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Supporting Peer Interaction In Early Childhood Education And Care Multilingual Environment

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Abstract

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<p>This study was conducted to establish the significance of supporting peer interaction in ECEC facilities in Espoo, Finland. The students and working life partners were concerned with examining the role that this topic plays in preparing learners for enrolling in formal education and for future use. The ages of the children during this project were between three to six in an early childhood education center (ECEC) in Espoo.</p> <p>The study was done and implemented in three early childhood education units, of which two were Espoo City municipal units and a private day care also in Espoo. The researchers used different methods to collect information for the thesis, including qualitative research methods, verbal interviews, observation of the children between the ages of 3-6 years and questionnaires for parents.</p> <p>In the theoretical framework as well as in our results, it is shown that peer interaction is essential and that it enables us to reorganize and see its impacts on the holistic child development. Social skills, play, and linguistic skills can support how the child can interact. The results have also shown that play is essential and can be supported from an early age, both in home environment and in early childhood education and care. The scaffolding method supports children's participation in group activities, and social cognitive theory supports social skills, e.g., imitation and mirroring, which emphasizes children's peer interaction.</p> <p>The role of the adult is essential and to meet the educational goals, the adult needs to be sensitive. Tools that support peer interaction can be for example pictures, sign language, open discussion, and practicing emotions. Earlier research has shown that inclusion and socialisation are key factors when developing peer interaction. The findings show that a safe and equal environment built by the professionals together with the children supports the child's peer interaction within the group.</p>	
Key Words	Peer interaction, children, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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<p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää vertaisvuorovaikutuksen tukemisen merkitystä varhaiskasvatusyksiköissä Espoossa. Opiskelijat ja työelämäkumppanit tarkastelivat tämän aiheen merkitystä oppilaiden valmistelemissä muodolliseen koulutukseen ilmoittautumiseen ja sen käyttöön tulevaisuudessa. Tämän Espoon varhaiskasvatuksessa toteutetun hankkeen tutkittujen lasten iät olivat kolmesta kuuteen.</p> <p>Selvitys tehtiin ja toteutettiin kolmessa varhaiskasvatuksen yksikössä, joista kaksi oli Espoon kaupungin kunnallisia yksiköitä ja yksi oli yksityinen päiväkotiyksikkö myös Espoossa. Tutkijat käyttivät erilaisia tiedonkeruumenetelmiä opinnäytetyötä varten, mukaan lukien kvalitatiiviset tutkimusmenetelmät, suulliset haastattelut, 3-6-vuotiaiden lasten havainnointi ja vanhemmille suunnatut kyselyt.</p> <p>Teoreettisessa viitekehityksessä ja tuloksissamme osoitettiin, että vertaisvuorovaikutus on olennaista ja mahdollistaa sen, että sitä voidaan organisoida uudelleen ja nähdä sen vaikutukset lapsen kokonaisvaltaiseen kehitykseen. Sosiaaliset taidot, leikki- ja kielitaidot voivat tukea lapsen vuorovaikutusta. Tulokset osoittavat myös, että leikkiminen on välttämätöntä ja sitä voidaan tukea varhaisesta iästä lähtien niin kotiympäristössä kuin varhaiskasvatuksessa. Ohjattu toiminta tukee lasten osallistumista ryhmätoimintaan ja sosiaalinen kognitiivinen teoria tukee sosiaalisia taitoja, kuten matkimista ja peilaamista, mikä korostaa lasten vertaisvuorovaikutusta.</p> <p>Aikuisen rooli on olennainen ja kasvatustavoitteiden saavuttamiseksi aikuisen tulee olla sensitiivinen. Vertaisvuorovaikutusta tukevia työkaluja voivat olla esimerkiksi kuvat, tukiviittomat, avoin keskustelu ja tunteiden harjoittaminen. Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet, että osallisuus ja soisaalistaminen ovat avaintekijöitä vertaisvuorovaikutuksen kehittämisessä. Tulokset osoittavat, että ammattilaisten yhdessä lasten kanssa rakentama turvallinen ja tasa-arvoinen ympäristö tukee lapsen vertaisvuorovaikutusta ryhmässä</p>	
Avainsanat	vertaisvuorovaikutus, lapset, varhaiskasvatus

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1. Introduction

From our experiences working with children, we started to understand the importance of the phenomena of peer interaction. As a combined decision with our working life partner, we decided to look deeply into peer interaction in a multilingual ECEC environment. Parents and society play a significant role in focusing on children's learning development. As children are the world's future, it is important to focus on human interaction among children in early childhood. It helps to facilitate the children and the parents to interact with all cultural groups based upon the genders, cultures, religions, castes, and so on, which provides a widespread of opportunities to develop the child's language in society.

Peer interactions occur when children are playing, sharing, taking turns, and/or using verbal (talking) and non-verbal (smiling, waving) communication with each other (Perkins, Y., & AFIRM 2021). It helps children to develop social skills like taking turns, improving communication skills, and making friends. Because of the huge benefits of peer interaction to children, it is highly encouraged and supported in daycares. Peer interaction means the child is involved in a group (Kettumäki 2020). Interaction is showing emotions, information, and needs to another person and receiving reciprocal actions from another person (Aunonen 2016: 6). Therefore, peer interaction among children in ECEC is an especially prominent issue since it impacts on the growth and development of the children.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Article 23: "Children have the right to active participation, care, protection, and peer relationships, regardless of their need for special education". In addition, the national core curriculum mentioned the importance of peer interaction by pointing out how children view peer interaction. According to Finnish National Agency for Education 2022, The peer group, and the experience of belonging to a group are key to the child's learning and participation. Early childhood and care professionals have a vital role in supporting and developing effective practices that promote inclusion and support involvement in every child during various activities (Brodzeller et al 2018) The teachers in the early childhood and care settings try to encourage children to be involved in play with their peers. Inclusion in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is currently a globally preferred policy quality.

For children, peer relationships may be the most important part of their day in day care. Children themselves perceive peer relationships as a fundamental part of everyday life in ECEC centres (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2012). Peer relationships and the

possibility to participate in meaningful actions is important to every child, regardless of possible physical, socio-emotional, verbal, or cognitive dysfunctions (Chen et al. 2020).

On the other hand, lack of approving relationships or social isolation harms socio-emotional development and increases risks for behavioural problems (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Numerous studies have revealed that continuous peer neglect in childhood causes long-lasting social, cognitive, and health-related problems (Copeland Wolke, and Angold 2013). Without any doubt, social relationships, and peer interaction are the basis for children's well-being. In an optimal ECEC environment, professionals should recognise need of communicative and social support and scaffold every child when necessary (Syrjämäki, Pihlaja and Sajaniemi 2018). Without the help of the professionals or sufficient scaffolding some children in the day-care might be side-lined or excluded by their peers.

Children have many ways they use to interact with one another; some of these strategies are appropriate and some are not. Negative peer interaction or behaviors like children grabbing toys from peers, pushing, or hitting to get what they want, or ignoring a friend who is trying to talk to them are common in day-cares. Some children may have difficulty interacting with their peers because of developmental disabilities, language delays, or social delays.

The above-mentioned factors inspired us to investigate the topic of peer interaction. Our thesis contains qualitative research, and it is concentrated on how early childhood education educators can support peer interaction in a multilingual environment.

2. Early Childhood Education System, Legislation And Guidance

Peer interaction among children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a critical issue since it impacts growth and development. Parents are concerned with ensuring that their children's interaction with peers builds their social interactions. The influence of peers cannot be underrated since it affects the child's future well-being. Peers can contribute to a child's antisocial behavior which ruins the ability of victims to interact sufficiently as adolescents and adults (Yunus 2019: 55.) Initially, it was assumed that peers have a minimal impact in childhood with parental influence playing the biggest

role. The role of family members in shaping children's social life was upheld while ignoring the impact of peers.

However, recent studies indicate that peers influence the behavior of their fellow children in the ECEC. Children enrolled in ECEC institutions spend most of their daytime with other children compared to the time spent with family members (Pepler and Bierman 2018: 4). In this regard, the impact of peer interaction in ECEC has a great magnitude of effects on the child's development.

Recent researchers have identified that children start interacting with peers early (Yunus 2019: 54). Pre-school interactions have been established, indicating the need to examine their influence on the development of children's behavior. Previous research shows that some children between three- and four years face rejection from peers (Lojk 2017: 5). Such rejection may have a profound impact on children by building antisocial behavior in victims at an early age.

Subsequently, the child's development in their childhood is inhibited by the inability to engage interactively with peers. In effect, these children develop shyness which hinders their future endeavors in the social world. The emotional development of these children is also affected when they face rejection from their peers at an early age (Lojk 2017: 7). Hence, it is essential to study the significance of peer interaction to guide children towards interacting in a manner that is beneficial to shape their future.

