee-specific factors* include personal capital (such as interaction skills and motivation to work) and expertise. *Team-specific factors* include those factors that involve other team members.

External factors

The ECSETs stated that the structures of the unit have a particular impact on the functionality of teamwork and the realization of cooperation between teams. If the structures are in order, they also create conditions for cooperation between different teams. In contrast, poorly designed facilities were described as violating the teams' activities and hindering interactions between team members. Communal spaces in ECEC centers, such as those used by several teams, could lead to employees being forced to take charge of the children in another child group in the end. Consequently, the boundaries of the teams were broken. This was seen as challenging, especially when a child needs individual support. Working with several child groups can make it impossible to provide support for the children in their own child group. Shared facilities were also noted as creating limitations on how to schedule and organize activities, as this prevented flexibility in operations. In data example 1, the ECSET describes the structures as creating a framework for team action.

> Structures and facilities and everything that creates that framework forces you to act in a particular way.

(Data example 1)

As another aspect of external factors, documents, such as individual education plans, were described as having an impact on the smooth functioning of the teams. If the documents are well drafted, they guide the preparation and updating of plans, which, in turn, helps drive the way teams' function and the plans are implemented into practice. The requirements and expectations set for the activities were also felt to be part of the burden on employees.

Unit-specific factors

It was considered important for the functionality of teamwork that the ECEC center director had the skills to organize the activities of the entire unit and staff. This included taking care of sufficient staff, influencing the permanence of groups of children and teams, and creating meeting structures. According to the ECSETs, the director is able to create conditions for the functioning of the teams, such as enabling team meetings to take place and creating a framework for a culture of open discussion in the work community (see data example 2). Solutions for how groups of children or teams are formed were also

perceived as affecting the integrity and long-term quality of the activities and how the goals of the activities are realized.

> It is amazing how big of an impact the type of director in a center can have for activities.

<div align="right">(Data example 2)</div>

The ECSETs explained that the director should be aware of employees' strengths and how different teams work. Knowing employees when forming groups of children and teams creates a framework for the realization of teamwork. Good human resources (HR) management was said to accompany the ability to help teams and clarify employee responsibilities and the role of teams. Good HR management was said to include, for example, reviewing employees' duties and the requirements contained therein with employees and taking care that team action plans (e.g., team contracts) are drawn up. For good HR management, the director should offer opportunities for team members to have discussions, commit teams to common goals, create conditions for utilizing different skills (multiprofessionalism) in teams, and enable the creation of a culture of open discussion.

The director's pedagogical awareness and how they lead the pedagogy were seen to support the work of teachers in particular. By supporting pedagogical activities in the unit, the director leads the teams in noticing the goals of the activities and the importance of the measures and supports the evaluation and development of actions. The ECSETs felt that clarifying the common goal and the objectives of actions would increase the sense of belonging in the work community. The director's pedagogical skills were also perceived as creating the conditions for ECSETs' work, as this promoted cooperation between ECSETs and directors and the evaluation of the ECEC center's activities from the view of educational support. A lack of pedagogical leadership was felt to burden teachers. In this case, teachers had to bear more responsibility for activities, and there was a greater need to explain pedagogical solutions to other team members. This was seen to increase teachers' workloads. In some cases, however, ECSETs were the ones taking the role of a leader in child's support and the development of teamwork, often saying that that was not their duty but needed, as the leadership was absent. In data example 3, the ECSET explains that teachers must carry more responsibility if the ECEC director's pedagogical leadership is weak.

> Then, the special education teacher or teacher has an even bigger role to somehow tell what kind of solutions [there are], what is the purpose of them [pedagogical solutions], and what those are aiming for.

