



Onboarding Program for Foreign ECEC Teachers Working in Private English- speaking Daycares in Finland

Sura Aghaverdiyeva

Delia Sahuquillo Muñoz de León

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ABSTRACT

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Sura Aghaverdiyeva & Delia Sahuquillo Muñoz de León
Onboarding program for foreign ECEC teachers working in private English-speaking daycares in Finland.

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This thesis strives to explain how an onboarding program could help foreign background teachers working in English-speaking daycares in Finland to understand and put in practice the Finnish educational model.

To respond to the research question, this thesis collected data using qualitative methods, more specifically, an online survey and two focus group discussions. The data were collected from a total of 31 early childhood teachers, actively working and living in Finland. In addition, the focus groups offered a deeper perspective of experiences and suggestions from a sample of 8 professional educators.

The results were analysed through the lens of Learning at Work theories. Teachers expressed the need for support in understanding the system, accessing materials, guidance from experienced teachers and feeling part of an educational community.

This thesis discovered the real needs and wishes of foreign ECEC teachers working in Finland. As a result, the researchers concluded that creating a learning community amongst ECEC teachers and launching an onboarding program in the future would support the integration of those professionals working at English-speaking daycares.

Key words: early childhood, leadership, mentoring, onboarding, daycares, English language.

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GLOSSARY

ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
FNAE	Finnish National Agency for Education
FINEEC	The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
OAJ	Trade Union of Education
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
CoP	Community of Practice
SDL	Self-directed learning

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research topic

The research topic was chosen based on the interest and experience of us, researchers, in the English Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter referred to as ECEC) sector in Finland. Working actively in this field, we have noticed the problems surrounding our profession.

In addition, the lack of literature related to mentorship in the ECEC sector was notable during the research. Although mentorship as a concept has been studied vastly in the business field, it was difficult to find literature featuring successful mentorship examples or research examples. This fact highlighted, even more, the need for more literature on the topic.

Before the 2018 reform in ECEC, private kindergartens in Finland had more freedom to design their own learning and care processes, making them more exclusive than public-sector kindergartens (Ruutiainen 2022, 41-42). For example, daycare centres would use educational curricula other than Finnish ECEC, promote longer care hours, prioritise fluent English language teachers over teachers with Finnish curriculum experience, or even choose their customers for the benefit of full-time care and non-special needs.

It was after 2018 that the biggest differences showed when comparing public and private ECEC. Due to the independence of each municipality and each ECEC centre in organising and deciding about their practices (always considering the Finnish curriculum and legislation), there are big disparities in how new educators are brought into their new workplace.

On one hand, some public Finnish-speaking kindergartens try to organise workshops and seminars to create professional discussions, offer pedagogical training in Finnish to maintain up-to-date quality and knowledge of their professionals, and ensure onboarding programs at the beginning of teachers' working life. Private English-speaking kindergartens, on the other hand, show limited access to

pedagogical training (which, when presented, rarely expands the knowledge of these qualified professionals) and do not offer an adjustment period. Professionals start teaching without an onboarding or preparation program, making those teachers more vulnerable to burnout or retention.

As foreign-background teachers working in the English ECEC sector, we have had our challenges at the beginning of our careers, which led us to self-doubt our skills and knowledge as teachers. As future leaders and managers, we are also curious to seek an answer from our colleagues across different ECEC private centres in Finland and understand how the situation can be improved.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis aims to gather information about the experiences of ECEC teachers with foreign backgrounds regarding the mentorship practices offered when they first started working in Finland. Through that information, the purpose is to identify the barriers and to provide insights and recommendations that could enable mentorship practices, ultimately enhancing the professional development and retention of foreign ECEC teachers in the English ECEC sector in Finland.

The main research questions are:

What kind of support should foreign teachers receive when understanding and putting into practice the Finnish Early Childhood Education model through a mentoring program to ensure the quality of ECEC?

- What kind of mentoring would ease teachers' first year within the Finnish educational system?
- What type of impact would the onboarding program have on helping mentors facilitate the adjustment of the new teachers in the Finnish ECEC setting?
- What type of support would this mentoring offer to teachers' everyday practices at their daycare?

It is through the last three sub-questions that the overall vision of the mentoring program would take place: discovering the needs of ECEC teachers in their first teaching year in Finland, understanding how these programs could support mentors, and interpreting the practicability of the mentoring program.

1.3 Research approach

The research was divided into two phases: an anonymous survey and the focus group discussions, following the framework of Design Thinking and its first three phases of analysis: empathise, define and ideate.

The anonymous online survey, considered as part of the empathise and define stages in Design Thinking, was created to offer a comfortable space where ECEC teachers could express their experiences, difficulties and hopes freely. Closed-ended questions were used to guide the participants along the questionnaire, while open-ended questions were the ones which allowed getting to know the realistic picture and how ECEC teachers faced their first year working in a private English-speaking kindergarten in Finland. The focus was especially directed to their mentoring experiences as well as inclusion in the work environment.

The focus groups, considered as the ideate phase of Design Thinking, were organised to find from a collaborative perspective. The researchers played the role of moderators, and individual processing time for each question was also offered. The equal participation of every attendant, brainstorming while respecting turns and ensuring the conversation flow were important factors that supported gathering data with this research method.

1.4 Data analysis

The data were analysed with qualitative methods, focused on a phenomenological approach, which helped identify the essence of the experiences lived by ECEC teachers. The data received from the online survey was safely stored in the researchers' accounts, not being accessible to anyone but themselves. It was

analysed by sorting the answers with similar thematic which were repeated more often by the respondents.

The data received from the focus group discussions were analysed by coding the transcription of the discussions, which had been previously recorded. Different subcategories were created from the participants' ideas and suggestions. The codes created by each researcher separately were later compared, leading to the final results of the research.