2.1 Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland

Early Childhood Education is notified as an essential path to a child's development, which is guided by international agreements and Finnish law. When thinking about the rights of an individual, the individual has the right to be free and treated with dignity and equality (Constitution of Finland 6 § 7 §). A minor or a child is considered someone under the age of 18 (Child Welfare Act 6§). Therefore, the possibility of having holistic development is vital, also making sure that the child's best interest is considered (Child Welfare Act 2 §, Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 4 §).

As the introduction explains, the child has the right to live and grow in a safe environment (The United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child Articles 3-6). The country needs to provide the appropriate facilities for the child to have an appropriate education (The United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child Article 7, Child Welfare Act

417/2007 2 § 7 §). In Finland, children under the age of seven can participate in early childhood education and care (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 1§).

The outline goes that the parliament makes needed decisions, legislation, and political concerns, in this case, the Act on Early Childhood (Hakanen and Nevanen 2020). Therefore, operating the Act on Early Childhood Education is vital because the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for overall guidance, planning, and monitoring of early childhood education and care (Ministry of Education and Culture n.d). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, early childhood education and care is implemented by municipalities, joint municipal authorities, and independent service providers at the early education center or as family day-care.

Finnish National Agency has important value because it publishes early childhood and care curricula as a guideline for municipalities, early childhood education and care providers and professionals on providing quality education among children. As stated before, municipalities' early childhood education and care national core curriculum are the basis for their local curriculum (Act on Early Childhood 20 §). For example, the local curriculum is developed for a given provider, unit, or group and it needs to notify pedagogically emphasis other factors applicable to early childhood education and care, supplementing the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (Act on Early Childhood Education 20§).

Finnish Education and National Centre make sure by giving guidelines that early childhood education is provided with quality. Finnish National Education Centre has a strategy for making external evaluations for early childhood education and care providers to support their statutory task of quality management and self-evaluation (Finnish National Education Centre). Furthermore, it also gives ongoing external evaluations and reports of completed evaluations (Finnish National Education Centre)

Early childhood education curriculum ensures that the child has a right to an early childhood plan. The values in early childhood education are the child's conception, childhood, and learning. Such as respecting the child's possibility to grow and having equal treatment. Additionally, there are values such as diversity and a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Pedagogical activities in early childhood education are based on child interests, needs, and learning areas (Early Childhood Education Curriculum 2022). In the latest early childhood education and care curriculum, inclusion is noticed as an important part. Learning areas consist of a rich world of languages, diverse forms of

expression, me, and our community, exploring and interacting with my environment, and I grow, move, and develop (Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum 2022: 23). Learning areas and the interest of the child helps the educators to support the transversal competences.

Transversal competencies are thinking and learning, Cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression, taking care of oneself and managing daily life, Multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology, participation, and involvement (Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum 2022: 23). Professionals who are working in early childhood education can be nursery nurses. Still, there is always one teacher who has obtained a university education. The teacher is responsible for pedagogy in the group of children, and the teacher will be responsible for making early childhood plans for children.

2.2 Target group and working life partner

The thesis aims to research peer interaction between 3-6-year-olds children in Espoo, Finland. Our working life partner is Espoo City, two municipal early childhood education and care units and one private early childhood education unit. Two early childhood education units were bilingual and one early childhood unit were Finnish speaking unit.

In this thesis, we use a qualitative method, and material acquisition is realized through observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Observation takes place in group-led activities, plays and free play. We will verbally interview early childhood education professionals and use questionnaires for parents.

3. Social Skills and Play

In this chapter we will share theoretical perspectives of our developmental task. We chose social cognitive theory, zone of proximal development, social and behavioral development, scaffolding and language development in together with our working life partner. These topics were chosen because they are related to our research question. Thus, for us to answer our research question, we must examine the above topics' theoretical framework.

3.1. Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory is an excellent example of how the child can observe what the parent is doing and might do the same after. Albert Bandura influences that cognitive processes impact the environment and behaviour (Santrock 2009: 27). An introduction above is an example of observational learning. Observational learning also named modelling or imitation, has a significant impact since the child gets models from the environment on how to react. Santrock mentions an excellent example of when a boy observes the father, who gets angry at people and treats others with antipathy. It leads to social cognitive theory highlighting that people collect a wide range of thoughts, behaviour and feeling through observing others' behaviours; these observations are vital parts of children's development (Santrock 2009: 27).

Bandura's social cognitive theory is divided into three dimensions linked to each other. It includes behaviour, the person/cognition, and the environment (Santrock 2009: 27). These dimensions are operating interactively since behaviour can have an impact on individual factors and vice versa, cognitive activities can have an impact on the environment, and the environment can change individuals' cognition (Santrock 2009: 27).

3.2. Zone of proximal development and peer interaction

A research study by Taber states that according to a famous psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, in his theory states that the development of children creates a massive value over social and cultural experiences despite being children are born with the skills for language development. Zone of proximal development is an excellent example since the children who cannot master the range of skills by themselves can get guidance and assistance from adults or more skilled children (Santrock 2009: 200). The idea is for children to learn by interacting with others such as children and adults to think more beyond the "zone" more literally outside of the box (Santrock 2009: 200). There are two limits in the zone of proximal development: upper and lower limit. The upper limit is the level of increased responsibility with an instructor's guidance. While the lower limit is the skills reached independently (Santrock 2009: 200). Zone of proximal development supports cognitive skills that are maturing, which can be supported and accomplished by only more-skilled individuals (Santrock 2009: 200).

Lev Vygotsky suggests that language plays an especially key role in the child's development, and the child can develop their languages only through social interactions and focusing on the diversified culture, which might be effective for the children to learn many things and to adopt new creative thinking of language development.

Peer interaction is especially important for the learning and development of children. Vygotsky (1978) discussed how interactions with others contribute to development particularly when those interactions concern more experienced peers during which the more experienced inducted, the less experienced into the ways of the culture. Children have more to learn from others who are older or younger than themselves than they do from age-mates. In mixed-age, children scaffold the behavior of younger one, so that the latter play within their zones of proximal development and thereby stretch their abilities to higher levels (ECI 2021).

Research shows that the level of peer interaction increases in a mixed-age group. "For younger children, symbolic play improves in quality, through both lengths of time and interactions, when it involves children of mixed age" (Tara J.F. 2009). Younger children turn to be attached to older children for guidance, and they act as role models and leaders to the younger ones.

3.3 Social and behavioral development

ECEC plays an essential role in shaping children's behavior and developing social skills that are vital to surviving in the modern social world. Previous researchers have identified that children begin to interact with peers even before reaching three years of age (Yunus 2019: 57). At this early age, the interaction may be in the form of touching each other and touching the toys of peers. The social-emotional competencies achieved through peer interactions are indicated in figure 1 below.



Figure 1 Social-emotional competencies (Pepler and Bierman 2018).

The knowledge that children begin interacting early in childhood shows the need to conduct a study to understand the significance of peer interaction amongst peers. The ability to engage in social interactions with peers indicates that behavioral development and social skills are formed at an early age during childhood (Pepler and Bierman 2018: 5). However, the participants in this thesis are between the age of three to six years. At this stage, most children are already enrolled in ECEC, and peer interaction is clearer as compared to kids under three years of age.

The study is concerned with examining the way children initiate play, communicate with peers, and interact during free play and teacher-directed activities. Children deploy various techniques such as showing their toys to attract the attention of peers to initiate play (Shin et al. 2016: 384). Verbal and non-verbal cues are also tactics that children use to invite peers to engage in play activities. In other cases, children use imitation and negotiation to initiate play.

However, previous research conducted by Yunus (2017: 56) shows that most ECEC practitioners lack knowledge of children's interaction competencies. This knowledge is essential in establishing the capabilities of different children to guide peer interaction.

ECEC practitioners need sufficient knowledge regarding the varying capabilities of learners in pre-school to cater to the needs of all children. Lojk (2017: 5) indicates that some children experience behavioral problems at an early age.

Professionals and adults should understand these behavioral needs to tailor the ECEC programs to meet these requirements. For instance, children with antisocial behavior need professional support to fit into the programs. These kids are usually victims of rejection among peer groups during their early childhood years. These vulnerable children require encouragement to develop their social skills in the context of ECEC centers (Pepler and Bierman 2018: 7). Practitioners should be trained to respond to the needs of children with special needs. Therefore, professionals, parents, and older adults have a role in ensuring that they facilitate the social and behavioral development of children in ECEC.

3.4. Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding is particularly important during teachers' directed activities/play. The concept of scaffolding introduced by Vygotsky is used to guide children from being assisted by a teacher or peer to do a new task to be able to do the task independently (Bodrova & Leong 2007). This guidance should or must fall within each child's zone of proximal development (ZPD) to support the skills and knowledge of the child that needs support (Vygotsky 1978). The teacher determines this individualized scaffolding based on each child's ZPD through dynamic assessment. (Robert C et al. 2012). Dynamic assessment considers the outcome of an intervention, and it is used to determine a child's present level of achievement and the future ability to attain a greater level (Robert C et al. 2012). Thus, before teachers can use scaffolding as a pedagogical method to support any child, they must consider each child's potential, abilities, needs, and skills.