<div align="right">(Data example 3)</div>

Supporting the functionality of the individual teams was also assigned to the directors' tasks. According to the ECSETs, the guidance provided by the director was based on

employee-oriented needs. The director was described as having an important role in helping teams get started in their cooperation and in helping solve various problems or conflicts between employees. ECSETs' discussions highlighted the importance of guidance, especially in conflict situations, yet ECSETs also talked about directors who had not provided support to teams. In these teams, employees could experience loneliness and feelings of inadequacy, and situations escalated among the staff. In these cases, the activity could manifest itself as haste, loss of group control, and employee exhaustion and stress. In data example 4, the ECSET describes her own experiences with poor leadership when she worked as a teacher in a team.

> I didn't get that director's support even though I asked for it. Because of that, I thought that I would be here this spring, and then, I would look for work somewhere else.

(Data example 4)

The functions of the teams and the employees' professionalism were also supported by the guidance of the ECSETs. According to the ECSETs, their support for the teams was driven by the needs of the children. The ECSETs' work provided the teams with the tools to take action with children and to increase the teams' resources (see, e.g., data example 5). During the discussions, the ECSETs said that teams sometimes had challenges identifying what measures could be taken to develop or promote an activity to support the children's needs.

> The work of an ECSET is a little bit like giving resources to teams. Many times, things go really well there, but they need someone to say it to them out loud.

(Data example 5)

Team-specific factors

Team-specific factors include two different results categories: team processes and team performance. Team processes embody factors that include, for example, organizing a team and structuring a common goal. Team performance embodies employees' cooperation with each other in the child group, such as action development and interaction within the team.

Team processes

According to the ECSETs, the structures of teamwork create conditions for the functionality of teamwork, coherence to activities, and the implementation of pedagogy. The practices agreed upon among the team and created together build consistency, and flexibility increases the smoothness of cooperation and reduces the sense of haste in groups of children. Clear structures were seen as particularly pronounced when there was a lot of turnover in the teams. According to the ECSETs, well-functioning structures increase the anticipation of actions and make it possible to maintain the coherence of

actions and reduce the potential workload of both children and adults due to staff turnover within the team. In data example 6, one ECSET describes the importance of structures when staff turnover is high.

> If those working structures are in order, then it's great to assign tasks to substitutes and say that they are doing this today and this small group is doing these things today. You are working with these today and do that. … it makes it easier to act if well-functioning structures and practices already exist.

<div align="right">(Data example 6)</div>

According to the ECSETs, regular team meetings promote communication among team members and in child groups, and they provide opportunities for the involvement of team members. The ECSETs said that team meetings were moved too often and that sometimes they were arranged too rarely. Team meetings provide opportunities for team members to share their observations on activities, children, and children's relationships. When the structures of the team meetings are well planned and organized, they promote the consistency of team members' actions and enable assessment and evaluation for higher-quality ECEC and the development of activities.

The ECSETs noted that, in order to develop and function consistently, a team needs a leader. The team leader was understood to be the teacher. Teachers are responsible for the implementation of the pedagogy in the child groups and make sure that everyone in the team is aware of what activities support the child's growth, learning, and special needs. The team leader is a role model for others, takes responsibility for team activities, informs team members, and leads decision-making within the team, such as the prioritization of work. The ECSETs experienced that some teams have particular problems with the demarcation of work and that employees themselves create haste in the child groups. Without strong team leadership, team performance may require outside support.

The ECSETs described that, when the duties of employees are well defined, there will be fewer conflicts. The ECSETs also discussed how the clarity of team members' professional roles and duties affects the quality of pedagogy in the child group. In addition, when team members work with tasks for which their education has prepared them, this leads to a stronger professional identity.