1.5 Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

In writing this thesis, various Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were utilised to improve the quality and efficiency of the work. Here we present in detail what tools and how we used them along our writing process:

- Copilot: helped with the information transfer among us, researchers, by summarising and/or translating articles in the Finnish language. It also became a content inspiration program through insightful conversations, helping to expand information, when no literature related could be found (section 2.1.1.4 of this thesis, paragraphs 5 and 6, offering insights about the challenges and advantages of including foreign ECEC teachers in Finnish educational set-ups).
- Grammarly: used for grammar correction, ensuring the text was clear and free of mistakes.
- Napkin AI: created figures to visualise our data.
- Quill Bot: assisted with paraphrasing, finding academic concepts, and connecting ideas, which improved the quality of our writing.
- Restream: created the transcription from our focus group recordings.
- Scribbr: supported the citation process of our list of references (despite being modified and corrected by the researchers, when in need)

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured in the following chapters:

Chapter 2. The chapter analyses the literature review behind the concepts of Early Childhood Education in Finland and guiding programs as two separate blocks. The Learning at Work theories, chosen to frame this research, are discussed in detail.

Chapter 3. The chapter focuses on the methodology approach and data acquisition methods chosen for the different stages of this research. Limitations of this study are also presented.

Chapter 4. Results obtained through the first thematic identification and final coding. The chapter introduces and explains a total of four categories for the results: Category 1: Language and information barriers, Category 2: Support systems, Category 3: Workload and Expectations, and Category 4: Organisational culture and practices.

Chapter 5. Conclusions and suggestions on the topic are discussed.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Terminology

The terms Early Childhood, leadership, mentoring and onboarding are being used in this thesis. Considering the variations of meaning according to context, culture, or professional backgrounds, in this chapter, we clarify the definitions applicable for our research to make our approach easier to understand for the readers.

Early Childhood

Early Childhood refers to the period of child development that begins before birth and ends at the age of eight. This phase encompasses an intense development and learning, being one of the most important stages on a child's path of growing and learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, s.a.).

Finland emphasizes the value of this phase by referring to it as a goal-oriented entity (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018), which incorporates the aspects of care, education and teaching, concepts that add a particular focus on pedagogy (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, Finnish National Agency for Education s.a.). This is how the development stage becomes Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and is understood as the educational level where children take part from 10 months to 6 years old.

Residents of Finland have several Early Childhood Education options to choose from: family day care, kindergarten, club activities, or home care support (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care). Each of these options differs from the others in terms of group sizes, structure, and personnel training requirements (Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas 2017, 20), as well as the provider type, since they can be public or private operators.

Each municipality is obliged to offer ECEC services for children by law, yet free to decide on the form and curriculum according to the affordances it can provide (Kela s.a.; Ministry of Education and Culture s.a.). For this reason, there are differences between municipalities in regulations or rules. Early childhood education also varies in the teaching focus, with ECEC centres focusing on language (Swedish, English, French or German speaking daycares amongst other languages), physical development or art development, amongst others.

Considering all the different options, this thesis focuses on the private English-speaking kindergartens.

The shift towards a more market-driven approach in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has made it easier for parents to find a wider selection of appealing options for their children. They began comparing the private and public sectors and opting for the most suitable option for them (Alasuutari et al. 2023). However, guardians' choices were mostly ruled by the opportunities given to them by their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and the offers of their residential locations would provide (Ruthann 2022). Based on Finland's education administration reporting portal, 81% of ECEC services were covered by the public sector in 2021, while 19% belonged to private ECEC. Numbers also show the preference of families to allocate their children to early education centres, being the choice of 94% of families, while only 6% of them preferred family daycares (European Commission 2024).

Despite families' choices, all ECEC providers are always supervised by the government and municipalities (Hujala & Alila 2022, 228) to ensure service and pedagogy quality implementation (Finnish National Agency for Education s.a.).

Leadership

Traditionally, leadership in ECEC has been defined as the position of a leader, as Hujala & Alila (2022, 230) summarise through their analysis of different ECEC leadership studies. However, a more modern perspective describes effective leadership in the ECEC context as a shared function and responsibility among

various practitioners and teams (Rodd 2014, 31). Through this statement, leadership becomes an interactive process between ECEC, the actors in the process, and the organisational environment structures where administrative and management functions are included (Hujala & Alila 2022, 230; Act on Early Childhood Education and Care; Finnish National Agency for Education 2018).

Amongst the different types of leadership, distributed and contextual leadership seem to fit better with ECEC demands and needs. Both stakeholders, staff, and leaders, need to understand their tasks and responsibilities, understand the organisation, show a trustworthy and open relationship between professionals, and work together towards the aims of ECEC. The implementation of leadership is an interactive process in which the whole staff is engaged (Hujala & Alila 2022, 230-232).

Onboarding

According to the online etymology dictionary, the term “onboard” comes from the ancient English word “bord”, which means part of the ship, deck (2019). When someone is on board, it means they are working alongside the other people on the ship and contributing to the cooperation that allows the ship to sail. Later, the phrase was employed in the business world to indicate the training and mentorship that employees require to understand their job obligations and organisational culture. (Online Etymology Dictionary 2019.)

In the Finnish context, “onboarding” is translated as “perehdytys” which means introduction, familiarisation, or orientation in English (sanakirja.org 2024). While surfing through the literature, onboarding gets several definitions. It encompasses the structured process of acquiring, accommodating, assimilating, and accelerating new team members to fit into their new roles seamlessly, whether they come from outside or transition within the organisation. (Bradt & Vonnegut 2009, 3.) A new employee requires organised help to comprehend the insights of their new job title. This support should include adequate information about their activities, the ability to internalise the information based on prior knowledge and

skills, and the ability to add their contributions and amendments while doing the tasks.