The scaffolding method does not make the activity easier for the child, it instead makes the child's work easier by providing full support and guidance at the early phase, then slowly retreating as the child starts to understand and grasp the new skill (Wood et al. 1976). During teachers' led activities in ECEC, scaffolding is essential because it facilitates motivation and engagement. When an action is scaffolded, it increases children's participation and helps them focus on the skills they are trying to learn.

Scaffolding also makes the learning process manageable and improves children's confidence, which in turn makes them freely interact with their peers.

Lastly, scaffolding helps in bridging the learning gaps among children. Assessing the needs of children helps the teacher to know how to scaffold an activity for each child, thus, helping them to learn and master new skills. To support peer interaction during teacher-directed activities it will be nice to scaffold the activities according to each child's needs, abilities, skills, and potentials because this will enhance participation and engagement for every child in a group.

3.5. Teacher directed activities

The daily life of children in the ECEC environment is comprised of much play with peers and teacher-led activities. Teacher-led activities can be several activities like arts, gymnastics, crafts, science, and mathematically based exercises. This thesis is based on supporting peer interaction. However, the type of activities is not the focus but how these activities support peer interaction. These activities are not just guided but also planned by the teachers. During the planning, the teachers consider each child's strengths, weaknesses, developmental stages, and interests. The children can also help the teachers during the planning. When this happens, the activity tends to be more interesting and engaging, it increases the participation and concentration of the children. Most of these activities are play-based for them to be enjoyable. As mentioned above, children learn a lot from play, but they will learn a lot more from structured play that is supported by teachers' directed activities. Teachers engaging children in guided activities or scaffolding play help enhance academic exploration and learning, and this, at times, have some learning goals they wish to Attain (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009).

Teachers' participation during directed activities can provide distinctive interactions and possibilities to develop language, spring innovative ideas, and helps children think about and develop concepts and skills they had no idea about. The way teachers interact with children during these activities and their choice of words are particularly important for children's learning (Babara and Jill 2016). During directed activities, the teachers need to take time to set out the rules and regulations which support children learning. However, they do not solely direct the activity while implanting opportunities for children to learn novel words and ideas (Babara and Jill 2016).

Teacher-led activities can provide unique interactions and opportunities to foster language, give the latest information, and guide children to think about and discover concepts and skills that they had no idea about (Babara and Jill 2016). During directed activities, the teacher needs to be an active participant. This will make the children more engaged. The instructions for directed activities should be simple, and children should be given time to process and digest them. During the activity, the teacher should be observant and take note of the children's behavior and how the activity was perceived. This will help the teacher to modify and improve future activities that suit the needs and interests of each child (Järvinen et al. 2009:172-174). To motivate and encourage the children for future participation, the teacher should appreciate the children's effort and ask for their feedback. This will also make their experience enjoyable.

3.6. Play as peer interaction

Play is an essential part of children's lives, and it is at the center of early childhood education. Early childhood education centers should create diverse opportunities for children to play. Many early childhood education curricula are play-based, which springs from constructivist development theories like (Piaget 1963; Vygotsky 1967), which encourages learning via play. There are several definitions of play, but in this thesis, we will use the definition of Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013 :105). Which defines play as; "activities that are fun, voluntary, flexible, have no extrinsic goals, involve active engagement of the child, and often have an element of make-believe." In the ECEC environment, children may play alone, with peers, or with adults/teachers. Play is said to be children's work, and most of their time should be involved in play (Babara and Jill 2016). Play can also be a significant social action with children acting together and learning ways to have good relationships with other children and learning about sharing and negotiating social contracts (Gagnon and Nagle 2004).

Vygotsky's concept of make-believe play is the main activity of children in preschool and daycare. Children's involvement in high-level make-believe play adds to the development of their inherent cognitive skills like symbolic thinking and self-regulation (Babara and Jill 2016). According to Berk (1994), between the ages of 2,5, and 5 years, social dramatic play and make-believe play materialize and develop. The type and way of playing changes with the children's ages. As children grow older, their interaction with others begins to last longer, interact with a variety of peers, and become more involved and cooperative.

Play has a lot of complex and indirect benefits for children. Berk, (1994) brought out the fact that children who are more engaged in social dramatic play have a higher level of intellectual development and a greater capacity to understand others' feelings. Understanding the feelings of others is an excellent quality that fosters positive peer interaction. In addition, play welcomes prospects for children to problem solve, use their imaginations, their creativity, and enjoy the world around them.

Furthermore, make-believe play has an extensive list of benefits for children. Make-believe play promotes children's narrative and storytelling skills, strengthens their mental capacities, enhances their memory, and enlarges their vocabulary. Children involved in make-believe play tend to reason through demanding situations, and this improves their problem-solving abilities, eventually letting them have greater self-esteem and confidence in their decision-making abilities. The combination of the above benefits has proven to be the reason for higher scores in school for children who engaged in make-believe play as compared to children who do not have make-believe play experiences. (Berk 1994).

Play is how children traverse their world and gain knowledge. Children go through distinct stages and phases of development, such as emotional, intellectual, linguistic, physical, and social development. Play is a vital way of further developing these phases, therefore play is not only a way for children to explore different situations but an overall developmental agent. (Van Hoorn et al 2015 :4).

Play is an essential way for children to develop and learn new skills, socialize, and go through life's challenges. It should be noted that children should not be coerced to play. Play among children should be voluntary, instinctive, and out of their interest.

3.7. Free play

Free play is an activity a child performs alone or with peers without adult involvement. Free play is valuable to children's creative development, letting them discover ideas and activities without the influence of an adult. In free play, children may talk either to themselves or to other children about their activities, illustrating things, pointing out what is happening in the play scenario, and negotiating play between peers (Babara and Jill 2016). Free play is motivated by the satisfaction enclosed in the activity, and the

player/players should not be worried about the outcome of the play but the activity itself. In free play, the children make their rules, and they can control their activities and apply meaning to their activities. Free play should be free from outside influence and the behavior of those involved should be instinctive. Free play demands active participation and involvement of the children (Saracho and Spodek 1998 :3-4).

An early childhood education should be where children discover a love for learning through various play experiences. The benefits of play are crucial to allowing a child to develop appropriately. Specifically, research has pointed to the value of free play in children's creativity and, more recently, in children's self-regulation (Bodrova et al. 2013). However, one limitation of free play is that it typically revolves around ideas and content that children are familiar with and is focused on ideas and language that children already know.

According to Jona K, Bailey. J. (2010) play is beneficial to children in ways like learning how to think, remember and problem solving. Play provides children with the chance to test the world's beliefs. Children's language skills can be enhanced by play. This can be done when children mimic or model their peers. In addition, Play lets children be creative while building their imaginations. Play is essential to healthy brain development. Play allows children to master skills that will help build their self-confidence and resilience (Jona K, Bailey. J. 2010). Play allows children to air out their views, experiences, and at times, frustrations (Jona K, Bailey. J. 2010). Play with peers helps children to acquire social skills. Play lets children learn the skills of mediation, problem-solving, sharing, turn-taking, and cooperating with peers. Children carry out decision-making skills, working at the pace and uncover their interests during free play (Jona K, Bailey. J. 2010).

4. Language Development and Linguistic Pedagogy

4.1. The influence of peers in language development

Previous studies indicate that peer interactions play a key role in influencing a child's growth and development. Yunus (2019: 54) shows that children begin interacting with peers even before the age of three years. Their growth is subsequently likely to be impacted by peers at an early age, necessitating the study of how these interactions affect a child's growth and development. Ribeiro et al. (2017: 1) show that peer interaction in preschool affects social and cognitive development among children. When there

are positive interactions, kids grow mentally and develop critical skills at an early age enabling them to cope with the changes in adolescence.

The development accompanied by interactions facilitates children's readiness for enrolling in formal education (Lindh and Mansikka 2022.) For example, children develop problem-solving skills as they try to help each other in difficult moments during playing sessions. The characteristics of peers determine the success attained in the child's growth and development (Shin et al 2016: 385). For example, interacting with children with a greater intellectual ability enables kids to develop their prowess. Pre-school competency also boosts the child's growth achievements and fosters development.

Ribeiro et al 2017 depict that children with low educational ability benefit immensely from peer interactions in the preschool years. Some parameters developed during preschool include modeling, social learning, and peer cultures. Ribeiro et al. (2017:2) indicate that children's language development is facilitated by horizontal interactions with peers more than vertical interactions between children and adults. Pre-school years play a vital role in developing children's comprehension of language and expression. Children between three to six years of age are still in their early childhood development stages. Their ability to express themselves is not developed, hence the need to interact with peers to experience horizontal interactions (Davis and Degotardi 2014: 65).