The prerequisites for the operation of teamwork were described as a collective understanding of the activities and a shared goal of the team functions. According to the ECSETs, it is important that the goals of the different activities are discussed together with team members, for example, whether a pencil grip is practiced with children and whether a pencil grip is relevant for all children. It is essential to have a shared understanding of the purpose of the activities for all team members and that the chosen solutions are

discussed. This creates the conditions for a commitment to agreed-upon practices. According to the ECSETs, it is important that agreed-upon working methods are written up in some document, in team agreements or in group-level curricula. The team's understanding of the activities' purposes and the commitment to the agreed-upon practices were understood to increase the flexibility and consistency of actions (see, e.g., data example 7). The problems with these were seen as complicating the planning, evaluation, and development of activities and the implementation of long-term plans; increasing the various problems in the child group and uncertainty among employees; and harming cooperation among the team members.

> The work feels easy when everyone commits to it. Then, things that have been agreed upon together can also come true in that child group. The team members somehow better see the needs of a child as a team and are prepared to work a lot for them. ... Everything goes much smoother when the employee has the feeling that someone else will take over the situation if necessary.

(Data example 7)

Team performance

According to the ECSETs, teamwork was promoted when team members discussed well-being at work and its significance and impact on children. Teams in which employees are burdened easily miss the positive things that are happening in a child group, such as progress in learning. Inflexible and rigid working practices could make it difficult to support children's needs. These factors also increase the workload of employees and create a sense of uncertainty in employees. Supporting and helping one another's work strengthens employees' task-specific expertise and provides conditions for utilizing their different skills and strengths.

The ECSETs discussed that it would be important for team members to support each other and that teams could create an encouraging atmosphere. In an atmosphere where failures are not to be feared, team members also dare to try and develop. An encouraging atmosphere was understood to support employees' solution-oriented approach and sense of safety and to create a framework for a culture of open discussion within the team. In such an atmosphere, it is easier for employees to admit their own mistakes or missteps (see, e.g., data example 8). Asking for and receiving help in such teams was also understood to be easier, which also facilitated the ECSETs' work.

> There is no need to fear that other employees will underestimate one another or, in the eyes of others, lose their skills. Mistakes and misinterpretations are also possible in the team. And it is a good thing. And employees dare to say that to teammates.

(Data example 8)

In terms of a team's effectiveness of cooperation, it was considered significant that each employee in the team would be heard and that everyone would be allowed to share their own observations about the children. The ECSETs explained that, for cooperation among team members to work, it was particularly important that each employee was allowed to contribute to the action—to feel involved and be a part of the team. Participation and feelings of belongingness create the conditions for an appreciative and reciprocal debate in which the key principles of action can be discussed from a different perspective. This creates possibilities for better understanding what kind of support children need and how to respond to these needs. The realization of inclusion requires the team to have time together and to participate jointly in discussions, where the issues defining the team's activities are discussed in particular.

The ECSETs highlighted the team's internal communication and its significance. The employee's ability to interact with team members was seen as making a consequential contribution to the team's cooperation and as increasing interaction between employees. The ECSETs understood that active interaction within the team reduces misunderstandings among team members. The ECSETs pointed out that only through discussion can one understand how another team member interprets different situations, measures, and instructions. Active discussion also promotes the interpretation of team members' differences, which, in turn, increases the consistency of the action. Finally, the ECSETs stated that cooperation between workers is not sufficiently taken into account in ECEC. Although ECEC centres have traditionally been operated in teams, cooperation may have been unplanned. According to the ECSETs, more attention should be paid to teamwork, as high-quality support for children can only be provided within a successful team.

Employee-specific factors

The ECSETs named various employee-oriented factors that affect the performance of teamwork. Personal capital is combined in particular with the employee's ability to interact with other people; this includes kindness and courtesy, the employee's openness to new ideas, motivation to work, values, and past experiences. The ECSETs described that employees' personal experiences with teams and that their own upbringing histories can influence how they understand teammates and cooperate in the team. The ECSETs also experienced sensitivity between employees as a meaningful activity to promote teamwork. Interaction skills were said to create conditions for communication among the team members. In the example below (data example 9), the ECSET explained how teamwork must partially serve the needs of each team member for a team to succeed.