Onboarding is also described as a form of structured support (Riesen 2024). According to Klein & Weaver (2000), onboarding can be seen as organisational socialisation, where new employees are introduced to their job tasks and the work environment, both in smaller teams and the broader organisation. Organisational socialising is defined as getting the necessary social knowledge to “fit in” with an organisation (Kram & Ragins 2007, 179).

Mentoring

Looking through the literature, one finds that definitions of mentorship and onboarding overlap. The social component of mentoring, however, is one of its primary distinctions. Mentorship involves a dyadic relationship (Godshalk & Sosik s.a.). The etymology of the word “mentoring” directs to two traditional perspectives of mentoring from the Greek word “Mentor,” which means “guide or advisor for the younger,” and another meaning coming from the Indo-European word “mentos,” which means “the one who is thinking, reflecting” (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson & Heikkinen 2016). These two concepts pretty much define the relationships between mentor and protégé, assigning the mentor as someone with more experience and knowledge and passing down all the wisdom in a more hierarchical order. Mentors are seen as more experienced ones at the workplace who can share prior knowledge with the new hires by modelling, guiding and providing feedback on the performance of their mentees. (Woodard, 2007). Mentors help employees reach their developmental goals in their careers by providing necessary information and knowledge (Chao s.a.).

Nowadays, however, mentoring is slightly changing its meaning as it can emerge as a rather asymmetric process and not linear anymore (Pennanen et al. 2016). To combat the power relationships and create more supportive relationships at work, mentors are encouraging their proteges to bring the issues to the table. (Murphy 2014.)

To fully understand mentoring as a process, it is advantageous to know the background, as it can be defined and understood differently in different contexts. For example, in the Finnish context, mentoring in the workplace is used for the well-being of the new hire and the team's competence development, whereas in the rest of the world, it is used for the improvement of the retention levels of the hires (Pennanen et al. 2016).

2.2 Early Childhood Education in Finland

2.2.1 Policies background

Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland has gone through substantial changes since the arrival of the first Finnish kindergarten in the city of Jyväskylä in 1863, and with the foundation of the first public kindergarten in Helsinki in 1888 by Hanna Rothman, as mentioned by Eerola-Pennanen et al. (2017, 13 in Salminen 2017, 3). These modifications have affected not only the general organisational processes within the kindergartens but also the perception of this educational level and the professionals working there.

In the beginning, 60 kindergartens operated with few rules and specifications, but today's ECEC in Finland has undergone two significant reforms and has experienced significant modification. Interest in privatising the field grew after the introduction of the voucher system (Laki sosiaali-ja terveydenhuollon palvelusetelistä 569/2009) and government subsidies for private early childhood education (Paananen 2017). In addition, the 2013 transfer of governance from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture changed the focus from social healthcare to education, imposing several demands on teachers' pedagogical and leadership abilities.

Since August 2015, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) has been responsible for the national evaluation of ECEC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2016). However, each municipality continues to be responsible for evaluating each individual ECEC entity. As expected, this brings

a lot of differences in how and what each municipality carries out the evaluation process.

In a nutshell, the main reforms in the ECEC sector covered teacher qualifications, their job titles, the adult-child ratio in the classroom, as well as the separation of the different specialisations in the early childhood field. (Alexiadou, Hjelmér, Laiho & Pihlaja 2024).

Each change in the legislation affected to the changes in the national core curriculum by highlighting children's rights and importance of the play-based pedagogy as a main way of learning and in the last curriculum document making shift towards developing children's broader abilities for lifelong learning and facing complex challenges (transversal competencies) (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022).

All these changes and modifications aim to increase the quality of ECEC. However, according to Hoing (2006), the implementation of new policies should not be taken for granted in the education sector. Due to the complexity of each educational institution, a small change can create highly different effects depending on the conditions under which the implementation occurs (Hilppö et al. 2019, 71). Hence, paying attention to all those small details and introducing the modifications in small steps is important to avoid overwhelming ECEC professionals with constant changes in their practices and regulations.

2.2.2 The role of the ECEC teacher in Finland

Early Childhood Education and Care has gone through a strong reform throughout the past years, as explained in the prior subcategory of this thesis chapter. The new core curriculum status has changed from being a general guideline to a normative document that directs ECEC educators' work (Hilppö et al. 2019, 71).

Teachers' role in society's perception has also changed over the years, due to these new policies and societal changes. Through the analysis of literature, it seems that the tendency is slowly moving from categorizing ECEC teachers as

“aunties” or “uncles”, which led to undermining their professional status and their university studies (Laitila, Patteri & Katainen 2016) towards understanding that teachers represent a group of high qualified professionals who are fully capable to design, plan, implement, modify, document, evaluate and develop the education, their teaching, the interaction in the classroom and their professional skill (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas 2021, 3).

In the past few decades, daycares underestimated the diversity of skills and responsibilities of their professionals. The culture of “everyone does everything” and the division of responsibilities based on work shifts instead of skills and competencies was a highly extended practice in the sector (Karila et al. 2017, 80). However, the publication of the document “Guidelines for Teachers 2017-2030” brought up changes to this perception. It focused on the understanding that multi-professional knowledge is required in the ECEC field (Karila & Kupila 2023, 6), and the need to take advantage of this multi-professional knowledge when dividing tasks

However, these all seem to be a utopia, since the reality of ECEC is far from the ideal responsibilities’ division. Private daycares continue assigning shifts without considering skills or roles, and there is still a very unclear professional profile for ECEC staff (FINEEC 2024a; 2024 b), which has appeared as a developmental need (Heikka et al. 2022, 23). At the same time, Finland faces the shortage of ECEC qualified teachers (European Commission 2024a), which will make it impossible to meet the demand for the three groups of professionals from 2030 onwards (NLS network of analysts 2023, 15).