Children feel comfortable learning from peers in cooperative play and fully develop their language skills. The foundation laid in preschool is essential in facilitating the successful transition into formal learning (Balani 2020: 5). Children who fully attain language development during preschool years benefit from reading, and their later proficiency in language in formal school is established at an early age (Ribeiro et al. 2017: 2). In effect, language development fosters children's language prowess and academic success in later years as they endeavor to establish their career path. In contrast, children who develop language capabilities partially in preschool face long-term difficulties in academics and socio-emotional development (Lojk 2017: 7). Subsequently, such children perform poorly academically, recording poor literature results, and affecting their overall performance.

4.2. The influence of educator's child's language development

Teachers play a vital role in facilitating children's language development in ECEC facilities. Children in preschool primarily depend on instructions given by their respective teachers compared to other adults. Previous studies show that the influence of teachers is critical after enrolling in preschool. The teachers are likely to control peer interactions in preschool based on their perceptions of the appropriate way of interacting among children (Yunus 2019: 55). Learners in ECEC view their teachers as symbols of power and are keen to obey their instructions as compared to other adults within the child's scope of experience. Some of the essential aspects taught by practitioners in ECEC and their percentage contribution are indicated in figure 2 below.

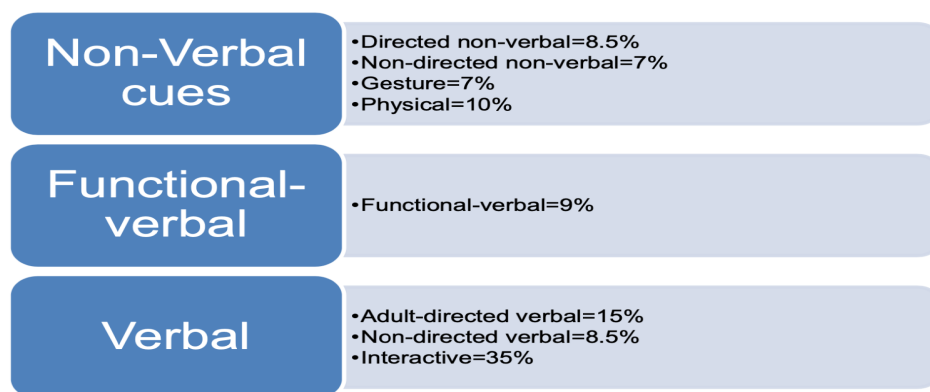


Figure Language Elements taught in ECEC (Syrjämäki 2019: 563)

Teachers in ECEC centers expose children to complex syntax to steer their language proficiency. The pupils are also exposed to huge quantities of language-related information that paves the way towards boosting language development in readiness for transition into formal school. The teachers' inputs go a long way in influencing language skills among children in ECEC (Syrjämäki 2019: 563). The pie chart in figure 3 was developed from the data in figure 2 to indicate the visual percentage contribution of each variable.

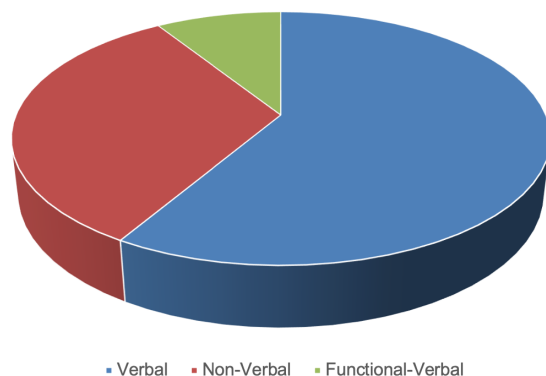


Figure 3. Visual presentation of percentage contribution of each variable

4.3. Socio-pedagogical aspect on peer interaction

When thinking about the socio-pedagogical aspect, it is important to remember how peer interaction can support children to create friendships, enhance language skills, and become aware of the diversity within society. The latest Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2022) highlights inclusion's importance. Also, the environment for learning and creating peer interaction must provide equal opportunities for all children to develop. Talentia states that inclusion is seen by people as a right to gain knowledge and express their opinion.

Participation has a key role because the individual feels he belongs and can participate and be actively present in human relationships (Nivala and Rynnänen 2019: 138). Participation is an interactional process that involves managing relationships between children and adults. When the child can participate and feel included in a group in the early childhood education unit, then peer interaction becomes easier this is because the child can make decisions and feels included during interaction periods with other humans (peers, adults, and the world around him or her). Nivala and Rynnänen (2019) point out the importance of inclusion and emancipation for integrating within society, not forgetting socialization.

Early childhood education has a significant role because it is compelled to create facilities for children to learn age-appropriate skills in a safe environment (Nivala and Rynnänen 2019). Additionally, socio-pedagogical aspects take account of the resources and

individual factors so the child can be an active agent in the future (Nivala and Ryyänen 2019).

5. Purpose, Ethical Consideration and Reliability

5.1. Purpose of our study

Together with our working life partner we hope that through the thesis, we will learn more deeply how peer interaction emerges in early childhood settings and how it can be supported by the teacher through pedagogical actions. Child's overall development, such as language development, the interaction between children and the development of friendship skills are amongst our interests. Most importantly, how can teachers support peer interaction during free play and directed activities in a multilingual environment? Two early childhood units emphasize the English language in daily activities, and one early childhood unit is diverse, meaning that there are children with Finnish as a second language.

There is one main developmental question, which is below:

How can peer interaction be supported by educators during free play and directed activities in a multilingual environment?

5.2. Ethical consideration and reliability

The study was guided by ethical standards to ensure that the integrity of the research process was upheld throughout the study. The dignity and well-being of the sample that participated in the research are also protected by following the ethical guidelines of research studies (Teachman and Gladstone 2020). The key parameters considered in this study to observe research ethics include confidentiality, the anonymity of identity and informed consent. All participants participated voluntarily. The consent forms were given to the children's parent's and in the consent, form was described the research topic and how the research was handled. The questionnaires to parents were sent randomly, and

in the beginning of the questionnaire the questionnaire was informed of the research topic and the three different sections of the questionnaire described how to answer the questions. The interviews for early childhood education and care professionals were carried out orally and they were not recorded at any phase. The interviews have been carried out both face-to-face and via phone calls via WhatsApp.

Firstly, the researcher ensured that the raw data collected was held with the highest degree of confidentiality. The study promised to uphold confidentiality by storing the data in a safe form and never disclosing it to unauthorized persons. Confidentiality was geared towards preventing any harm coming upon participants such as stigmatization in the social context. Confidentiality was considered by making sure to the participants that all the data that was stored by making notes would be immediately destroyed after the research had been completed.

Secondly, the anonymity of identity was enhanced by refraining from storing the exact names of participants. The participants' names were not collected to avoid any possibility of their disclosure in case the data leaks to unauthorized persons. The sample was not needed to tell their names when collecting the demographic information. Finally, the researcher sought permission and notified the participants of the needs of the research. The researchers had a holistic understanding of the research process and were aware that they were participating in the study before the study. Therefore, the researcher prepared a consent form that was issued to participants for them to sign to indicate their agreement.

6. Methods and Implementation

Here we are going to look at the methods used in data collection and how we implemented our theoretical knowledge to get the most complete and accurate data.

6.1 Methods

This thesis was carried out using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are best used when a researcher wants more in-depth data to answer questions concerning the interaction between people in social situations and uses words to analyze instead of numbers. Qualitative methods of research were selected because they allow

researchers to gain a deep insight concerning the topic of study. Qualitative data helps the researcher to conduct extensive research to view the topic from different dimensions (Hamilton and Finley 2019). For instance, the researcher can collect diverse data to understand the significance of ECEC based on the aspects of children, teachers, and parents within the context of Espoo, Finland. The data can be applied in other regions in later stages to determine suitability across diverse cultural heritages.

Therefore, qualitative methods will work best to answer our research question: how do educators support peer interaction during free play and teacher-directed activities? This type of research allows the researcher to carry out smaller studies in small groups, as qualitative research is often time-consuming. Conducting smaller studies allows the researcher to entirely focus on the research question and get in-depth data straight from the target group themselves (Nolan et al. 2013 :88-89). For our research, we used observation and interviews through questionnaires as our research methods, this helped us to obtain in-depth data straight from the possible source.

Observation according to (Mason. J. 2002: 94) is a method of collecting data that requires the researcher to immerse him/herself in the research setting to experience and observe firsthand a range of dimensions in and of the setting. A researcher can observe as an active participant or from afar and it can be done with or without the knowledge of those being observed. In our case, our target groups were aware.

Interviewing as a research method involves a researcher asking questions and hopefully, receiving answers from the interviewee. Interviews are widely used in social research, and they can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Robson and McCartan 2011:284).

A questionnaire is a form of structured interview, and it can be said to be a research instrument with a series of questions to collect data/information from the respondents.

