



Utilising Green Care in Urban Early Childhood Education to Promote Mental Well-Being

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2023 Laurea



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Social Services
Bachelor's Thesis
December, 2023

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Year	2023	Number of pages	35
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The purpose of this thesis was to study how Green Care is utilised in urban early childhood education to promote children's mental well-being. The choice of topic was influenced by a growing concern on children's mental health and increase in urbanisation. The research was conducted in Järvenpää's municipal early childhood education and care. The main goals of this research were to find out how Green Care is utilised in Järvenpää's early childhood education and care, what are the main challenges and what kind of developmental need there is.

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, theory on children's mental health, effects of nature and urban living, as well as the introduction of Green Care and nature-based methods. This is qualitative research, which was conducted through a questionnaire, yielding both quantitative and qualitative data. The main method for the data analysis was thematic analysis.

Based on the collected data, respondents are aware of the importance of nature and attempt to utilise nature regularly in activities. The results showed a lack of knowledge and information on Green Care and a need for development. A lack of resources was identified as a challenge. One of the conclusions of the research was that there is a need for concrete ideas on how to utilise Green Care. Based on the findings the following suggestions for future developments were made: concentrating on utilising the kindergarten yard areas to their maximum potential and developing a concise and clear guide on Green Care methods for educators.

Keywords: Green Care, Early Childhood Education, Mental Well-Being, Nature Education

Christina Kananen

Green Care-toiminnan hyödyntäminen kaupunkialueiden varhaiskasvatuksessa psyykkisen hyvinvoinnin tukemiseksi

Vuosi

2023

Sivumäärä

35

Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia, miten Green Care-menetelmiä hyödynnetään kaupunkialueiden varhaiskasvatuksessa lasten psyykkisen hyvinvoinnin tukemiseksi. Aiheen valintaan vaikutti kasvava huoli lasten mielenterveydestä ja urbanisaation lisääntyminen. Tutkimus suoritettiin Järvenpään kunnallisessa varhaiskasvatuksessa. Tutkimuksen päätavoitteina oli selvittää, miten Green Care-menetelmiä hyödynnetään Järvenpään varhaiskasvatuksessa, mitkä ovat suurimmat haasteet ja minkälainen kehitystarve löytyy.

Tämän opinnäytetyön teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmien perusteista, teoriasta lasten mielenterveydestä, luonnon ja kaupunkiasumisen vaikutuksista, sekä, Green Care ja luontolähtöisten menetelmien esittelystä. Tämä on kvalitatiivinen tutkimus, joka suoritettiin kyselyn avulla, joka tuotti niin kvalitatiivista kuin kvantitatiivista dataa. Data-analyysin päämenetelmänä oli temaattinen analyysi.

Kerätyn datan perusteella kyselyyn vastanneet ovat tietoisia luonnon tärkeydestä ja pyrkivät hyödyntämään luontoa säännöllisesti toiminnassa. Tulokset osoittivat, että Green Care-menetelmistä on tietämyksen ja informaation puutetta, ja kehitykselle on tarvetta. Resurssien puute tunnistettiin yhdeksi haasteeksi. Tutkimuksen yhtenä johtopäätöksenä oli se, että konkreettisille ideoille miten Green Care-menetelmiä hyödynnetään, on tarvetta. Tutkimustulosten perusteella tehtiin seuraavat ehdotukset tulevaa kehitystä varten: keskityttäisiin hyödyntämään päiväkotien piha-alueiden maksimaalinen potentiaali, sekä kehitettäisiin ytimekäs ja selkeä opas Green Care-menetelmistä kasvattajille.

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1 Introduction

Mental health issues are a growing concern when it comes to Finland's public health. According to THL (2023), about 15% of the child population of Finland struggle with some type of mental illness. Due to this growing concern, Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health have launched a National Mental Health Strategy, with children's mental health as a one priority point. As part of this strategy, the support children receive from early childhood education and care centres is emphasized. (Vorma, Rotko, Larivaara & Koslof 2020).

This thesis is qualitative research studying how Green Care is utilised in early childhood education to promote children's mental well-being.

1.1 Choice of Topic

I was first introduced to the well-being effects of nature through my own mental health journey. I discovered nature to be an important cornerstone for my well-being. This inspired me to do some research on the topic in order to understand my experiences through scientific data. Even though reading about the topic nurtured my excitement it also raised a concern. Our society has developed to be more and more detached from nature. So now I was not only interested in the positive effects of nature, but also the possible negative effects of urban living.

As mentioned before, mental health issues are a growing concern in Finland, especially among young people. As the basis for a person's mental health is already formed during childhood, I believe it is especially important to focus on promoting children's mental well-being and mental health skills. Doing so, could help preventing the development of further mental health issues later in life as well. (Vorma et al. 2020.) Thus, I decided to focus on children as the target of my thesis.

The main objective of the thesis is to investigate how nature-based methods are utilised in early childhood education and care (ECEC), to promote the mental well-being of children living in urban areas. Another goal is to determine whether there is a developmental need and to consider solutions or methods which might promote this development.

1.2 Working Life Partner

The research is conducted in the municipality of Järvenpää. Järvenpää has 16 municipal early childhood education centres. I had decided on the topic of this thesis, before contacting

Järvenpää's department for early childhood education and care. I asked if they would be interested to be my working life partner for this thesis, and they accepted.

According to Järvenpää's local curriculum for early childhood education and care, Järvenpää as a city, offers a diverse learning environment combining nature and constructed environment. The local nature offers many opportunities for trips within the city. Thus, according to the local curriculum, Järvenpää offers a comprehensive learning environment for children. It is also stated that active and regular trips to nature should be part of the ordinary life of children in Järvenpää's ECEC centres. (Järvenpään varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma 2022.)

2 Theoretical Framework

In this section I will introduce some key concepts and theory relevant for my thesis. I will discuss topics such as children's mental health, early childhood education and care in Finland, and Green Care.

2.1 Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland

Early childhood education and care is defined as an entity, which consists of systematic education and care, with emphasis on pedagogy (Varhaiskasvatustaki 540/2018). In Finland, early childhood education and care is guided by the National Core Curriculum for ECEC. The curriculum is based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). Every ECEC centre in Finland, must follow the guidelines set in the Curriculum. Additionally, each municipality will create their own local curriculum. The purpose of a local curriculum is to complement and specify the National Core Curriculum, guiding the implementation of ECEC in a municipality. The point of the National Curriculum is to ensure every child's right to equal high quality ECEC. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.)

The first aim of ECEC mentioned in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) is to promote children's growth, development, health, and well-being. Other important values of ECEC include equality, diversity, children's rights, and sustainable living. ECEC centres must provide children with a safe environment which promotes development and learning. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.)