> Teamwork involves emotions, and it involves something that has happened in the past, and there are personal wishes. And if those things aren't balanced, then that

interaction doesn't become confidential, and that way, you don't really dare to openly discuss things.

(Data example 9)

An employee's expertise and its upkeep were highlighted in the ECSETs' responses. In particular, the importance of teacher competence was strongly highlighted. Teachers' skills were said to have a crucial impact on the ECSETs' work. Employee competence was described as particularly important in how the staff implement different methods in a child group and how employees interact with the children. The ECSETs also saw employees' abilities to discuss different views with each other and process the development of their actions as professional skills. A lack of employee competence was seen in the inability to evaluate and receive feedback on one's own activities. Employees who are incompetent or unsure of their own skills could also create and organize unreal situations in child groups when an ECSET visits the team. The ECSET illustrates this in data example 10.

I said you can't threaten with food that way. Everything on the list is for a child's lunch. To this, this employee said, in a very unprofessional way, goodbye to me. This is an example of how they might do a scene while I'm there. And when I'm not there, they act in a different way.

(Data example 10)

Discussion

In this study, we investigated what constructs or prevents the functionality of teamwork in ECEC according to ECSETs'. Our focus was especially on teamwork in relation to a child's support. The ECSETs described that the success of teamwork has a great impact on the functionality of a child's educational support. Teamwork is influenced by external factors, as well as the team's functions. These factors included the facilities of the ECEC center, the managing and leading of the unit, and the values, attitudes, and competencies of the employees. The functions of the team, in turn, involved the organization of the teamwork, the understanding of the goals of the activities, the interaction within the team, and the development of the teamwork.

The ECSETs experienced that teamwork has a significant impact on employee well-being (see also Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Nislin et al., 2016; Paakkanen et al., 2021). The participants explained that the functionality of teamwork is a basic prerequisite for educational support provided to a child, as implemented in a group of children. If teamwork in a child group is not successful, the basic structures of the operations will not work, and the actions of the support will lose their relevance. During the discussions, the ECSETs expressed concern that the quality of teamwork varies greatly between ECEC

centers, even between teams in the same unit. For the ECSETs, it was easier for them to collaborate with teams where the functioning was smooth. They experienced difficulties cooperating with teams where communication among team members was weak and there was no culture of open discussion and no possibility of bringing out different perspectives. This, again, can be seen as a threat to the child's right to receive instant support in their own ECEC group as well as ECSET's support. A lack of discussion can lead to misunderstandings between team members and cause conflicts (see also Tarricone & Luca, 2002). In addition, fear of conflict may reduce interaction in teams or complicate the realization of multiprofessionalism (also Bøe & Hognestad, 2017).

In the ECSETs' descriptions, we identified similarities to the study by Ranta and Uusiautti (2022), in which they identified three different dimensions of functional teamwork. In our research, we found structural factors that create premises for teamwork, as well as processes taking place within the team that affect the functionality of teamwork which are presented in Figure 1.

Premises of functional ECEC teamwork							
External factors			Unit-specific factors			Employee-specific factors	
Structures of unit	Structures of documents	Requirements	Directing ECEC center	The work culture of the unit	Team coaching	Personal capital	Employee expertise