We used the above three methods because these methods lay emphasis on depth, variation, complexity, and roundedness in data (Mason. J 2002 :75). In addition, we used these methods because we had an epistemological view which suggests that evidence or knowledge of the social world cannot be generated without observing and participating in real-life situations (Mason. J 2002 :95). Thus, interacting, participating and observing was the best way of collecting firsthand information.

We used the narrative method in recording during observations. There are multiple ways of recording through narrative records, including diaries, anecdotes, running records, and specimen records. (Bruce et al. 2014:13). In our case, we used diaries to record our observations. During group-led activities, it was not easy to write down details of the observation while leading the activities. The notes were taken in point form, and it was elaborated upon during break. Taking notes during free play was easier because we were not active participants in the free play.

6.2 Implementation

The research was implemented by having observation in the early childhood unit, verbal interviews with early childhood education and care professionals and questionnaires for parents. All participants joined voluntarily, and the research aim was explained to them. There were consent forms made, and 13 participants joined the observation. Group-directed activities were done in small groups, such as morning circles, outdoor activities, and different distinct play activities among children. In the group-directed activities, the researcher guided the activities for children. While in free play, the researcher observed play interactions such as barbie, drawing and exercise in the gym. Five early childhood education and care professionals joined in the verbal interviews, which were conducted face-to-face and by telephone. Six parents answered the questionnaires that were sent to them; the questionnaires were made via Google Forms. The anonymity and confidentiality were considered, and all information gathered at the end of this research will be destroyed.

Observation has happened from May to August 2022. Before observation, we gave the parents the consent forms, where they could decide whether the child could participate in the observation. There have been 13 participants in the observation from 3 to 6-year-old children. Observation has been implemented by having a group directed activities and viewing children interacting during free play.

The observed target group of teacher's directed activities was made up of children aged between 3-6 years. The space was divided into two classrooms, one for the 5-6 years activities and the other for the 3-4-year-old children. Most of the activities and plays take place in one room which is the room for the 3-4 years because it is the largest. The observation was done in both classrooms and as an active participant. The morning

circles are for the whole group and the 5-6-year lessons are on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The space has been finely demarcated to encourage distinct types of plays and activities among the children. The daycare has two playgrounds, one at the front and another at the back of the daycare's building. Outdoor activities also take place in a nearby park with a huge open field that gives the children the opportunity to explore during play.

Teacher-directed activities will include activities where the teacher was in a key role, such as leading circle time, crafts, or a game such as tag with the children. Although during free play, the children were just among peers for most of the time, a teacher was also present for some of this time.

These sessions usually occur in various places like the playground, forest or even inside the day-care during official activity times. Most of the time we used the exploratory learning approach. According to Rieber (2017), all exploratory learning approaches are based on the following four principles: learners can and should take control of their learning, knowledge is rich and multidimensional, learners approach the learning task in remarkably diverse ways, and it is possible for learning to feel natural because learning is not forced on the children. Based on this approach, most of the children could produce ideas with the help of their language and sometimes try to explain to the rest of the group or the adult in the group. Finally, some parents were also involved. Parents were invited to morning circle, and children with different language backgrounds were encouraged to translate what the parents were saying into a common language used in the group, Finnish, and English.

In addition, the scaffolding method was used, which means focusing on one child at a time and breaking down the activities into quite simple steps for them. Focusing on small groups and explaining the activities to the children first in English, and if we were not understood because of the language barrier we explained and break it down in Finnish.

6.3 Directed activities

Activity one was group sports; during this activity, the children were put in small groups of three, and they had to choose a character in a piece of music called "my name is" by D Billions (2020). They followed the action of the character in the music video. The music

video was first shown to them, so they understood what was expected. They were then asked to group up in threes. The boys in the group quickly grouped together, choosing the boy's character in the music.

Since they were asked to be grouped only in threes, one boy was left out, which caused a challenge for us because he refused to join the girls. We explained to him that he could not be alone and let him understand it would be nice to play with others out of his clique. It was noticed that the children formed groups according to their interests and played cliques. We danced to the song's lyrics three times, and the fourth time the children's names were used instead of the song's characters. This was because the activity was an indirect English lesson. The song was translated to the children in Finnish, so they understood the meaning of the lyrics. That made the fourth round of singing along and dancing easier for the children because they understood the music was about self-introduction.

The activity was so much fun, and the children enjoyed it. They even asked for more rounds, but unfortunately, we were out of time because another group was to use the gym. The children asked for this activity during outdoor play. More children from other groups joined the activity, and we could hear more English words during their play. This activity helped in developing the children's language and interactive skills.

The second activity was teaching the children how to collect data during a forest field trip. They were put into small groups of four and given different devices to take pictures of things they love in nature and talk about the distinct colors of the leaves they could find. They took turns taking pictures, and when they found something that they liked, they had to cooperatively say why they liked it. There was some little disagreement because not everybody unanimously liked some things.

The third activity was story crafting ("sadutus" in Finnish) which enhances children's personal, social, and emotional development (PSED). The child can express him/herself with the words they have chosen and talk about the topic they are interested in, or that is bothering them. Writing exactly what child says when telling a story makes them feel proud and willing to say more. After this, the teacher reads it aloud to the child alone before reading it to the rest. This is especially important because sometimes children want to make changes to the story they have told already. When we read aloud to the child, it makes the child feel he/she is being heard and valued. But most often, children

do not want to change anything. It does not matter if it is a repeated word but what matters is that the children are proud of their production. This encourages them to speak more, and the more they speak, the better they become. Adults must know that story drafting is not speech therapy.

As stated by Karlsson (2014: 41), adults should not change the story when reading the story of the child. When a story told by children is changed it does not make the story original anymore and children sometimes become disappointed. The story told by the children develop their imagination which is then transfer into words as it was being explained in (Laakso 2018:10). During the morning circle times which was done every day but two days for story telling with the main aim of enhancing the children's personal, social, and emotional development (PSED). Children were often asked to draw anything that makes them feel sad and happy. During this period children are not giving a limited time to complete the task but those that are able to finish before the end of the circle times are read to the rest of the group. Below is an example of a story a child told.



Figure 4. Storytelling

The fourth activity was drawing, coloring, and labeling shapes like rectangles, squares, triangles, etc. After the coloring and labeling, the shapes were cut out and glued in strings that were attached to the wall of the classroom.

The fifth activity was decorating, planting, and watering flowers for mothers' day gifts. This was done in groups of three. With a model and the teacher's help, the children glued marbles on jars. They picked their designs and colors of marble.

The sixth and last activity was organizing a drama to be presented to the parents during the spring party. They had parts given to them in little groups, and English songs were taught to be presented during the party. The drama of “snow white and the seven dwarfs” was acted by the kids.

6.4 Observations of free play

During free play, the teachers arrange the physical environment in a way that supports peer interaction. The environment is divided into different play themes like a playhouse, LEGO center, modeling corner, train, and car center. In addition, the children are placed in small play groups, and their interests and needs are considered. Before placing them in play groups, the teacher observes the children and learns the quality of their play and themes and the type of toys they are interested in. The teachers set a time limit for free play to encourage other activities and change of play peers. The teachers also scaffold plays or games for children for better understanding. Some children might not want to play with peers because they do not understand a particular game. Thus, the teacher becomes a facilitator and makes the game or play understandable for everyone. The teachers act as mediators during conflict when children are playing.

Including drama in the form of free play and pairing children in the “Kieli Kaveri” section helps the children who have short attention spans or are too shy to participate in the lessons in class makes them feel included in the class community because they can contribute and participate and bring out their thoughts. At the same time, the adults in the group observe from a distance and join in the play when needed. This is because the children get to participate, and this helps them to make the lesson taught to them their own because some children understand the lessons more when it is being acted out to them. One of the simplest forms of drama is role play which is very engaging and fun.

Children love role play and tend to partake in it naturally when playing alone or with friends. For example, children with difficulties in numbers role-played a shop with a model from the adult. Children with anxiety, when going to the doctor’s office, role-played the hospital, which might help with their anxiety and the stereotyping ideas they have that doctors always give injections when they visit the hospital. Roleplay improves the language and vocabulary of children, and their confidence levels sometimes increase during this period of play. For teachers’ drama should be seen as a fantastic tool for

learning or one of the most important methodologies to educate children and even sometimes adults. At the end of the lesson, its benefits can be seen in and out of the classroom or section.

The challenge, we had was not giving praise when needed during the first week and this affected the results that is children were not willing to take part. After these observations, praises were given when needed and we realised that children were got more involved due to the reward system we put into practise. This concluded that most children get involved in interaction with the adult as well as peers when rewards are giving to them when needed and explained.