Some municipalities, in the attempt to facilitate the job of their professionals, have introduced guidelines to define each role and the specific responsibilities (Karila et al. 2017, 80) as shown in the following summary table:

Table 1. Role – responsibilities summary (Karila et al. 2017, 90)

ROLE – RESPONSIBILITIES SUMMARY	
Early childhood teacher	<p>Responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pedagogical planning, development, and evaluation. - teaching preparation and implementation in cooperation with the team. - communication of the group's pedagogical activities. - multiprofessional and network-related cooperation with the school, health care, and families, especially when the issue is related to child development and learning.
Early childhood social pedagogue	<p>Responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participating in the care, education, teaching, and evaluation together with the ECEC teacher. - assessment and development of the operating culture of the educational community. - supporting and educating the team on information related to the municipal and provincial family service network, services and operating methods, and how to guide and support families. - multiprofessional and network-related cooperation with the school, health care, and families, especially when the issue is related to the child's life situation.
Child carers & practical nurses	<p>Responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - creating a sensitive interaction with children. - taking care of children's comprehensive well-being and health. - cooperation with families.

In this unstable market situation, all daycare professionals continue developing their competencies to provide quality teaching and care services to families.

The general competencies of every ECEC staff member (see Table 2) include the ones that ensure the interpretation of the environment (awareness of cultural and social starting points, legislation, and daycare everyday tasks), related to early childhood education (teaching skills, curriculum knowledge, well-being skills, etc), that ensure cooperation and interaction amongst different stakeholders (interaction skills, linguistic management at work, networking skills, etc) and that promote continuous development (reflection and knowledge of management skills, evaluation and development expertise).

Table 2. Competencies needed for daycare work (modified from Finnish with Google Translate; Karila et al. 2017, 77).

Key areas of expertise	Core competence
To interpret the operating environment and basic tasks related competence	Awareness of the social and cultural starting points of upbringing and childhood Awareness of the legislation and other guidance governing the work at any given time Knowledge of the whole everyday life of children and families
For early childhood education related competence	Cultivation expertise Teaching skills Knowledge related to health and care Curriculum knowledge Knowledge about child development and learning Pedagogical competence Well-being skills
For cooperation and interaction related competence	Interaction skills Knowledge of professional discussions Cooperation skills Linguistic management of work Networking skills Ability to influence
For continuous development related competence	Reflection and knowledge management skills Evaluation and development expertise

ECEC teachers' competencies vary from the general competencies vision, focusing not only on their role as the pedagogical leader of the classroom (Heikka, Suhonen & Kahila 2022, 23; Laitila et al. 2016) but also on ensuring skills and competencies related to group management (Karila et al. 2017, 75), due to their

obligation to lead the pedagogy and practices in the team (Heikka et al. 2022, 23; Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas 2021, 12).

To achieve a successful Finnish multi-professional approach, we mentioned the importance of paying attention to skills and competencies related to group management (Karila et al. 2017, 75). ECEC teachers are also expected to embrace holistic and dynamic leadership, where the interaction among different elements (such as context, leader, and practitioners) creates an outcome that exceeds the sum of its individual parts (Rodd 2014, 32).

The needs of English-speaking private daycares must also be considered. Attracted by the language of instruction, these daycares often become large multicultural centres. Leadership styles modelled on specific values may, therefore, not be acceptable to or understood by everyone. This is an important consideration in early years, where diversity in staff and families can lead to unanticipated expectations, approaches, and reactions to demands for leadership and change (Rodd 2014, 34).

Teachers seem to be asked to be 'more of everything' now and in the future. However, one more time, the path to achieving all these expectations and wishes is not stated in any document or legislation. The Ministry of Education and Culture (2022, 5) only ensures that providers of early childhood education and care and education and training will reinforce the role of pedagogical leadership in the education and training sector. In this uncertain environment, it is not surprising to find teachers who feel insecure about leading, since in a relatively short period, pedagogy and teachers' pedagogical responsibility, as well as the expectation for pedagogical leadership, have been emphasised and intensified (Heikka et al. 2022, 23).

2.2.3 Being a foreign ECEC teacher

The qualifications of ECEC personnel are regulated in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018 (Hujala & Alila 2022, 229) and in the Act on Qualifications of Professional Personnel in Social Care 272/2005 (Karila et al. 2017, 80).

After the integration of the Act on ECEC in 2018, and in order to be considered as a qualified staff member, this document establishes that:

- an early childhood education teacher must hold a bachelor's degree from a university, giving pedagogical training in ECEC.
- an early childhood social pedagogue must have a bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences. Those who graduated before 2022 from a university of applied sciences retain eligibility for the position of ECEC teacher (Karila & Kupila 2023, 7), which included a social services degree from the University of Applied Sciences and 60 ECTS as specialisation in Early Childhood Education.

(Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 35–37)

English-speaking private kindergartens found themselves in trouble after the release of these qualification demands. Finding English-speaking educators with the status of recognised qualified professionals in Finland became a hard, sometimes impossible, task to achieve, especially in the Helsinki area.

However, the problem does not only take place in the English-speaking sector. It has extended to the public sector also, where, as a solution, Finnish authorities decided to recruit and language-train early childhood teachers from abroad for their public Swedish and Finnish locations (Yle News 2023; Yle News 2024). English-speaking daycares are not part of these types of projects, and they continue their search amongst those professionals of immigrant background living in Finland.

Challenges might appear when bringing unqualified personnel or professionals with foreign qualifications into the Finnish ECEC. Insecurities based on the lack

of knowledge of Finnish ECEC legislation and pedagogical practices: misunderstandings due to cultural differences or language barriers, or unexpected educational and quality standards, are only examples of what these teachers could face when heading into English-speaking private daycares in Finland.