↓

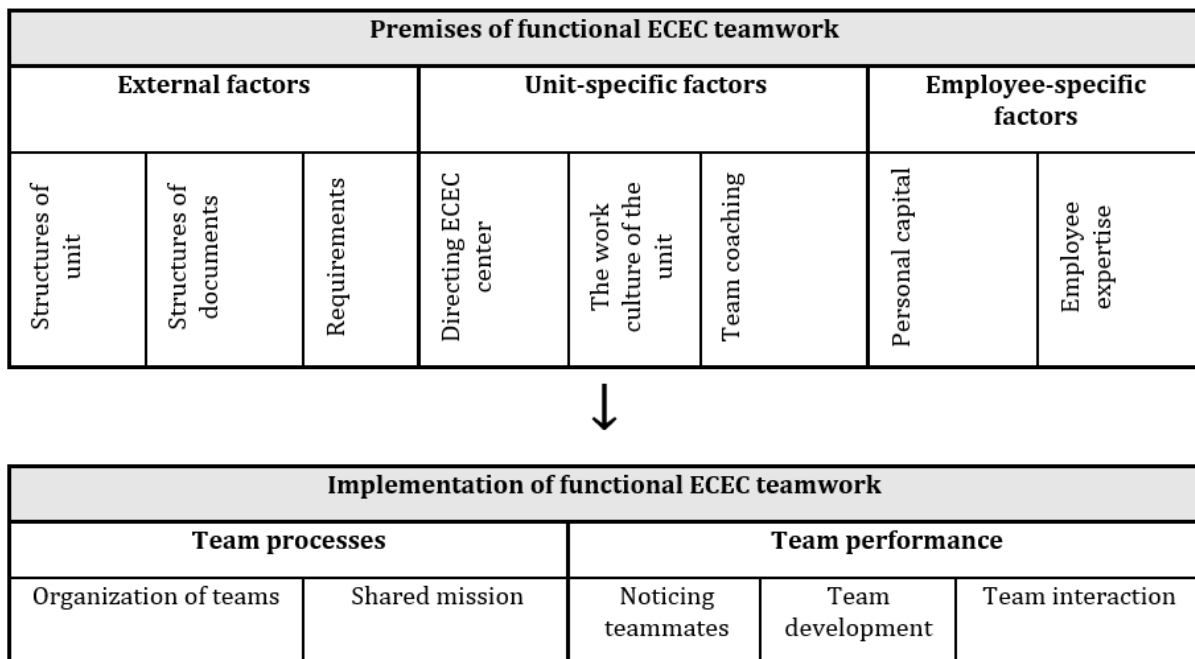| Implementation of functional ECEC teamwork				
Team processes		Team performance		
Organization of teams	Shared mission	Noticing teammates	Team development	Team interaction

FIGURE 1 Factors of functional ECEC teamwork according to ECSETs' experiences.

At its best, teamwork increases an individual's well-being and helps them thrive at work (see e.g., Edwards, 2010; Ranta & Uusiautti, 2022). According to the ECSETs, more attention should be paid to teamwork in ECEC centers to provide staff with the capacity to face challenges related to teamwork and identify its strengths. Teamwork requires not only the team members' work input but also external support and tools to develop as a team. The ECSETs described that the functionality of teamwork enables the consistency of team members in their activities and allows the children's educational support to be

implemented. Our results will help in understanding the factors and functions associated with ECEC teamwork and provide opportunities to identify and develop team strengths and weaknesses in ECEC centers.

Limitations of this study

This study has some limitations. We studied ECSETs' experiences, in which case the conclusions about the consequences of teamwork to the child's educational support are based on subjective perceptions. Based on this study, it is impossible to say what kinds of consequences teamwork have to the child but to illustrate the possibilities seen by ECSETs. ECSETs were not critical of their own role in child support or teamwork, locating the challenges in teamwork outside of their own actions. Teamwork is of course a process where also ECSETs themselves play a role. Based on this study, we do not know what the perspective of those who carry out teamwork in ECEC teams would be nor the perspective of children. The strength, however, is that ECSETs, regardless of their location, were very like-minded about things in discussions. We have an impression that the participants shared their own experiences freely and still, there were surprisingly many similarities in the participants' experiences.