The National Core Curriculum for ECEC emphasizes the importance of children's learning environments. Learning environment not only refers to the physical environment, but also social and psychological dimensions. Learning environments are the basis for achieving the goals set for ECEC and they should support children's development and growth. When designing or developing the environment for ECEC, accessibility, comfort, ecology, and indoor air quality should be taken into consideration, among other things. Learning environments

must provide opportunities for play, physical activity, exploration, rest, and versatile pedagogical activities. Natural environments and outdoors in general are part of the children's learning environments. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.)

Environmental education is part of the ECEC curriculum. Environmental education means that children are "learning in the environment, learning about the environment and acting for the environment" (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022, 46). The goal is to strengthen children's relationship with nature. Thus, making trips to natural environments should be part of ECEC. Environmental education also includes learning about sustainable living. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.)

Another important task of ECEC is to strengthen children's skills related to taking care of oneself and their environment. Importance of rest, nutrition, physical activity, sustainable living, and mental well-being should be discussed with children. It is the personnel's task to ensure children an opportunity for active participation and involvement. Supporting the development of children's emotional skills is a crucial part of well-being. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.) The importance of emotional skills and other factors influencing children's mental well-being will be discussed further in the next section.

2.2 Children's Mental Health

Mental health is an essential component of a person's health and well-being (World Health Organization 2022). Good mental health acts as a resource, supporting an individual's capacity to function in their daily life (Vorma, Rotko, Larivaara & Koslof 2020). Mental health can be influenced by social, economical, biological, or environmental circumstances. There are many factors that can either act as risks or as protective factors influencing a person's mental health. These factors can either be biological or environmental. Young children are in an especially sensitive developmental stage, making them more vulnerable to risk factors. (World Health Organization 2022.) In many ways, the basis for a person's mental health is already formed during childhood and thus, promoting children's mental well-being can play a role in preventing further mental health issues (Vorma et al. 2020, 21).

Public health refers to organised methods taken to promote health among a population as a whole (World Health Organization 2023). Mental health issues are a growing concern when it comes to Finland's public health. Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health have published a National Mental Health Strategy 2020-2030 as a measure to improve public mental health. One of the focus areas of this strategy is mental health for children and young people. In this strategy, the introduction of age-appropriate support for children from ECEC centres is proposed as a priority. (Vorma et al. 2020.) According to THL (2023), about 15% of the child population of Finland have some type of mental illness. ADHD and anxiety are among the

more typical issues. However, it is important to keep in mind that mental well-being is more than just the absence of diagnosable mental disorders (Claveirole & Gaughan 2010).

Family is an important factor influencing children's mental well-being (Claveirole & Gaughan 2010). Formation of a secure bond, or an attachment, between an infant and a caregiver is crucial for an infant's well-being. It has also been argued that the type of attachment formed during infancy continues to have an effect on people throughout their life. Attachment is defined as an emotional bond with another person, and it is crucial for infant survival as they cannot take care of themselves. When an infant's needs are met consistently, they will develop a secure attachment to their caregiver, meaning that they can trust their caregiver. Children with a secure attachment to their parents are more likely to have stronger self-esteem and successful relationships. A secure attachment will reduce the risk factors influencing mental health while poor attachment can cause trauma and increase the risks. (Cherry 2023.) There are many other factors within a family which can act as risks, such as abuse, violence, substance abuse, parental separation, or poverty. Secure attachment and good family conditions can also play a part in mitigating the negative effects of other factors in a child's life. (Claveirole & Gaughan 2010.)

One way to promote good mental-health is to practice mental-health skills. Mental health skills refer to individuals' abilities to cope with stress, self-regulate or identify and assess one's own mental health, among other things. Emotional skills are a big part of mental health skills and children's overall development. (Vorma et al. 2020.) The basis for emotional skills is created during childhood, but they can be developed later on as well (YTHS no date). In early childhood education, emotional skills are mainly practiced utilising play, drama, or pictures (Anttila, Huurre, Malin & Santalahti 2016).

Other important factors influencing mental well-being is an individual's self-esteem and social interactions (Orth & Robins 2022). Good self-esteem can act as a protective factor influencing a person's mental health, while poor self-esteem is a risk factor (Vorma et al. 2020). Self-esteem can play a role in forming social relationships, which is another important part of human well-being (Orth & Robins 2022). Social interaction is a basic human need. Social deprivation can lead to loneliness and mental health issues. Isolation from others can influence behaviour, for example by increasing stress, anxiety, depression, or aggression. For children and adolescents, social interactions are crucial for development. Thus, practicing social skills can promote mental well-being throughout life. (Orben, Tomova & Blakemore 2020.)

2.3 Nature's Role in Mental Well-Being

Many studies have been conducted on the well-being benefits of being in contact with nature. Nature has been proven to affect both cognitive and physical well-being. Being in contact

with nature can reduce depression, anxiety, aggression, and pain. Nature can also promote recovery, relaxation, attention, sleep quality and respiratory health, among other things. The explanation for all of these benefits lie in biomedical mechanisms. (Kotte, Li & Shin 2019.)

Senses play a big role in the health benefits of nature. Nature offers visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile stimulation, meaning that we can use all of our senses in order to benefit from nature. The sensory input we receive from nature stimulates different parts of our brains, creating different well-being effects. For example, visual stimulation from nature has been found to activate the brain reward circuitry, promoting positive emotions, which is crucial for mental health. This explains why many people experience nature to have antidepressant-like effects. Spending time in nature has also been found to decrease the concentration of adrenaline, which is a hormone released during stressful situations. Thus, being in contact with nature has a relaxing effect, lowering stress levels. (Kotte et al. 2019.)

Some of nature's health benefits can be absorbed simply through our skin or inhalation. One of these benefits relate to serotonin, which is a neurotransmitter that plays a crucial role in emotion regulation. This means that the lack of serotonin has a strong correlation with depression. Sunlight increases the production of serotonin, thus promoting mental well-being. Breathing in natural environments, like forests, can benefit our microbial diversity, which has been found to be crucial for human health. (Kotte et al. 2019.)

Nature can also have an effect on human well-being in a more indirect way, for example, through reduction of air-, and noise pollution, or by promoting physical exercise and social interactions (Kotte et al. 2019). Houseplants, for example, can be utilised to improve indoor air quality and create more homelike environment (Rappe & Koivunen 2017). Physical exercise is an important part of human well-being, not just for physical health but mental health as well. Exercising can have a positive impact on stress levels, mood, depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. It can even act as a protective factor or a delay against dementia. The importance of social interactions for mental well-being was explained in the previous chapter. (Mental Health Foundation no date.)