However, ECEC teachers' diversity and multicultural backgrounds also bring positive outcomes, such as the combination of pedagogical approaches (which enriches ECEC practices), the development of a broader worldview of children, and the promotion of bilingualism. In addition, motivation is a key aspect for these professionals who dream of working in Finnish ECEC settings while using a language they feel comfortable with (English, in this case).

To work in ECEC in Finland as a qualified teacher, a foreign background professional needs to apply for a recognition decision from the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE s.a.). This type of process includes a high economic price, paid before knowing if the recognition will or will not be accepted.

The different steps and stages of the recognition process of a foreign qualification can be seen in Figure 1. Usually, decisions are made by case, and qualifications are recognised depending on the educational history and matching the qualifications of the applicants.

The Finnish National Agency for Education (s.a) cites:

“The higher education degree or studies completed abroad must be comparable both in terms of level and content to the higher education degree or studies that are required in Finland for the ECE profession in question. In addition, the degree or studies should have prepared them for the same profession in the country where they were completed”

ELIGIBILITY FOR A PROFESSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) BASED ON A FOREIGN QUALIFICATION

Have you completed your qualification abroad? Do you intend to qualify for an ECEC profession in Finland?
Use this chart to find out what to do and who to contact. More information: www.oph.fi/recognition, recognition@oph.fi

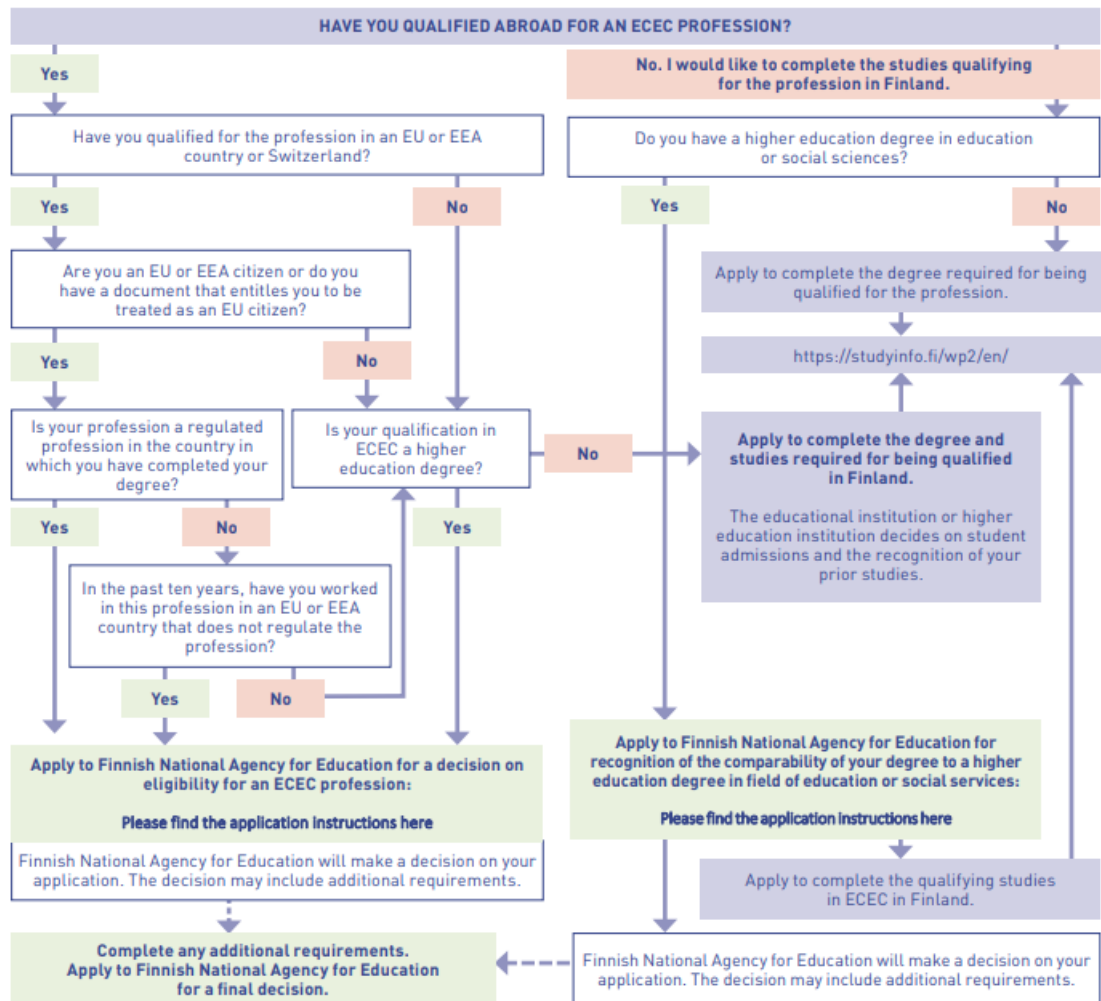


Figure 1. Eligibility for a profession in early childhood education and care (ECEC) based on a foreign qualification. FNAE s.a., 26.

2.3 Guiding programs

2.3.1 Onboarding

Generally, every daycare centre has a folder containing all the necessary information onboarding the new employee on the operation and culture in the specific daycare centre, such as operational plans, safety and hazards plans, hygiene plans, anti-bullying plans, and nowadays, employees' well-being plans also.

Every new employee, including teachers and childminders, is supposed to read through these folders

The Act on Occupational Safety 738/2002; amendments up to 222/2023 indicate that every employee starting a new work relationship needs to examine their company policies and rules regarding the work conditions, occupational health, and general information about orientation to the new workplace. Sections 3 and 4 of the Act cover workers with contracts and temporary workers or interns working in educational settings (738/2002; amendments up to 222/2023).