6.5 Interviews and questionnaires

There were verbal interviews in one early childhood education unit. Five early childhood education and care professionals participated voluntarily in the interviews. There were four sub-questions that were connected to the main developmental question. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and remotely via WhatsApp; the interviews were not recorded. The interviewees had Sub questions before the interview and could prepare. Most of the interviews were conducted remotely, and most wanted to be prepared. In the interviews, we ensured that there were no wrong or right answers and that everybody could answer, whether with a few words or paragraphs to questions. The interviewer made notes on paper and laptop. At the end of the interview, the interviewees could give feedback about the interview and topic.

The questionnaires were also conducted in the same early childhood education unit. Online questionnaires were made in Google Forms, and they were sent randomly to nine parents, of which six parents participated in the questionnaires. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the thesis topic and information regarding the process were explained. The questionnaires had three different sections, and the first one was general information about the parent, such as gender and language, that is anonymized in the results section. The second section focused on the child's play, attachment with the parent, and interaction with other family members at home. The third section concentrated on the child's peer interaction and participation in the early childhood unit. The first and third sections had multiple-choice questions, whereas, in the second section, parents could write their answers.

The collected data from the interviews were analyzed by thematic analysis by comparing the answers to each question and looking at what themes would arise from the questions. The second section of the questionnaire was analyzed by writing down a general view of the results. The first section of the questionnaire was analyzed, respecting the anonymity of the respondents. The third section also had multiple-choice questions, but because of the small number of participants, the results were not described in percentages.

7. Results

We used the thematic method of analyzing our data. Thematic coding analysis of qualitative data can be used as a realist method that brings out experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants (Robson and McCartan 2011,467). A thematic method is used to describe data and interpret processes of selecting codes and constructing themes. A thematic analytical method was chosen because of its flexibility to be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and its application to various study questions, designs, and sample sizes (Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio 2020).

7.1 General observation of peer interaction in early childhood education units

This section will be divided into subheadings that reflect our research question. Here we will examine how mixing languages, scaffolding, grouping, physical environment, and teacher's intervention during conflict supported peer interaction.

7.1.1 Language mixing

Teachers' directed activities were carried out during this research in the English language. Since most of the children's mother tongue is Finnish, it was not easy to support peer interaction using only the English language. Thus, we were obliged to use both English and Finnish during directed activities for the children to understand the tasks. Interaction was more when the teacher used both languages to explain to the children, and the children started using both languages during activities. For example, during a session, the children were asked to look for items around them in yellow and

red. We could hear some children telling their peers, “tämä on yellow.” Making the children understand the tasks or games by using the language they are familiar with encourages them to participate, which tends to foster peer interaction.

7.1.2 Physical environment arrangement

The arrangement of the physical environment helps in enhancing peer interaction. The classroom was well-demarcated, with toys and books in the right places. There is a section for home play, music, hospital play, arts and crafts, reading, LEGO, train and cars, games, modeling, etc. Those sections have been designed for not more than four children at a time. These small groups encourage in-depth peer interaction. During free play time, the children place their name stickers on the sections they want to play in. In the little groups during free play, peer interaction can be seen. Children can be seen taking roles like doctors, moms, train conductors, babies, builders, etc.

The environment for peer interaction needs to be safe and warm, and the educator must be friendly since their attitude reflects on the children. Being sensitive and having room for open discussion improves peer interaction in the group. Making sure that children are respected equally and that every child can take part, express their own opinion and be themselves. It goes hand in hand with self-esteem and identity because the educators saw that the child should be able to express themselves and be proud of their own identity. Language and culture were also crucial factors since children need to express themselves, but also the role of educators to have activities that arouse interest in diverse ways, beliefs, and cultures.

Though educators thought they were doing their best by supporting peer interaction, the results showed that there is a need for more to be done, especially with being more present, anticipating the atmosphere, and having the time to organize the activities beforehand.

7.1.3 Scaffolding play, games, and activities

Considering each child's needs, play, games, and activities were scaffolded to support peer interaction. During observations, it was noticed that some children refused to join

their peers in play, games, and activities because they did not understand or know what other children were doing. When the teacher stepped in and explained or showed how it was done, the children joined their peers and participated. Sometimes, we asked the children with a better understanding of the game, play, or activity to show others how it is done. The children preferred the activities being scaffolded by the teachers to their peers. Peer interaction is enhanced when the children's job is made easier through scaffolding.

Participation was seen as children took part in group activities, allowing them to choose and form their own opinions about play and with whom to play. Mirroring is a good example that could emphasize peer interaction since interacting could be done by talking and making expressions and gestures to see how the other child is reacting. Additionally, mirroring was also a way to encourage others to do the same thing. For example, educators asked the child to play, and other children got involved in the play. This leads to the educator's role being seen as vital since the educator can support peer interaction and learning through play (Vygotsky 1967).

7.1.4 Grouping

Another way the teachers enhanced peer interaction was by placing the children in small groups. Some activities required the children to choose their group members. For example, during free play, the children were asked to group themselves according to their interests in play. During this type of activity or play, the children remained in their play cliques and did not accept new members. To encourage every child to interact, we group children with high interaction skills with shy ones. It was observed that the shy ones would take some time to observe what the others were doing. After some time, they slowly joined their peers and started to play with them. During free play, the younger ones, 3 years old, were mostly seen playing alone. This might be due to the age difference with the other children because when they are grouped with others, they tend to interact well. Sometimes the younger one's scaffold games and play with older children. Returning to play cliques during free play was visible.

The breaking of play cliques was one of our difficulties during this research. One child refused to play with others the entire day because his only friend was absent from daycare. It was visible during free play for the children to return to their play cliques. We tried grouping the children out of their play cliques to make sure no child was left out or

played alone. In the groups, interaction took place so well, but it was a short lift as the children returned to their usual cliques. In addition, during friendship days, a friend is assigned to each child, and they are supposed to play with the friend the entire day. These days are so fun for the children because they learn how to cooperate, work as a team, take turns and they learn more about each other.

The educators' observations and views have shown that small group-directed activities are an excellent way to start supporting peer interaction. Though in the group directed activities, the English language might have been the barrier, the interaction between children became more accessible when we gave the instructions in the Finnish language.

Grouping the children was one of the best ways to support peer interaction. While in free play, educators already formed the groups, it was interesting to see that children interact differently depending on the play. Small group activities were one tool educators mentioned, including pictures, sign language, open discussion, and sensitivity.

7.1.5 Conflict situation

In the observed groups, conflict situations arise when two or more children want to play with the same toy during free play or when two or more children want to use the same color pen when painting in teacher-directed activities. For example, when colors and shapes were being taught, two children wanted to use the yellow color pencil at the same time, and only one was available, so an argument started. The teacher came in and explained to them the benefits of taking turns and sharing. This helped them both to use the pencil without any more argument. In addition, during free play, conflicts arise when children hit their peers when they are frustrated about something. Some children were rejected by their peers because they exhibited violent behavior when frustrated about something. For example, a child with speech issues hits others when he is frustrated because he cannot express himself so well. The educators explained to him the adverse effects of violent behavior. He was told to report to the adults when a friend did something he did not like. The intervention of the adults increased his level of interaction with his friends because he started reporting to the adults and he was praised for that.

7.2 Interview results

7.2.1 Educators' views on peer interaction

In this thesis having the point of view of educators and parents is crucial since it gives a colossal overview of how parents, for example, view their child's interaction skills with other children. Additionally, having the opinion of the educators is vital because of having an actual picture of how educators can reflect their activities done in the group of children and reflect their actions.

In one early childhood education unit, interviews were carried out. Five educators were voluntarily interviewed orally. It was interesting to have interviews with different educational backgrounds, such as nursery nurses and early childhood education teachers. Four sub-questions were formed for the interviewees who got the questions beforehand and to think and reflect before answering the questions. There were four sub-questions related to the topic, and the final question was about reflection and thoughts about the interview. The themes in the interviews were participation, equality, socialization, mirroring, self-esteem and identity, language and culture, active agency, the educator role, and group-directed activities.

7.2.2 Peer interaction in the group

The first sub-question concentrated on the educator's view of how peer interaction is seen in a group of children. Peer interaction is seen both in directed activities and free play. Peer interaction varies between children of different ages. Also, the presence of adults as mirroring has an impact; sometimes, the child can interact more easily.

It is important to have a safe environment. Grouping is also vital since it brings a feeling of belonging in the group. Participation of the children was essential since children can interact with one another by making gestures, talking, making noises, running around, looking, making eye contact, and giving an item to one another. Additionally, it differs between the age and how the children interact; for example, children under three years of age might communicate by making eye contact or hitting or touching another child and waiting for a response. Older children raise awareness by talking and mirroring, e.g., the child watches what another is doing and does the same thing. Participation goes hand in hand with equality since the child needs to be seen and heard. The children need to be treated equally and involved in the activities, for example, by choosing play activities

and with whom to play. Challenges might occur in peer interaction if Finnish is a second language and if there are communication and language development difficulties. Socialization is an important aspect of peer interaction since children who feel free are likely to socialize and interact with peers.