Due to the recruitment of research subjects, we cannot determine if the study excluded individuals who had vastly different experiences of ECEC teamwork. All participants were motivated to reflect on teamwork and to use time to discuss about it which might have which may have excluded certain types of participants. However, the data broadly represent the variation of practices considering ESCETs work that prevail in Finland. Local practices can be seen as significant because, in the Finnish decentralized education system, local organization of ECEC plays a major role in defining the structures of ECSETs work. However, all the participants had a required special education teacher qualification, which does not reflect the situation in the field. Similarly, participants were sought through an association, and consequently, the participants could be seen as a selected sample of ECSETs. The Finnish system is unique, and the teamwork model in ECEC needs to be taken into account when applying the results. However, this is precisely why research into Finnish ECEC makes it possible to study teamwork. The results can also inform the development of teamwork at other levels of education and in other contexts.

Conclusion and implications

Teamwork in ECEC and its success, like in many other jobs, are important for the efficiency and quality of activities. This, in turn, appears at its best as more effective and functional educational support from the child's point of view. When a child's support is organized, as in Finland, in their own ECEC group, the importance of the skilled and committed professionals working close to the child becomes highlighted. As one crucial

aspect of expertise is the organization of teamwork. Although teamwork has been extensively studied and the importance of the effectiveness of teamwork has been highlighted in several studies, there has been very little focus on teamwork in ECEC research (see Melasalmi, 2018; Ranta et al., in press). Perhaps because of this, ECEC centers do not have enough tools to support team development, nor do they identify the factors and functions that would support team operations. Interpretations of the outcomes of teamwork on performance may also remain partially superficial. This was also revealed in our study. The ECSETs were able to describe the effects of different elements and activities of effective teamwork. Nevertheless, the ECSETs described quite similar outcomes for different factors and functions or described them at a very general level. However, it is not clear which of the elements discussed here lead to successful teamwork. Therefore, it is the task of the future studies to identify the extent to which different factors and functions must be realized for teamwork to become successful.

According to our research, the ECEC center director's role and leadership in the success of teamwork is significant. The ECSETs reported that the ability to direct the ECEC center has a particular impact on employee well-being and the culture of discussions. Previous studies have shown that the director's activities have a significant impact on the quality of the activities carried out in ECEC teams (Heikka et al., 2016) and thereby to children's well-being and learning. The director creates a framework for teamwork by organizing activities, forming teams and child groups, managing substitute arrangements, and building a working culture in the unit. In some cases, however, ECSETs were the ones taking the role of a leader in child's support and the development of teamwork, often saying that that was not their duty but needed, as the leadership was absent. Additionally, directors cannot lead teams alone. For developing teams working with small children, it is important to understand how cooperation among employees can be supported and how teamwork's functionality has crucial effects on the children and their support. Further research is needed to understand how to effectively guide and lead the functionality of ECEC teams at the internal level.

Acknowledgements

References

Aloe, A. M., Amo, L. C., & Shanahan, M. E. (2014). Classroom management self-efficacy and burnout: A multivariate meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, *26*(1), 101–126. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-013-9244-0

Åkerlind, G. S. (2005). Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *24*(4), 321–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360500284672

Åkerlind, G. S. (2018). What future for phenomenographic research? On continuity and development in the phenomenography and variation theory research tradition. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *62*(6), 949–958. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1324899

Bøe, M., & Hognestad, K. (2017). Directing and facilitating distributed pedagogical leadership: Best practices in early childhood education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *20*(2), 133–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1059488

Bowden, J. (2005). Reflections on the phenomenographic team research process. In J. Bowden & P. Green (Eds.), *Doing developmental phenomenography* (pp. 11–31). RMIT University Press

Bruce, C. S. (1994). Reflections on the experience of the phenomenographic interview. *Phenomenography: Philosophy and practice*, 47-56.