However, despite those compulsory orientation materials and the clear statement made by the Act, it is not a common practice to assign a mentor who can guide new employees through the first period of their work in a more structured way.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, teachers are required to meet a range of competencies that correspond to their job titles. Having a teaching degree in early childhood education alone is no longer sufficient to fulfil their educator responsibilities. Kupila & Karila (2018, 11) have also emphasised the critical importance of support for novice teachers during their initial period in their studies as well. The competencies demanded from teachers can be quite challenging even for the local teachers who know the Finnish working culture and understand the language. Foreign background teachers, on the other hand, who need to go through the cultural acclimatisation when moving to a new country, encounter additional obstacles. This makes the beginning of a new employment relationship extremely burdensome for them.

Working with small children adds extra ethical responsibilities and considerations to the organisational culture. Therefore, onboarding programs targeting Early Childhood education must have well-defined objectives and individually tailored assessment plans to help new hires comprehend their new positions within the company, while promoting the individual's growth plan without being overwhelmed. (Klein & Weaver 2000.)

Onboarding programs are mentioned as tailored training plans that help all the newcomers to get high-quality information at the same level, which empowers

them to work on tasks more independently and increases their satisfaction levels at a new workplace. (Hamdawi & Keyed 2024.) Employees who are provided with the necessary training about the skills required to perform their tasks, as well as an understanding of the expectations, are more likely to enjoy fulfilling their new job tasks rather than struggling to learn what needs to happen before they can start performing at their work.

In their book, Stein et al. (2010) explain onboarding as a strategic training program that can reduce 25 % of the attrition level. Accordingly, the beginning of work partnerships is a fragile stage in which employees feel vulnerable and exposed. Because they are still in the trial period and learning their tasks, they may make a variety of mistakes that can lead to irritation and emotional burnout. However, by investing in an onboarding approach, management may help their workers reduce stress and focus on job responsibilities. Successful onboarding can reduce stress and provide emotional support, allowing employees to focus on the positive aspects of their employment. (Stein et al 2010.) When onboarding programs leverage the transmission of existing knowledge along with the appropriate emotional support, attrition rates are reduced, and employees' inner motivation to stay at work for a longer period increases. (Stein et al 2010.).

Onboarding is also a form of caring for the employee's well-being, and when people feel cared they tend to get attached to their workplace. Because employees still lack the bond to discuss their thoughts and feelings at the start of their careers, particularly in such demanding jobs as teaching, onboarding may serve as a substitute for checking in on how they are doing. (Allies 2021.)

Besides, the employees going through mentorship programs at the beginning of their careers tend to be more productive in their further work and go on with their tasks without any further lingering or losing time and/or causing errors. (Stein et al 2010.) Onboarding programs also enhance the image of the employment brand and attract more applicants in the recruitment process. (Stein 2010). The table 3 below explains the positive outcomes of the strategic onboarding. Since private kindergartens are business models that rely on their revenue by investing in onboarding programs, the companies can reduce the cost of changing employees very often.

Table 3. Outcomes from strategic onboarding (Stein et al. 2010)

Improvement Objectives	Business Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge Transfer • Engagement Levels • Employment Brand • Automation • Consistency of (Positive) Experience • Organizational Transformation (business and /or cultural) • Accountability— Roles and Responsibilities • <i>Other: unique to your organization and circumstances (as determined by your diagnostic)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attrition • Time to Productivity • Level of Productivity • Ability to Meet Emerging Talent Needs • Competitive Position • Recruiting Cost • Labor Cost • Onboarding Administration Cost • <i>Other: unique to your organization and circumstances (as determined by your diagnostic)</i>

Onboarding positively reduces employee turnover rates, positively affects the capacity and productivity of the company in a shorter time also elevates the company's image for further recruitment.

2.3.2 Mentoring

Mentors play a vital role in organisational socialisation by helping new workers acclimate, encouraging career mobility across many organisations, and adhering to the diverse demands of today's labour market to guarantee operational effectiveness and efficiency. (Chao 2007). It is especially beneficial when the job tasks include multi-professional collaboration. The benefits of mentorship in organisational socialisation can be explained in three ways: reduction of early turnover and focusing on full-time careers, increasing career mobility, allowing individuals to socialise at multiple levels, and accelerating the culture renewal within the organisation. Instead of gradually assimilating to the outdated culture of the company, those who receive mentorship can help create new norms and behaviours in a shorter time (Chao 2007, 179).

Mentorship can take 2 types considering the relationships between mentor and mentee dyads: formal and informal types (Godshalk & Sosik s.a.). Formal mentorship has more defined roles and organisational expectations, having a more distant character, whereas informal mentorship entails a more double-sided developmental feature and has a more intimate nature (Godshalk & Sosik s.a.). This

dual classification defines how mentoring relationships develop and evolve. Formal mentorship programs often include structured activities, regular meetings, and specific goals, while informal mentorship allows for more spontaneous interactions and mutual growth. (Godshalk & Sosik s.a.)

Mentoring can be a driver for development at work, improving the everyday consciousness of the steps taken towards the learning and development process (Illeris 2003a). It is not only mentors who are passing down common wisdom to their less experienced colleagues, but the process is twofold. Mentoring helps to improve the organisational culture, creating an open environment for shaping the common knowledge, goals and learning by discussing and supporting. Mentoring, viewed as an active, collaborative process of knowledge construction in social environments, facilitates growth, idea exchange, and innovation (Pennanen et al. 2016). For example, one person's hassles at work can open new perspectives for fruitful developmental discussions, which can contribute to the improvement of services or the shift of approaches.

There are two kinds of mentors in organisational socialisation: career-related mentors who assist in gaining the information and skills necessary for the job, and psychosocial mentors who provide encouragement and criticism. (Chao 2007, 188). Psychosocial mentors cover the emotional side of the job orientation, which covers attitudes and motivation.