In addition to natural environments, also constructed green spaces have their benefits. For example, gardening can offer many benefits for human well-being. Gardening as an activity offers a wide range of sensory stimulus and physical activity. Gardening activities can also support self-esteem by creating feelings of succeeding. Plant growth is something very concrete that can be followed, and following the changes can be motivating. Plants can also be grown indoors, making nature more accessible to everyone. Constructed green spaces, such as gardens, can be an important alternative to natural environments when it comes to urban living. (Rappe & Koivunen 2017.)

2.4 Effects of Urban Living

Urbanisation - meaning the relocation of a large number of people to cities - has become a worldwide megatrend. Over 70% of the Finnish population currently live in urban areas. (Suomen Ympäristökeskus 2023.)

Urban living can have negative effects on human well-being and health due to air pollution, lack of nature and over stimulating environment. Even the aesthetics of one's living environment can have an effect on mental health. Less appealing environments such as industrial areas, can have a depressing effect, causing negative emotions to arise. Meanwhile green spaces, such as parks, can create more positive emotions, enhancing recovery. (Tyrväinen, Silvennoinen, Korpela & Ylen 2007.) According to Lee, Jordan, and Horsley (2015), epidemics of obesity and mental illness are products of increased urban living and the contemporary lifestyle. Thus, they argue for the importance of urban planning and utilising the potential health benefits of urban green spaces.

Urban living can also have positive effects on human well-being by providing more resources. Urban environments can increase the accessibility of health care and education among other things. (Vojnovic, Pearson, DeVerteuil, & Allen 2019.)

One way to measure the quality of a living environment is by assessing the accessibility, quantity, and quality of green areas. Poor maintenance, overcrowding, fences, and parking lots are examples of factors which may have a negative effect on the quality of green spaces. However, at the end of the day, how the quality of a green space is perceived is quite subjective, as people may prefer different qualities. According to a study conducted on the location of people's favourite places, 45% of people prefer natural environments such as forests, while 23% prefer constructed green spaces. This study also identified some of the issues that people had with constructed green spaces. These issues included trouble finding peace and quiet, lack of space, and lack of opportunities for utilising nature for purposes such as berry-picking and mushroom hunting. On the other hand, green spaces were found to provide good opportunities for spending time outside and physical activity. Therefore, it can be noted, that even though green spaces can be very beneficial for people living in urban areas, there are some differences compared to natural environments, which may influence the quality and well-being benefits. (Tyrväinen et al. 2007.)

2.5 Green Care and Nature-Based Method

Green Care refers to an activity, which utilises nature-based methods and their well-being effects to promote and maintain human well-being. Nature-based method refers to a systematic method involving nature, for example activities conducted in a green environment. (Luke & GCF ry. 2021.) Green Care can be conducted using various methods

such as animal-assisted or nature-assisted methods (Green Care Finland no date). Green Care is meant to be an organised activity, where nature is not just a background, but rather a tool. In Green Care, a natural environment can refer to a forest, farm, garden, or a body of water, for example. (Luke & GCF ry. 2021.) It is good to keep in mind that Green Care is a concept with wide-ranging interpretations (Ylilauri & Voutilainen 2021).

Green Care has three main principles, which together create the well-being effects of Green Care. The three principles are: nature, activity, and community. Green Care also places emphasis on participation, goal-orientedness, responsibility and experiences. Green Care services can be therapeutic or rehabilitative or preventive, and they can be directed at specific clientele. In early childhood education, Green Care is often combined with pedagogy, supporting children's development and learning. (Luke & GCF ry. 2021.)

Green Care services can be divided into nature care and nature empowerment. Nature care refers to services provided by professionals in the social and health sector. Nature care services are directed towards people who need rehabilitation or care. Individual goals, guidance and continuity are essential to nature care. Nature empowerment services are available for everyone and commonly act as preventative, refreshing or empowering measures. Nature empowerment can be executed in a group setting as a one-time activity. (Luke & GCF ry. 2021.)

According to a study conducted on the demand of nature-based services in Finland, children, adolescents and people with disabilities or mental health issues are some of the most crucial client groups utilising Green Care services. Some of the main challenges hindering the use of nature-based services identified in this study were a lack of awareness, availability, information, and financial resources. (Ylilauri & Voutilainen 2021.) The results of this thesis indicated similar challenges.

3 Methodology

In this section I will introduce and justify my research questions for the thesis, the data collection method, and data analysis methods.

3.1 Research Questions

The goal of my thesis is to evaluate how Green Care / nature-based methods are utilised in early childhood education in urban areas (Järvenpää), in order to determine whether there is a development need. Thus, I came up with three research questions which I aim to answer in my thesis:

1. How is Green Care utilised in urban ECEC centres of Järvenpää?
2. What are the main challenges for utilising Green Care in ECEC in urban areas?
3. What kind of developmental needs there are for utilising Green Care in urban ECEC centres?

In order to evaluate whether there is a developmental need, I needed to first assess how Green Care is currently being utilised in ECEC and what are the main challenges. To assess how Green Care is utilised in ECEC I've considered things such as accessibility, quantity, and versatility. I believe accessibility is a relevant factor to consider, to ensure equal participation and to figure out whether nature is available in general. I also wanted to examine quantity, or frequency, meaning how often are forest trips made or Green Care activities actualised. Versatility of Green Care activities was another important factor I wanted to examine.

3.2 Data Collection

I chose to use a questionnaire as the data collection method for my thesis. I chose this method, because I want to reach as many ECEC centres in Järvenpää as possible. A questionnaire can be distributed and answered electronically, making it potentially more efficient or quicker than some other methods. One risk with this type of method, however, is possibly receiving a low response rate. On the contrary, qualitative research can also produce a large amount of data, which must be carefully read through and analysed. (Wellington & Szczerbinski 2007.)

The type of data one will receive from a questionnaire will be heavily influenced by the types of questions included. Providing specific answer options does not leave too much room for variety and can be considered leading. However, I chose to include closed-ended questions so I would be able to measure quantity more clearly, for example the number of times children make a trip to the forest per week. (Wellington & Szczerbinski 2007.) According to Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007), it is good to start with closed-ended questions and leave the open-ended questions to the end of the questionnaire. Having too many open-ended questions can feel time consuming and challenging for the respondents, even though they will most likely yield interesting qualitative data. Thus, finding a balance when constructing the questionnaire is important. Considering all of this, I decided to make half of the questions closed-ended and half open-ended

Before implementing the research, I contacted Järvenpää's department for early childhood education and care and introduced my thesis topic and asked if they would be interested on being my working life partner. They showed interest and I applied for a research permit, which got accepted. We agreed that I would personally contact the kindergarten managers

and ask their permission via a letter to key informants. However, when I struggled to get responses, my working life partner supported me by also contacting the managers.