Chuang, E., Dill, J., Morgan, J. C., & Konrad, T. R. (2012). A configurational approach to the relationship between high-performance work practices and frontline health care worker outcomes. *Health Services Research*, *47*(4), 1460–1481. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6773.2011.01366.x

Cossham, A. F. (2017). An evaluation of phenomenography. *Library and Information Research*, *41*(125), 17-31. https://doi.org/10.29173/lirg755

Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research design. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage

Driskell, J. E., Salas, E., & Driskell, T. (2018). Foundations of teamwork and collaboration. *American Psychologist*, *73*(4), 334. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000241

Duckworth, A. L., Quinn, P. D., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2009). Positive predictors of teacher effectiveness. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(6), 540–547. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903157232

Early Childhood Education Act, Law 540. (2018). [Available only in Finnish] https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/smur/2018/20180540?search%5Btype%5D=pika&search%5Bpika%5D=varhaiskasvatuslaki

Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI]. (2022). *Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet 2022* [National core curriculum for early childhood education and care2022] (Määräykset ja ohjeet 2022:2a). Finnish National Agency for Education. https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-ja-tutkinnot/varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmien-perusteet

Edwards, A. (2010). *Being an expert professional practitioner: The relational turn in expertise.* Springer.

Fisher, C. D., & Ashkanasy, N. M. (2000). The emerging role of emotions in work life: An introduction. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 21*, 123–129. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200003)21:2%3C123::AID-JOB33%3E3.0.CO;2-8

Government of Finland (2021). *Government proposal to change the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* (HE 148/2021 vp). Eduskunta riksdagen. https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/HallituksenEsitys/Sivut/HE_148+2021.aspx

Heikka, J., Halttunen, L., & Waniganayake, M. (2016). Investigating teacher leadership in ECE centres in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 5(2), 289–309.

Heikka, J., Kahila, S., Pitkäniemi, H., & Hujala, E. (2021). Teachers' time for planning, assessment and development connected to staff well-being in early childhood education. *IntechOpen*. doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.99103

Kalleberg, A. L., Nesheim, T., & Olsen, K. M. (2009). Is participation good or bad for workers? Effects of autonomy, consultation and teamwork on stress among workers in Norway. *Acta Sociologica, 52*(2), 99–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699309103999

Karila, K., Kosonen, T., & Järvenkallas, S. (2017). *Roadmap on the development of early childhood education for 2017–2030. Guidelines for increasing the degree of participation in early childhood education, and for the development of the skills of daycare centre staff, personnel structure and training* (Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2017:30). Ministry of Education and Culture.

Köngäs, M., & Määttä, K. (2020). Pienten lasten hyvinvoinnin tukeminen päiväkodissa tunnesäätelyä ohjaamalla [Supporting the well-being of young children in day care centres by guiding emotional regulation]. *Kasvatus: Suomen kasvatustieteellinen aikakauskirja*, *51*(5), 539–550.

Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2001). *Practical research: Planning and research*. Upper Saddle.

Martin, J., Nuttall, J., Henderson, L., & Wood, E. (2020). Educational leaders and the project of professionalisation in early childhood education in Australia. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *101*, Article 101559. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101559

Marton, F. (2004). Phenomenography: A research approach to investigating different understandings of reality. *Journal of Thought, 21*(3), 28–49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42589189

Melasalmi, A. (2018). *Early childhood educators'professional learning through shared practices* [Doctoral dissertation University of Åbo]. Annales Universitatis Turkuensis, B455. http://www.utupub.fi/handle/10024/144981

Melasalmi, A., & Husu, J. (2019). Shared professional agency in Early Childhood Education: An in-depth study of three teams. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *84*, 83–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.05.002.

Morgeson, F. P., DeRue, D. S., & Karam, E. P. (2010). Leadership in teams: A functional approach to understanding leadership structures and processes. *Journal of Management*, *36*(1), 5–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309347376

Neitola, M., Siipola, M., & Heiskanen, N. (2021). Valtakunnallinen kysely varhaiskasvatuksen henkilöstölle tuen järjestelyistä, toteutumisesta sekä henkilöstön tukeen ja inkluusioon liittyvistä käsityksistä [Nationwide survey of support arrangements for early childhood education staff, implementation and perceptions of support and inclusion]. In N.