Cheng and Hackworth (2021) describe the 5 "Cs" of mentors: content mentors, connect mentors, coach mentors, critique mentors, and career mentors. Meaning mentors are those who help new employees with needed information, they guide their mentees to network with necessary channels, they coach when the employees are stuck and need another perspective on the situation, and they deliver necessary feedback and give career advice. All these different types can be gathered in one person, or mentorship can be developed based on the situation by more than one person.

It is wise to understand that the new employees might need more time and support to overcome those challenges in the initial stages of their careers. Making mistakes one after another and not having enough skills to avoid them might drain

the mental well-being of the new hire and can cause a loss of motivation or lead to leaving the job. Here, mentoring takes a more coaching nature, guiding the mentee through challenging times. By giving psychological support, mentors can change their proteges' behaviour and look at the situation from an alternative perspective. (Boyatzis s.a.) At the beginning of their career, international background teachers may feel a lack of agency and decision-making skills due to limited knowledge of information. Literature says that teachers' well-being is closely linked to their job satisfaction and their ability to make decisions about their daily tasks. Teachers who acquire skills quickly feel a stronger sense of belonging to their professional community, which positively impacts their well-being and their desire to remain in the same workplace. This sense of belonging is crucial for teachers, as their well-being is tightly connected to their professionalism and the effectiveness of their performance. (Allies 2021, 996-997.)

2.3.3 Real case: Vantaa mentoring program

As part of our thesis writing process, and willing to increase our knowledge of mentoring experiences in our field, recognising and getting information about existing mentoring programs for ECEC teachers in Finland was a meaningful resource of knowledge.

Vantaa, a city in Finland's Uusimaa area, only 20km from the capital Helsinki, is implementing a mentoring program for new ECEC teachers. This mentoring, which started in 2018, is fully directed to Finnish speakers and public sector day-cares. The main goal is to support those ECEC teachers and special needs teachers who start working in Vantaa for the first time in their careers (Vantaa Kaupunki 2022).

The program bases its success on the mentor-mentee relationship, which translates into a more experienced ECEC teacher with at least 3 years of working experience (mentor) supporting the newer additions to the field (mentees) (Vantaa Kaupunki 2024). The mentor agrees to approximately a monthly meeting for a full school year with his or her mentees and draws up an annual plan of topics to discuss, which will depend on the specific needs or interests of the mentees.

In addition, the participation and compromise of managers are essential to ensure the success of this type of program. Every manager in Vantaa is committed to ensuring that anyone involved in mentoring has available time to attend to the specific responsibilities coming from the program: offering the time for mentoring, organising the mentoring sessions, and attending the agreed meetings.

Mentees highlight the feeling of support when familiarising themselves with the practices in the city of Vantaa, their professional growth, and discovering their own identity as teachers as important aspects experienced thanks to the program. On the other hand, mentors get to feel satisfaction, personal growth, and new possibilities for career paths when offering mentoring support to their mentees. However, this type of program can be understood as teamwork, where peer support and the feeling of belonging to a community of professionals positively impact teachers' well-being and feelings of appreciation for impacts on teachers' well-being and feelings of appreciation for both mentors and mentees. (Vantaa Kaupunki 2024.)

At the end of each mentoring program, all mentees are expected to offer an evaluation and feedback on their mentoring experience and their mentor's approach. This helps the Early Childhood specialist in charge of mentors understand the success or failure of each mentor's organisational style and to support them in achieving better practices in the future.

2.4 Theories – Learning at work

These days, learning is not limited to one degree or professional education that one obtains once in a lifetime and continues their professional career based on it. Therefore, continuous education and training at work are becoming an integral aspect of learning because of the constant changes in the community and the skills requirements it brings to the job market. (Illeris 2003a.)

This is the reason why adult learning theories and learning at work are becoming very appealing topics to be researched. Considering that mentoring programs are

the initial step of learning at work, it is noteworthy to understand the theories defining them.

A substantial amount of adult learning happens in professional settings. Thus, to understand learning in the workplace, we need to understand learning in adulthood.

Learning should be viewed as a continuous process of developing one's quality, competence, personal growth, and other abilities thanks to instruction or training (Allen Rosch and Riggio 2021,258). According to Rogers's research on adult learning, meaningful learning entails the learner's personal growth as well as a shift in behaviours, attitudes, or even dispositions (Lankau and Scandura 2007, 95). Adult learning entails more humanistic aspect in learning than the mechanical development as most adult learning happens based on our willpower and interests (Merriam 2014). The main adult learning theories are three: Andragogy, Self-directed learning, and transformational learning (Illeris 2018).

The term adult learning is closely connected to Knowles's concept of andragogy, which stated that learning is a never-ending process, rather than lifelong. The concept of andragogy focuses on actual learners as the main subject of the learning process rather than external beliefs built around them. In andragogy, the learner is the one who creates the necessity for the learning. (Chinnasamy 2013.) Knowles describes andragogy as self-directed, based on prior knowledge and experience, linked to their social roles, hands-on application, based on problem-solving rather than the subject itself, and heavily leaning on inner motivation (Illeris 2018).

Tough has expanded the self-directed aspect of adult learning, taken from the andragogy and introduced it as a new theory (Merriam 2014). The main difference of self-directed learning (SDL) from andragogy is about taking the initiative for learning into one's own hands. SDL is the most common form of learning that serves for development and professional growth (Illeris 2018). In this type of learning, learners' agency is rather strong, and they can independently choose what they want to learn and how.

Transformative learning theory, which was developed by Mezirow, focuses on the meaning-making process. The new knowledge always creates some kind of ethical crisis in the thinking process, causing dilemmas. (Illeris 2018.) This is where the past knowledge conflicts with the new knowledge, and as a result, either we resist or perceive information, causing unlearning and changing the entire meaning or prior knowledge (Illeris 2003a).