I sent the questionnaire to 16 different municipal ECEC centres in Järvenpää and asked if one educator per kindergarten could answer the questionnaire. I chose to send the request to the kindergarten managers, who would then forward the questionnaire to one educator in their unit. I chose to do this instead of sending the questionnaire straight to the educators myself, in order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents throughout the research. I also didn't want the managers answering the questionnaires as I wanted to make sure I received the data from people who worked in close contact with the children daily. I ended up receiving 8 responses, which is a 50% response rate. The questionnaire was answered anonymously.

3.3 Questionnaire

All together my questionnaire included 18 questions; nine closed-ended questions with answer options provided and nine open-ended questions. I designed the questionnaire in Finnish as I assumed it would be a stronger language for most of the respondents. Thus, the questions in this section are translations. The original Finnish version of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix 1: Questionnaire in Finnish.

The closed-ended questions in the questionnaire were as follows:

1. Is there nature, for example forest, nearby the kindergarten (within 1km radius)?
2. Do you think the nearby nature is rich and diverse?
3. Approximately, how often do you make trips to nature with the children?
4. Do all of the children go on trips despite their age or mobility restrictions?
5. Are you familiar with Green Care as a concept?
6. Are you concerned about your group's children's nature relationship?
7. Are you concerned about the mental health of children in your group?
8. Do you feel like you have received enough education on Green Care and nature education?
9. Do you feel like you have received enough education on promoting children's mental health?

I chose these questions so that I would get a better idea of the environments available to the kindergartens and how much they are utilised. I also wanted to know are the respondents familiar with Green Care.

The open-ended questions in the questionnaire were as follows:

10. Describe the kindergarten's yard area in your own words (quality, nature, accessibility etc.)

11. How is nature education realised in your group? Give concrete examples.
12. How do you carry out nature-based methods within your kindergarten?
13. What kind of things do you find challenging for carrying out Green Care activities?
14. Do you think there is a developmental need for carrying out Green Care activities?
What would you hope for?
15. How is children's mental health supported in your group?
16. Do you consciously utilise nature's well-being effects in promoting children's mental health? How?
17. Do you think there is a developmental need for supporting children's mental health in ECEC? How?
18. Is there still something you would like to tell?

With these questions I hoped to get concrete examples of how Green Care is utilised in the ECEC centres and what are the main challenges. With these questions I also wanted to straight up ask what kind of development the educators want and see a need for, instead of only making my own conclusions.

3.4 Data Analysis

The main difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that quantitative research seeks numerical information, while qualitative research seeks descriptive information. While a clear distinction between the two can be made, these two methods can complement each other. Research can yield both qualitative and quantitative data. (Wellington & Szczerbinski 2007.)

This is a research-based thesis, where I collected the data through questionnaires. Because I wanted to evaluate the quality of Green Care, I concentrated on a qualitative analysis. However, I designed the questionnaire so it would yield both quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose of the quantitative data was to assist in evaluating the quality. I chose to present the most important findings from the quantitative data as figures and percentages.

I chose to analyse the qualitative data using a thematic analysis method. The starting point for a thematic analysis is to have an already existing theoretical framework. This theoretical framework will provide themes, which can act as a base for your questions, influencing the nature of data which will later be collected. In a thematic analysis you will relate the collected data back to the initial theoretical framework. From the collected data you can also identify new themes. The collected data can then be divided into categories based on these themes. These categories can be developed by comparing and contextualising them with each other. It is important to read through the collected data multiple times. The identified themes and their relations can be mapped out by creating an illustration of some sorts. The meaning of these themes and their relations can then be analysed. (Haenssger 2019.)

I started the analysis of the data from the open-ended questions by gathering the data into a document and reading it through. I then made a table of the answers and started coding it, identifying key words, concepts, and ideas. Because the original data was in Finnish, I did the coding in Finnish to minimize errors caused by translation. Example of the coding process can be found from table 1, which includes data from question 15: *How is children's mental health supported in your group?*

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Coding

Original Statement	Reduced Statement
kaveritaitojen harjoittelua, kohdataan ja kuunnellaan lasta yksilöllisesti lasten tarpeiden mukaan, keskustelua myös vanhempien kanssa tarpeen mukaan	Kaveritaidot Kuuntelu Keskustelu
Aikuiset ovat läsnä ja sensitiivisesti tukevat ja kuuntelevat kaikkia lapsia parhaansa mukaan. Pyrkivät tasa-arvoiseen ja arvostavaan toimintaan aina ja kohtaavat lapset yksilöinä.	Läsnäolo Sensitiivisyys Yksilöllisyys
Positiivisella pedagogiikalla, itsesäätelyn- ja tunnetaitojen harjoittelulla, hiljentymisellä ja rauhoittumisella. Sylillä, lämmöllä ja huumorilla.	Positiivinen pedagogiikka Tunnetaidot Rauhoittuminen

I then looked for similarities and differences in the codes to identify some main themes. After identifying the themes, I once more read through the data, keeping these main themes in mind. I analysed what kind of connections there were between these themes. I gathered the themes into another table and added the main findings related to each theme. Example of this can be found from table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Main Findings

Themes	Main Findings
Accessibility	Kindergarten yards are accessible, mainly made of asphalt.
Forest trips	Regular trips to the forest. Diverse environment mostly available. Importance understood.
Exploration	Importance of exploration and taking the time to stop and wonder together.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Reliability

Research ethics refers to an ethical code, which guides responsible conduct of research (Finnish Advisory Board on Research integrity 2012). All European Academies (ALLEA) has published The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2023) in order to set common ethical guidelines for research. ALLEA has identified four fundamental principles, which should be taken into account when conducting research: reliability, honesty, respect and accountability. It is the researcher's responsibility to present truthful and honest results, without any falsification or misleading. (ALLEA 2023.) Plagiarism, which means presenting someone else's material as your own, is strictly prohibited and unethical (Finnish Advisory Board on Research integrity 2012).