7.2.3 Tools supporting peer interaction daily

The second sub-question concentrated on what the tools for peer interaction in a group of children daily are. It is essential to have a safe environment and a friendly atmosphere. There were a few tools that each interview mentioned: small group activities, pictures, sign language, open discussion, and the role of an educator as a facilitator to motivate and emphasize the children to connect with each other. Activities are planned so that every child can participate equally. Also, the educator must take note of personality, temperament, special needs, and linguistic aspects when forming play groups. The educator has a huge role, since the attitude, sensitivity, and eagerness to motivate also inspires the children to communicate. Especially in play, the educator must not only observe but also take part in children's play, since they are children with different personalities and temperaments. By supporting play, the adults show an example of how to be friendly friends or ponder together with the child or group of children something that interests them. Expressing and practicing emotions through tone, talking, and gestures can support peer interaction. It allows children to participate and strengthen their well-being by giving them the possibility sometimes to discuss, choose playmates and show their own culture and identity.

7.2.4 Educator's involvement in supporting peer interaction

The third sub-question concerns whether children's mutual interaction is supported enough. The answers confirmed insufficient support; even though all educators try to do their best, they face challenging situations, such as resources and commitment. During play, conflict situations arise. The role of an adult would be more efficient in those situations because the educator has an enormous impact on how the situations are resolved. It is important to be aware of the situation, and the child's development, and to notify that the child has a chance to participate regarding skills and needs. However, it is important to support the active agency of the child and practice emotional skills. In addition, the educator's approach to expressing and resolving the situation together with the child matters.

7.2.5 Diversity in the group of children

The last question was about how diversity is recognized in the group of children. The results showed that diversity is considered valued and rich. Regarding socialization, the interviewees pointed out the importance of modifying the environment to support the child's development and learning; children play with one another regardless of background. When thinking about identity and self-esteem, every child is valued and respected regardless of background. It depends on the age of the children, but for example, for children under three years old, a Finnish mother-tongue-speaking child can be a model for other bilingual children who are learning the Finnish language. Language and culture were also essential since they were language awareness projects, such as learning what languages are spoken in the group. Discuss with the children why children have different food (allergies etc.), why children need to sit at the table, and why some children go to church, and some do not. The child can show their culture and identity and be proud of it; also, it is vital that parents could come and show something relating to their culture in the early childhood education unit. Multi-professional networks such as special early childhood teachers, language and culture teachers, and therapists ensure that the child is considered in various aspects of the group.

7.3 Parents' questionnaire results

7.3.1 Parents' perspectives on peer interaction

The questionnaires were carried out in the same early childhood unit, as educators' interviews. Online questionnaires in Google Forms were sent to nine parents, from which six answered the questionnaires. The questionnaire was divided into three different sections one section asked for basic information such as the gender of the parent, the mother tongue of the parent, the mother tongue of the child, and what languages are spoken at home. Most of the respondents' mother tongue was Finnish, leading to most speaking Finnish at home. The second section concentrated on the child's play, attachment with the parent, and interaction with other family members at home. The last section concentrated on the child's peer interaction and participation in the early childhood unit.

7.3.2 Child's interaction and play in a home environment

Regarding respondents' answers, children love to draw, play with toys, e.g., figures, and play outside in the sandbox. Responses also described children's imagination, concentration, and courage to step up and try new things. Some children needed more support from their parents to play, and some played freely alone or with their siblings. Regarding the attachment to the child, all respondents claimed to have a good and deep attachment to the child. Children were close to their parents, and the relationship was described as safe and warm. Emotions, hugs, and kisses showed a safe attachment to the parents. Answers described as children's interaction with other family members were also closed since children liked to play with siblings and parents. Children interact with family members by showing emotions, talking, making gestures, playing together, cuddling, sitting in their parent's lap, and having family gatherings such as eating together.

7.3.3 Child's peer interaction relationship in early childhood education

The last section concentrated on how peer interaction is supported by educators in the early childhood education unit. All respondents answered that their child is taking part in early childhood education. In the following questions, the respondent could evaluate the statements between the least or not at all, which represented number one, to good, which represented number five.

Most respondents believed that the child has a safe attachment to early childhood educators; a minority, two of six respondents, thought that attachment to the child was good. According to respondents, children want to participate in joint activities since four of the six answers were very good, and two were good. This leads to children having a safe attachment with the educators, which makes it easy to join in joint activities.

Half of the respondents' opinion children do interact with peers since three respondents answered good (number four), two responded good (number five), and one was in between (number three). This leads to children overall interacting differently with peers.

Additionally, half of the respondents were highly satisfied that the educators participated in the joint activities; three responded good, one answered good, and two answered

number three. Most respondents thought educators support peer interaction in the group of children; three answered number five, meaning good. Two answered number four, meaning good, and one answered three. The majority are satisfied with involving children in joint activities and supporting peer interaction in the group of children. There was also a slight variation in diversity. Most respondents are satisfied that diversity is taken into consideration. Half of the respondents answered well, one response was good, and two were number three.

8. Conclusions

With the help and advice from our working life partners, we concentrated on how educators can support peer interaction in a multilingual environment. The thesis was implemented in three early childhood education units in Espoo, Finland. One private early childhood unit and two municipal early childhood education units. Our working life partners were Espoo City and a private daycare in Espoo. The target group of this thesis was 3-6-year-old children. The aim was to research peer interaction in this group of children and, most importantly, how educators can support peer interaction during group-directed activities and free play. The purpose was to see how peer interaction affects a child's holistic development.

Our results confirm that educators play a significant role in expanding or supporting children's interaction with peers in daycare centers. The observation showed that the environment supported peer interaction. Stanton-Chapman and Tina L (2015), mention arranging the ECEC physical environment to support and encourage peer interaction. For example, setting boundaries between play stations, making sure there is enough space for play gives the children opportunities to interact with peers, providing materials like books and toys that reflect children's needs and interests, and teaching them how to use materials in their surroundings, and offering visual cues that support peer interaction.

Another way to support peer interaction by teachers visible in our data was seen during the grouping of children. The teachers considered the strengths, interests, social skills, and abilities of children. In addition, the teachers made sure their behavior towards the children was socially conducive. This goes in line with the theory by Ostrosky M.M and Meadan H. (2010), which says teachers can support peer interaction by creating a conducive social environment that supports peer interaction. For example, considering

children's characteristics when putting them in a group, taking into consideration the group's size to maximize interaction, pairing socially competent children with shy ones, and providing opportunities to children with limited social skills to interact with others.

Lastly, as stated in our theory, the teachers' teaching strategies should foster peer interaction. For example, teaching social skills like taking turns, saying thank you, and saying sorry, to name a few to the children, teaching in small groups or one-on-one when necessary, scaffolding activities/play and roleplaying, giving positive feedback to children when they exhibit positive social interaction and sharing information about encouraging social interaction within the family (Ostrosky M.M and Meadan H. 2010). The results have shown that a safe and equal environment, where there is room for open discussion, is the best way to practice social skills. Additionally, practicing emotions through pictures and sign language, especially when conflict situations occur in the group.

Earlier research has shown that social skills, play, language development, and socio-pedagogical aspect are key factors in peer interaction. Play is an essential tool because it enhances a child's development, and it creates opportunities for learning and cognitive skills development, symbolic learning, and self-regulation. Our findings show the same since children have the possibility of having time to develop skills, enrich their imagination, and practice social skills. The results have shown that play is also essential in the home environment since the children practice interaction skills with parents and siblings.

Scaffolding can support children's participation in activities; our findings showed that having a safe environment for activities is essential. Earlier research also supports that the way of saying things and the choice of words are essential (Babara and Jill 2016). The findings suggest sensitive talking and noticing the child's needs, such as temperament, behaviour, and linguistic skills. Also, the adult's attitude is essential such as being genuinely interested. Sometimes even children do not understand all instructions in the first place and trying to say things differently engages the child's interest and participation in the play. This topic needs to be more efficient since our findings have shown that resources, time, and planning can sometimes be an issue. However, when comparing the parents' responses, they were happy with the educators' commitment and the children's involvement in group activities.

Earlier research has shown that social skills are important to peer interaction. Bandura's social cognitive theory has proved that cognitive interaction processes affect the environment and behaviour (Santrock 2009: 27). This supports our finding since imitation and mirroring emphasize children's peer interaction. The results show that parents can emphasize their actions toward children by having a safe and warm attachment. Mirroring and modelling can be shown in our findings through talking, making gestures, and doing something to see how another reacts.

Ribeiro et al. (2017:2) claim that children's language development is eased with peers more than with adults. The findings show that as children interact with their peers, their communication skills develop. Nevertheless, the role of an adult is important, meaning that language can develop with the support of an adult. Tools that support peer interaction are pictures, sign language, open discussion, practicing emotions, and educators' sensitivity and attitude to encourage children to interact.