Heiskanen, M. Neitola, M. Syrjämäki, E. Viljamaa, P. Nevala, M. Siipola & R. Viitala, *Kehityksen ja oppimisen tuki sekä inklusiivisuus varhaiskasvatuksessa* [Support for development and learning as well as inclusiveness in early childhood education and care] (Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2021:30). (Vol. 13, pp. 35–112). Ministry of Education and Culture.

Niikko, A. (2003). *Fenomenografia kasvatustieteellisessä tutkimuksessa* [Phenomenographic in educational research]. University of Eastern Finland.

Nislin, M. A., Sajaniemi, N. K., Sims, M., Suhonen, E., Maldonado Montero, E. F., Hirvonen, A., & Hyttinen, S. (2016). Pedagogical work, stress regulation and work-related well-being among early childhood professionals in integrated special day-care groups, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 31(1), 27–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2015.1087127

Paakkanen, M. A., Martela, F., & Pessi, A. B. (2021). Responding to positive emotions at work–the four steps and potential benefits of a validating response to coworkers' positive experiences. *Frontiers in Psychology*. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.668160.

Pölkki, P. L., & Vornanen, R. H. (2015). Role and success of Finnish early childhood education and care in supporting child welfare clients: Perspectives from parents and professionals. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 44*(6), 581–594. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0746-x

Qu, S. Q., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative research in accounting & management*, *8*(3), 238–264. https://doi.org/10.1108/11766091111162070

Ranta, S. (2020). *Positiivinen pedagogiikka suomalaisessa varhaiskasvatuksessa ja esiopetuksessa* [*Positive pedagogy in the Finnish early childhood education and care centers and pre-school*] [Doctoral dissertation, University of Lapland]. Acta electronica Universitatis Lapponiensis 283. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-217-7

Ranta, S., Harju-Luukkainen, H., Kahila, S., & Korkeaniemi, E. (in press). "At worst it leads to madness"—A phenomenographic approach on how early childhood education professionals experience emotions in teamwork. *Nordic early childhood educational research*.

Ranta, S., & Heiskanen, N. (2022). Toimiva tiimityö – jaettu vastuu lapsen tuesta [A functional teamwork - shared responsibility for child support]. Teoksessa N. Heiskanen & M. Syrjämäki (Eds.). *Pienet tuetut askeleet – Varhaiskasvatuksen uudistuvat tuki ja kehittyvät käytännöt* [Small supported steps - Renewed support and developing practices in early childhood education]. (pp. 137–154). PS-Kustannus.

Ranta, S., & Uusiautti, S. (2022). Functional teamwork as the foundation of positive outcomes in early childhood education and care settings. In S. Hyvärinen, T. Äärelä, & S. Uusiautti (Eds.), *Positive Education and Work: Less Struggling, More Flourishing* (pp. 195–221). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Richardson, J. T. (1999). The concepts and methods of phenomenographic research. *Review of educational research*, *69*(1), 53-82. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543069001053

Salas, E., Burke, C. S., & Cannon-Bowers, J. A. (2000). Teamwork: Emerging principles. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *2*(4), 339–356. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2370.00046

Tarricone, P., & Luca, J. (2002). Successful teamwork: A case study. In *Quality Conversations: Proceedings of the 25th HERDSA Annual Conference, Perth, Western Australia, 7–10 July 2002* (p. 640). HERDSA.

Uljens, M. (1989). *Fenomenografi – forskning om uppfattningar*. Studentlitteratur.

VKF (2021). Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutusten kehittämisfoorumi [VKF] [Forum for Developing Education and Training Provision and Programmes]. *Programme for Developing Education and Training Provision and Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care 2021–2030* (Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2021:3). Ministry of Education and Culture.

Ylitapio-Mäntylä, O. (2016). Opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä lastentarhanopettajan työstä uuden työn kulttuurissa. *Aikuiskasvatus,* 36(4), 258–269. https://doi.org/10.33336/aik.88511