When conducting research, it is important to be aware of personal bias. Bias refers to our already existing opinions and prejudices, which may influence our judgment and objectivity. Bias is a common threat to the reliability of research, which will nearly always be present to some extent in a study. Thus, it is important for the researcher as well as the reader to be aware of it. Personal biases can cause a person to either consciously or unknowingly falsify or lead the results to fit one's own conclusions. Bias can occur at any phase of the research. Researchers set their hypothesis or research questions based on current assumptions. Bias can also quite easily affect the sources chosen for the theoretical framework. (Pannucci & Wilkins 2011.) For example, in my case I began my thesis project with the assumption that nature is good for mental well-being while urban areas have a negative influence. This most likely influenced the key words I used when looking for sources, and which studies I chose to use for my theoretical framework. In order to minimise the effects of my bias, I try to keep it in mind and also try to find sources which contradict with my existing assumptions.

When conducting research through questionnaires, researchers need to also consider ethics and responsibility in relation to the respondents. Before conducting any research, a research

permit must be obtained, if necessary. (Finnish Advisory Board on Research integrity 2012.) The anonymity of the respondents and confidentiality should be considered (ALLEA 2023).

An important factor to consider when conducting research or evaluating the reliability of a study, is sample size. Sample size refers to the number of participants in a study, in my case, the number of people who answered the questionnaire. The sample size needs to be large enough, so that when the results are extrapolated, they will accurately represent the target population as a whole. (Faber & Fonseca 2014.) The response rate to my questionnaire was quite low, thus making the sample size low as well. Thus, I believe the small sample size to be the biggest limitation to my research. The sample size could have been increased if I had asked multiple people per kindergarten to participate in the questionnaire. However, this could have also affected the reliability of the results negatively as there could have been uneven distribution of responses between kindergartens. I also wanted to limit the amount of data, as the main contribution for my study was the qualitative data, which can be time consuming to go through.

Another factor which might have an impact on the reliability of my thesis, is the fact that I have translated some of the data. Because Järvenpää is widely a Finnish speaking area, I chose to conduct the research in Finnish. However, as I am writing my thesis in English, I had to eventually make some translations. Thus, there is a risk of translation mistakes.

4 Results

In this chapter I will present the results of my thesis. I will start by introducing the quantitative data yielded from the closed-ended questions. I will illustrate some of the relevant findings as graphs. After that I will discuss the results derived from the open-ended questions utilising thematic analysis.

4.1 Quantitative Results

Based on the questionnaire, every kindergarten has some nature within 1km radius, all except one, described it as rich and diverse. From this we can already deduce that the absence of nearby nature does not seem to be a challenge for ECEC centres in Järvenpää.

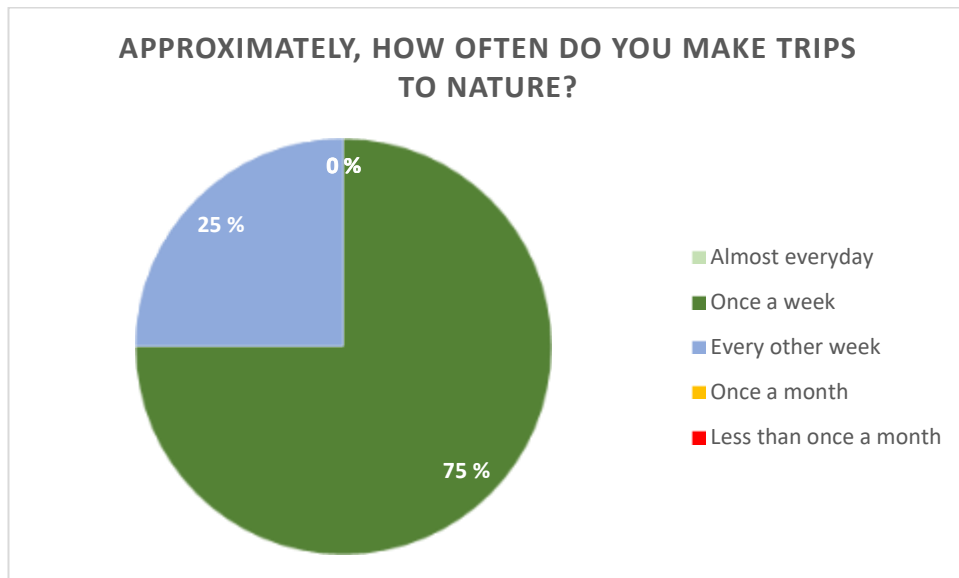


Figure 1: Frequency of Trips to Nature

As figure 1 shows, 75% of respondents answered that they make trips to nature with the children, about once a week. The rest 25% answered that they do about every other week. The other options would have been “almost everyday”, “once a month” or “less than once a month”, but no one chose those.

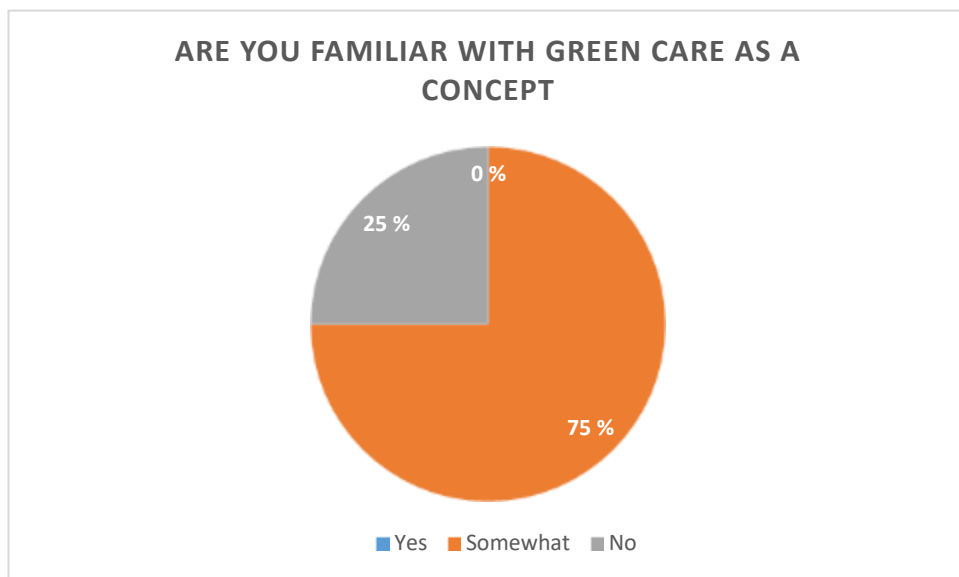


Figure 2: Familiarity with Green Care

75% of the respondents answered that they were somewhat familiar with Green Care as a concept and the rest 25% indicated that they were not familiar with the concept. No-one answered “yes” to the question. Thus, it seems that Green Care as a concept is not yet well

known among educators and more information might be needed. This is supported by the findings from question 8.