In the socio-pedagogical view, early childhood education plays an essential role in a child's development. Earlier research has shown that inclusion and socialization are key factors in peer interaction. The findings also support that a safe and equal environment enriches children's participation since children with diverse backgrounds can participate in all activities. Every child is respected and valued, as it means that the child can be seen through the lenses of strengths. As our findings have shown, backed up by earlier research, socialization and inclusion can be the best way for educators to support peer interaction within the group of children in an early childhood education centre.

9. Discussion

The process of this thesis started with the idea of the significance of peer interaction in the ECEC centers since we wanted to know more about the topic. We then realized that focusing on the significance of peer interaction was too broad. We narrowed our project to the teacher's role in peer interaction. During our observation, we noticed that to achieve a prominent level of peer interaction in ECEC centers, socialization, participation, and inclusion are essential. The environment is also a huge factor in enhancing children's interaction.

We had some challenges carrying on this project. Our first challenge was the difficulty of ascertaining our research question because we had many things we wanted to look at during our project. We took time to arrive at our above research question.

Secondly, we had the challenge of time. Qualitative research requires much time, especially when one is a participant observer. The three of us were all workers in our various daycares, so, it was difficult for us to squeeze out time from our busy days at work to do observations and collect data. Another challenge we had was a shortage of resources. Some activities we had in mind to do could not be actualized because our daycares did not have the resources needed to do such.

Furthermore, we had difficulty compressing the data collected from all the daycares. It was not an easy task to produce a comprehensive analysis of our data. Lastly, it was difficult for us to find previous research on our topic. Looking for theory to support our research topic was not an easy task as well. However, few were found, like Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development.

Discovering and trying some tips on supporting peer interaction in the ECEC environment from theories was very satisfying to us. We saw how some suggestions like creating a calm and friendly atmosphere to foster peer interaction work so well. We also noticed how grouping children out of the play cliques so they could interact with other children was successful for a noticeably fleeting time.

In all, we had an exciting time doing this project. It improved our teamwork ability both in our workplace with our colleagues' preparing activities and with our classmates drafting this thesis. If we must write about our topic in the future, concentrating on enhancing peer interaction during group/teacher-directed activities will be a better option because we noticed peer interaction was low in that area. In addition, in the future, it will be better to concentrate on one daycare as a working life partner because that will help us to have comprehensive data.

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Appendices

The Consent Form

Hei,

Olen Gresa Avdiu ja työstän kahden opiskelijakollegan Dorothy Addain ja Bayoh Tongin kanssa opinnäytetyötä, jonka tarkoituksena on tutkia lasten välistä vertaisvuorovaikutusta. Keskeisenä asiana on myös tutkia miten kasvattajat pystyvät tukemaan lasten keskinäistä vertaivuorovaikutusta. Käytämme tutkimuksessa laadullista tutkimusmenetelmää ja aineiston hankinta toteutuu havainnoinnin, haastattelun ja kyselylomakkeiden avulla. Havainnoimme pienessä ryhmässä 3–4 lasta, haastattelemme suullisesti varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisia sekä vanhempia kyselylomakkeiden avulla. Tutkimus toteutetaan kahdessa julkisessa päiväkodissa ja yhdessä yksityisessä päiväkodissa.

Aineiston keruuta varten haluaisimme havainnoida noin 3–5 lasta, jotka kuuluvat samaan pienryhmään. Havainnointikertoja on 2–3 kertaa ja ne voivat olla esim. ulkoilu, vapaa leikki ja pienet piirihetket. Havainnointi kestää 15–30 minuuttia. Mitään lapsen tunnistetietoja ei kerätä tutkimuksen aikana ja kaikki kerätty aineisto käsitellään anonyymisti. Tutkimuksen loputtua kaikki aineiston keruuseen liittyvä materiaali tuhoetaan.

Kerron mielelläni lisää tutkimukseen liittyen. Ohessa on huoltajalle täytettäväksi suostumuslomake ja ruksin saa laittaa ensimmäiseen kohtaan, jos haluatte, että lapsenne osallistuu tutkimukseen tai toiseen kohtaan, jos lapsenne ei saa osallistua tutkimukseen.

Ystävällisin terveisin,
Gresa Avdiu, Dorothy Addai ja Bayoh Tong

Lapsen nimi: _____



Lapseni saa osallistua tutkimukseen



Lapseni ei saa osallistua tutkimukseen

Huoltajan nimi ja allekirjoitus

The Questionnaire for Parents

1.Perustiedot/ Basic Information : Sukupuoli/Gender

- Nainen/ Female
- Mies/ Male
- En halua kertoa/ Prefer not to say

2.Mikä on vanhemman äidinkieli?

What is the mother tongue of the parent?

Oma vastauksesi

3.Mikä on lapsen/lasten äidinkieli?

What is the child's/childrens mother tongue?

Oma vastauksesi

4.Mitä kieltä/kieliä puhutaan kotona?

What language/languages are spoken at home?

Oma vastauksesi

Lapsi kotona / The child at home:

Tässä osiossa kysytään lapsen leikkiin ja lapsen ja vanhempien väliseen vuorovaikutukseen ja kiintymyssuhteeseen. Vuorovaikutukseen kuuluu puhuminen, eleet ja ilmeet. Kiintymyssuhteella tarkoitetaan lapsen ja vanhemman välistä tunnesuhdetta. Kysymyksiin on jätetty pidempi vastausteksti, joten voit vastata muutamalla sanalla taikka yhdellä kappaaleella :)

This section asks about the child's play, interaction, and attachment between the child and the parent. Interaction can mean, for example, expression, gestures and talking. Attachment means an emotional relationship with the parent. You can answer the questions with a few words or one paragraph :)

5.Miten lapsi leikkii kotiympäristössä?

How does the child play at home?

Oma vastauksesi

6.Miten lapsi vuorovaikuttaa vanhemman/vanhempien ja muiden perheenjäsenten kanssa kotona?

How does the child interact with the parent/parents and other family members at home?

Oma vastauksesi

7.Miten kuvailitte kiintymyssuhdetta lapseenne?

How would you describe your attachment to your child?

Pitkä vastausteksti

Lapsi ja vertaisuhteet / The child and peer relationships

Tässä osiossa kysytään lineaarisen asteikon avulla miten lapsi yleisesti vuorovaikuttaa muiden lasten kanssa ja miten hyvin kasvattajat pystyvät tukemaan lasten keskinäistä vertaivuorovaikutusta. Vertaisvuorovaikutuksella tarkoitetaan lasten välistä vuorovaikutusta esim. puheella, eleillä, ilmeillä jne.

This section is about asking how the child is interacting with other children and how well educators can support peer interaction among children. Peer interaction means interaction among children by talking, expression, gestures and so on.

8. Osallistuuko lapsesi varhaiskasvatukseen?

Does your child participate in early childhood education and care?

Kyllä

Ei

9. Onko mielestäsi lapsellasi turvallinen kiintymyssuhde oman lapsiryhmän aikuisiin?

Does the child have, in your opinion, a safe attachment with the educators in the group?

1 2 3 4 5

Vähäinen - Low

Erittäin hyvä - Really good

10. Miten lapsi vuorovaikuttaa muiden lasten kanssa lapsiryhmässä?
How does the child interact with other children in the group of children?

1 2 3 4 5

Vähän / Very little Erittäin hyvin / Really good

11. Osallistuuko lapsi mielellään oman lapsiryhmän yhteiseen toimintaan?
Does the child want participate in the joint activities?

1 2 3 4 5

Ei lainkaan/ hyvin vähän- Not at all / Very little Erittäin paljon- Very much

12. Osallistavatko kasvattajat lastasi yhteisiin toimintahetkiin?
Do the educators participate the child in the joint activities?

1 2 3 4 5

Ei lainkaan/ hyvin vähän - Not at all /very little Erittäin hyvin - Really good

13. Tuetaanko mielestäsi riittävästi lasten keskinäistä vuorovaikutusta ryhmässä?
Do the educators support enough peer interaction within the group?

1 2 3 4 5

Hyvin vähän / Very little Erittäin hyvin/ Really good

14. Miten moninaisuus otetaan huomioon lapsesi lapsiryhmässä?
How is diversity taken into account in your child's group?

1 2 3 4 5

Ei lainkaan / hyvin vähän - Erittäin hyvin - Really good
Not at all/ very little

Kiitos paljon kysymysten vastaamisesta. Haluaisitko vielä lisätä jotain kysymyksiin liittyen. Kiitos vielä ajastasi!

Thank you for answering the questions. Would like to add something regarding the questions. Thank you again for your time!

Oma vastauksesi

The Questionnaire for Educators

1. Miten mielestäsi vertaisvuorovaikutus näkyy lapsiryhmässä?
2. Millä tavoin kasvattajat voisivat tukea vertaisvuorovaikutusta arjessa?
3. Tuetaanko riittävästi lasten keskinäistä vuorovaikutusta ryhmässä?
4. Miten moninaisuus otetaan huomioon ryhmässä?