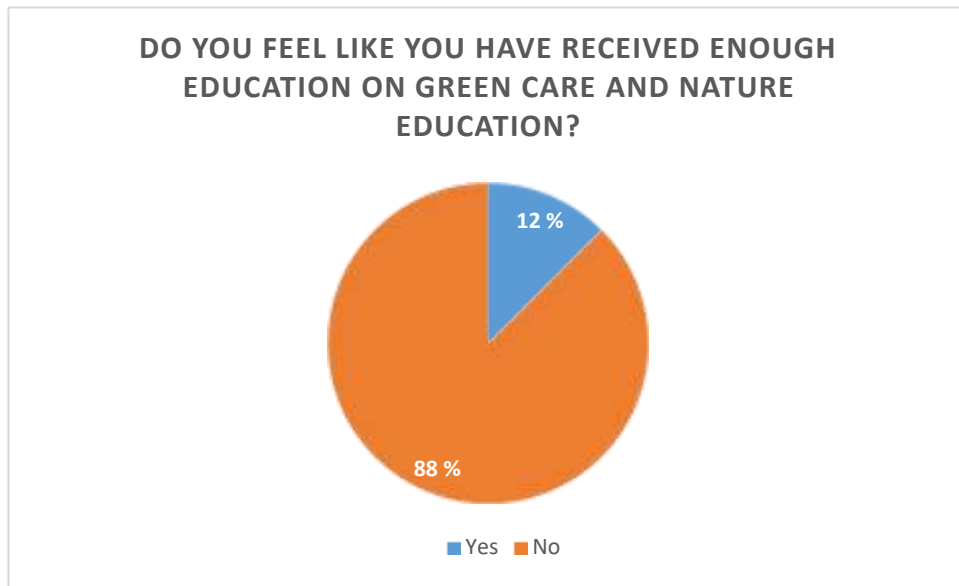


Figure 3: Green Care Education

88% of the respondents felt like they have not received enough education about Green Care and nature education. This means that only one of the educators felt like they have received enough education on the topic.

When asked whether the respondents were concerned about the children's nature relationship, half answered "yes", while half answered "no". However, the mistake I made with this question was not providing "somewhat" option.

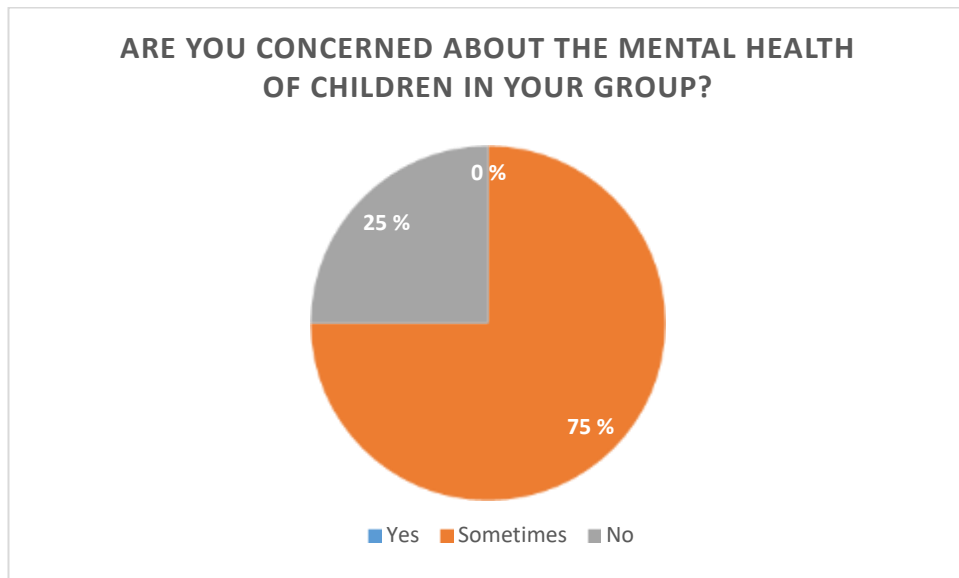


Figure 4: Concern about Mental Health

75% of the respondents answered that they were sometimes concerned about the mental health of the children in their group. 25% answered that they are not concerned. No one answered “yes” to the question. Half of the respondents felt like they have received enough education for promoting children’s mental health, while other half felt that they haven’t.

In conclusion, the quantitative results showed that the ECEC centres in Järvenpää have nature available nearby, and it is mostly diverse and rich. Most groups make weekly trips to nature. The respondents were not very familiar with the concept of Green Care and most feel that they have not received enough education on the topic.

4.2 Qualitative Results

As mentioned before, I analysed the qualitative data using thematic analysis method. I identified 9 main themes from the data: Accessibility, forest trips, exploration, play, nature crafts, calming down, lack of resources, lack of information and developmental need. In this section I will provide some example answers from the questionnaire to support my findings. The quotations picked from the data have been translated to English.

Accessibility

In the questionnaire, when describing the kindergartens’ yard areas, “accessibility” was a theme that stood out.

“The yard has gravel and asphalt areas, appropriate number of swings, some different kinds of jungle gyms (could be more), a sandbox. There are no elevation differences in the yard, only flat.”

Based on the data, many of the yard areas are mainly made of asphalt and sand, with some trees and play structures. This allows the yards to be accessible. However, some of the respondents described the yard as dull, and expressed that there is room for improvement.

Forest Trips

Based on the data, making trips to forests or other nearby natural environments is a regular part of ECEC in Järvenpää and thus I identified it as one of the themes.

“During the autumn we have gone to the forest, for example, to calm down, explore (plants and animals), eat blueberries, and discuss the importance of forests. We have collected trash and kept the forest clean and discussed how one should move in a forest/nature.”

The respondents understood the importance of forest trips and expressed that the groups try to make trips regularly. As mentioned before, the regularity of these trips varied between once a week and once every two weeks. According to the respondents, the availability of diverse nature in Järvenpää seems good. Only one respondent expressed that they did not find the nearby nature to be diverse or rich. Of course, it is to be noted that everyone’s views on what is considered diverse and rich nature can be subjective.

Exploration

The third theme I identified was “exploration”. This theme was discussed in connection with forest trips.

“Nearby nature is a natural learning environment for us. On trips we explore surrounding nature and stop at things that interest the children.”

Respondents emphasized the importance of stopping to explore and marvel at different natural phenomena, materials, plants, weather, animals, or anything that might interest the children.

Play

The importance of play was another reoccurring theme in the data.

“On forest trips we examine nature utilising different methods. Children’s play is at it’s best in the forest.”

Respondents gave examples of utilising nature in play, both indoors and outdoors. Some of the respondents brought up the opinion that children’s play is richer in a forest environment. Based on the answers, utilising nature materials in both indoor and outdoor play is common in most of the groups. This relates to the next theme I identified.

Nature Crafts

When asked how nature-based methods are carried out within the kindergarten, almost all of the respondents gave arts and crafts as an example.

“Crafting with materials from nature, these have been collected during trips when necessary...”

Nature could simply act as a topic for the arts and crafts or provide the materials for the activity. Some concrete examples included crafting binoculars or name cards. Few other indoor activities besides crafts, were mentioned, such as reading nature themed books.

Calming Down

Based on the data, many of the respondents have recognized nature to have a calming effect on children.

“Nature is also utilised for calming down and silence.”

Many of the educators reported to consciously utilise this, by going to a forest to calm down. Many mentioned providing a place to calm down to be important for the children’s mental health. Some of the respondents also noted how nature can provide an opportunity to get a way from a noisy environment.

Lack of Resources

Lack of resources was a reoccurring theme among responses when discussing the challenges of carrying out Green Care activities.

“Personnel resources sometimes limit making trips.”

The lack of resources mainly referred to lack of personnel and thus also time. Some respondents pointed out that the actualisation of activities is often dependent on the attitudes and personal views of different educators.

Lack of Information

Another common challenge identified was the lack of information and a need for new ideas. This applied both to Green Care activities and promoting children’s mental health.

“More knowledge and methods, respectively also rush/timetables should be reduced as possible.”

All of the respondents expressed some kind of need for information or education concerning Green Care. Green Care as a concept was unfamiliar to many, but more information about it was welcome. Many hoped for tips and new ideas for Green Care activities. Regarding new information, respondents hoped for a clear and concise package.

Developmental need

Last theme I identified was need for development, both for Green Care activities and mental health promotion.

“There is always a developmental need, especially as there is a lot of discussion about mental health issues in the society. The developmental need is more means to promote mental health from small toddlers to preschoolers.”

As with Green Care, respondents also wished for more information and ideas for children’s mental health promotion. Some wanted to specifically learn more about promoting young children’s (such as toddlers’) mental health.

5 Conclusions and Reflection

In this chapter I will introduce and reflect on the conclusions I made based on the results of my research. I will start by answering my research questions. I will then discuss my final thoughts, reflecting back to the theory discussed in chapter 2. Lastly, I will discuss some ideas for future development.

5.1 Research Conclusions

In this section I will reflect on the main findings of my research and answer the research questions I set earlier.

The first research question for my thesis was “How is Green Care utilised in urban ECEC centres of Järvenpää?”. As mentioned in the method section, I decided to approach this question from the perspective of accessibility, quantity, and versatility. Accessibility of the environment at ECEC is mandated by the law and is well actualised in Järvenpää’s municipal ECEC centres based on the research (Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018). The yard areas have been constructed to be accessible, and there is nature nearby every ECEC centre. However, some of the respondents described the yard as dull, and expressed that there is room for improvement. Because daily outdoor time is part of the ECEC curriculum, children are almost guaranteed to spend time in the kindergarten yard area on a daily basis (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022). However, there is no specific mandate in the curriculum for how often children should visit nature outside the kindergarten. It is only stated that it should be done “regularly”, which leaves room for interpretation. Based on the research the respondents understood the importance of forest trips and as mentioned before, the regularity of these trips varied between once a week and once every two weeks. As children are guaranteed to spend a lot of time in the kindergartens’ yard areas, I would argue that it would be important to utilise these areas to their maximum potential. Even though spending time outside in a constructed yard area, is not the same thing as spending time in a natural environment, Green Care activities do not always require making a trip to a forest or another natural environment. As discussed before, in chapter 2.3, constructed green spaces also have their benefits and can provide an important alternative to natural environments in an urban setting (Rappe & Koivunen 2017). A garden area, for example, could offer opportunity for a wide range of nature-based activities.

The respondents gave some nice examples of nature-based activities utilised in their groups. However, I would argue that there is a need for versatility. There wasn’t much variety in the examples of different respondents and the respondents expressed a need for new ideas. There is most likely a correlation between the lack of knowledge on Green Care and the lack of versatility in the nature-based activities. The point of Green Care is to consciously utilise the benefits of nature to promote well-being (Luke & GCF ry. 2021). Therefore, I would argue

that without knowledge and understanding of Green Care, it is less likely that versatile nature-based activities are utilised in ECEC.

To conclude on the first research question; the environment in Järvenpää offers good potentials to utilise Green Care in ECEC. However, the current actualisation of Green Care activities lacks in versatility. The lack of versatility can be explained by the challenges identified by the respondents, which I will discuss next.

The second research question for my thesis was “What are the main challenges for utilising Green Care in ECEC in urban areas?”. There were two main challenges that I was able to identify from the data: lack of resources and lack of information/knowledge. Thus, my findings were similar to the findings of a previous study conducted by Ylilauri & Voutilainen (2021), which identified lack of awareness, availability, information and financial resources as main the main challenges for using nature-based services. As mentioned before, in order to improve on the quality of Green Care in ECEC, there needs to be focus on providing information and education on the topic. However, even if educators were educated on the topic, there is still the issue with resources. For safety reasons, there needs to be enough personnel to accompany children on trips outside the kindergarten. A personnel shortage can even affect the educators’ ability to execute activities within a kindergarten, as sometimes there is only time to concentrate on taking care of the children’s basic needs. Considering this issue with resources, I would suggest concentrating on providing ideas for utilising Green Care within the ECEC centres.

The third research question for my thesis was “What kind of developmental needs there are for utilising Green Care in urban ECEC centres?”. This was already partially answered in the previous paragraphs; there is a need for providing more education and ideas regarding Green Care and children’s mental health promotion. There is also a need for developing more versatile actualisation of nature-based activities in ECEC. I will discuss some ideas and suggestions for improving these issues in chapter 5.3.

In conclusion, Järvenpää offers good environment for utilising Green Care, however, the actualisation of nature-based activities are currently lacking in diversity. The main challenge for utilising Green Care is lack of personnel and knowledge on the topic. There is a need for more information on the topic and concrete ideas for activities.

5.2 Final Reflections

In this section I will discuss some final reflections and comparisons between my research and theory.

In section 2.1, Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, I discussed some of the values and aims set by the National Curriculum for ECEC. It was interesting to see how these values reflected on the educators' answers. Themes such as play, rest, physical activity, sustainable living, and children's involvement, were visible in the respondents' answers.

“We acknowledge the importance of nature and in our group, we have had education on the well-being and therapeutic effects of nature. Children get to gravitate towards things they are interested in. In play, the noise and restlessness quieten.”

Nature was also recognised as an important learning environment, which is in accordance with the curriculum for ECEC. Also, many of the values mentioned in the curriculum, were also mentioned in the questionnaire responses. These values included equality, diversity and child-orientedness, for example. (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022.)

When reading the educators' responses relating to children's mental well-being, I was excited to be able to make connections to the theory I discussed before. Many of the respondents brought up the importance of supporting children's emotional skills.

“...positive pedagogy, practising self-regulation and emotional skills [...] calming down.”

As earlier discussed in chapter 2, supporting children's mental health skills, such as self-regulation and emotional skills is important for children's mental well-being and overall development (Vorma et al. 2020). I was also glad to read that educators have recognised nature to have a calming effect, and that they consciously utilised it. Respondents also mentioned collaborating with parents to promote children's mental well-being. This is important, as family is such a major factor influencing children's overall well-being (Claveirole & Gaughan 2010).

Now taking everything into consideration, it seems that the educators are in accordance with the National Core Curriculum for ECEC. They recognise the importance of nature and are able to utilise some of the benefits. The educators have an understanding on the basics of supporting children's mental health but are willing to receive more tools and information on the topic. According to the respondents, there is a need for more information on Green Care and concrete examples for activities. However, the lack of resources should be kept in mind.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Development

After identifying the developmental needs for utilising Green Care in ECEC, I will discuss some idea suggestions for improving these issues.

Based on the challenges discussed in the previous chapter, I would suggest concentrating on improving utilisation of Green Care within the premises of ECEC centres. I would suggest

taking Green Care into consideration when planning kindergarten yard areas and other learning environments. Incorporating nature elements in the design could make nature more accessible for everyone. I would also suggest incorporating a garden area, which can then be utilised in various Green Care activities within the premises of the kindergarten. It is also possible to bring nature indoors utilising indoor gardening and house plants. However, when bringing plants indoors it is important to consider any potential allergies the children or personnel might have (Rappe & Koivunen 2017).

There are some really good materials for utilising Green Care and nature-based methods in ECEC, which educators could benefit from. However, it became clear that educators might not have the time to go through all of these materials, as they can be quite long. Thus, it would be good to develop a more concise and clearer guide for educators to utilise. For now, I can recommend utilising materials provided by Ilo kasvaa ulkona - project. Ilo kasvaa ulkona is a joint project funded by Ministry of Education and Culture, which aimed to increase utilisation of nearby nature in ECEC (SYKLI 2019).

I have composed a list of different kinds of materials, including materials from Ilo kasvaa ulkona, which could be utilised in ECEC. The list can be found from Appendix 2: List of Suggested Materials. The materials include reading materials and activity cards, which can all be found online, however most of them only in Finnish. As my working life partner is the municipality of Järvenpää, which is predominantly Finnish speaking, I believe utilising Finnish materials is wise and accessible for most educators. The reading materials are quite long and detailed, and thus may not be suitable as is. The activity cards, on the other hand have been designed to be utilised in ECEC, providing concrete examples of nature-based activities.

Working on this thesis has been inspiring, and I would love to do some future work relating to my development suggestions. I strongly believe nature should be utilised more in different social fields to improve client welfare. I would love to do more research or projects with yard design, maximizing the potential of available space and nature's well-being effects. My working life partner has expressed their willingness to utilise my thesis, however, we have not yet made any formal agreements. If some further arrangements are made, I could possibly help my working life partner to create a short guide to educators on utilising Green Care, as suggested. Before that, my working life partner can arrange the distribution of nature-based activity cards to educators, which can be found from Appendix 2.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire in Finnish

Kysely: Green Care-toiminnan hyödyntäminen varhaiskasvatuksessa

Tämä kysely sisältää kysymyksiä Green Care-toiminnan / luontolähtöisten menetelmien hyödyntämisestä varhaiskasvatuksessa. Green Care tarkoittaa luontoon liittyvää toimintaa, jolla edistetään hyvinvointia.

Kyselyn vastauksia hyödynnetään opinnäytetyössä, jonka tarkoituksena on tutkia miten luontoa hyödynnetään varhaiskasvatuksessa lasten mielenterveyden tukemiseksi. Opinnäytetyön tutkijana toimii sosionomi opiskelija Christina Kananen. Tutkimus suoritetaan Järvenpään kaupungin varhaiskasvatuksessa.

Kysely on anonyymi, eli vastaajan henkilötietoja ei kerätä.

Valinta kysymykset

Onko päiväkodin lähetyvillä (alle 1km säteellä) luontoa esim. metsää?

Kyllä
 Ei

Onko lähiluonto mielestäsi rikasta ja monipuolista?

Kyllä
 Ei

Kuinka usein lähette keskimäärin lasten kanssa retkelle luontoon?

Lähes joka päivä
 Kerran viikossa
 Joka toinen viikko
 Kerran kuussa
 Harvemmin kuin kerran kuussa

Käyvätkö kaikki lapset retkillä iästä tai liikuntarajoitteista riippumatta?

Kyllä
 Ei

Onko Green Care käsitteenä sinulle entuudesta tuttu?

Kyllä
 Jonkin verran
 Ei

Koetko huolta ryhmäsi lasten luontosuhteen muodostumisesta?

Kyllä
 En

Koetko huolta ryhmäsi lasten mielenterveydestä?

Kyllä
 Valiilla
 En

Koetko saaneesi tarpeeksi koulutusta Green Care-toiminnasta tai luontokasvatuksesta?

Kyllä
 En

Koetko saaneesi tarpeeksi koulutusta lasten mielenterveyden edistämisestä?

Kyllä
 En

Kerro omin sanoin

Kuvaile omin sanoin päiväkodin pihan ympäristöä (laatu, luonto, esteettömyys ym.).

Millä tavoin luontokasvatus toteutuu ryhmässänne? Anna konkreettisia esimerkkejä.

Miten toteutate luontotoimintaa päiväkodin tiloissa?

Mitkä asiat koet haasteiksi Green Care-toiminnan toteuttamiseksi?

Koetko kehitystarvetta Green Care-toiminnan toteuttamisessa? Mitä toivoisit?

Miten lasten mielenterveyttä tuetaan ryhmässänne?

Hyödynnättekö tietoisesti luonnon hyvinvointivaikutuksia lasten mielenterveyden ylläpitämiseksi? Miten?

Koetko kehitystarvetta lasten mielenterveyden tukemisessa varhaiskasvatuksessa? Millaista?

Onko vielä jotain, mitä haluat kertoa?

Tietojen lähetys

Appendix 2: List of Suggested Materials

Reading Materials

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Activity Cards

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