There is a big motivational factor in learning in adulthood, as adult learners require more inner drive to make decisions and set aside time for learning. Being more capable learners, they employ more accountability for learning new things. To surpass their capabilities and keep developing, individuals also require additional incentives in learning as well (Illeris 2003a,173). Therefore, learning in adulthood is not always a very positive phenomenon and can have lots of drawbacks, which can result in non-learning or distortion (Illeris 2003a, 172). While learning, one applies the everyday consciousness aspect to the process, which can select from information to learn or defend against. Adult learning involves making connections between one's personal experiences and social-emotional associations the topic creates; this can lead to either learning or resistance to learning new things (Illeris 2003a,172). So, if a mature person does not have enough interest or motivation towards the subject, it is most likely that he or she will not spend time on further exploring it.

The above-mentioned explanations on adult learning assume that learning happens mostly in individual learning through the self's thinking and meaning-making process. Yrjö Engeström posits that when an individual acquires new knowledge, they exceed their learning capacities (Illeris 2003a).

However, learning cannot be described as an internal process only. There are lots of factors influencing it. According to Illeris (2003a,170), learning dimensions are threefold, including cognitive, emotional, and social aspects.

Learning in adulthood should be viewed as the understanding of the relevant internal cognitive development as well as the influence of external circumstances

on the learning process (Illeris 2003a). Further, he suggests looking into 3 approaches to studying this double component in learning: historical-cultural approach, critical approach, and humanitarian approach.

On the other side, Allen et al mention how Merriam's fivefold theoretical orientations, cognitivist, behaviourist, humanitarian, social cognitive, and constructivist learning, can be applied to workplace learning (Allen et al 2021, 259). These theories give us ample space to understand how personal and professional development happens through learning, and what the possible ways are to evaluate this knowledge and skills from different perspectives.

Personal development is viewed as how one sees oneself in the background of complex interpersonal relationships and a person's ability to manoeuvre those. According to cognitivist theory, learning occurs internally. The cognitive approach explains how information is processed by analysing new data based on prior knowledge and how knowledge is increased because of this internalisation.

"Learning what to learn" and "learning how to learn" are explained by this theoretical orientation. According to this approach, existing knowledge and past experiences are always a part of adult learning. Tests and exams are used to evaluate learning because the information presented in the cognitivist viewpoint is rather simple. (Allen et al 2021, 259-261.) From the cognitivist standpoint, the mentor is the main source of the information. Onboarding can contain info sessions, training, or manuals providing the necessary information needed for the orientation to the new position and the new organisation.

While the cognitivist approach focuses on acquiring knowledge, the behaviourist orientation to learning emphasises applying that knowledge through performance. This approach is centred on developing skills and mastering the acquired information. Since it relies on hands-on experiences, the evaluation process is based on the performance of concrete skills as well. (Allen et al 2021, 262-264.)

Finding one's purpose, developing, maturing, and eventually reaching self-actualisation are the goals of learning from a humanistic perspective. This very indi-

vidualistic path to learning focuses on one's finding purpose and motivation toward learning. Since it involves very personal learning, assessment of this kind of learning can also be a little complicated, as everyone experiences self-actualisation at different levels. (Allen et al 2021, 265-266.)

Learning from the mentor occurs in social-cognitive learning, where the learning happens in interaction with others. Learner usually acquires new skills and knowledge from single role models and/or from the group through networking. In this kind of learning interaction, feedback and mentor talks appear to be the most effective evaluation form. (Allen et al 2021, 267-268.).

The constructivist approach to learning focuses on the meaning-making process based on all the information and one's own experiences (Allen et al 2021, 268). In mentoring relationships, this means that the learner reaches the level of producing their knowledge around the topic and starts mentoring others. In the humanistic approach, it is a very personal process, and its evaluation is rather challenging.

The acquisition of new skills and talents that foster better teamwork within an organisation is known as personal skill development. Relational job learning refers to a greater understanding of the interdependencies between one's job and other roles within the organisation (Lankau & Scandura s.a.97). According to adult learning theory, onboarding programs should boost recruits' drive to learn new skills and information about the organisation by incorporating more hands-on and self-directed learning. A key element of professional communities' development is individual learning; by improving our abilities and competencies, we raise the standard of teamwork. Thus, every team player needs to understand their roles and contribution to the common goal.

The process of learning as an adult is quite complicated because it involves more meaning-making, self-awareness, self-growth, and development than it does the technical aspect of processing more knowledge (Daloz 2012). Adult learning is linked to our prior experiences, emotional and holistic components of learning, and greater intrinsic drive. Learning as an adult involves bringing the past and future into harmony. All our senses—emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental—

are stimulated by learning as adults. We perceive and understand things based on what we have experienced earlier or what values we uphold. (Merriam 2014.) Therefore, onboarding programs should initiate self-directed learning, motivate new employees by clarifying the importance of learning specific things, recognise their previous experience, clearly define their roles, and focus on practical applications. (Boyatzis s.a.)

Learning in adulthood does not end with learning all the time. Adults bring their identity to the learning. Some people have more arrangement in life, and learning new skills, changing their careers, or starting a degree or training program is a new step in their lives. (Illeris 2003b.)

Sometimes, the identity adults bring to their learning process can conflict with the new knowledge and their beliefs. In these times to learn new things, adults need to unlearn previously learned knowledge. Unlearning is a transformative process, and this requires lots of readjustment in professional identity; therefore, it needs a rather sensitive approach (Illeris 2003a,175).

2.5 Framework synthesis

The research on the competencies and responsibilities of early childhood education teachers helps us understand the requirements for effective onboarding programs. This research serves as a foundation for creating knowledge around these topics. By identifying key competencies, we can design more efficient and assessable onboarding programs. Additionally, understanding the real obstacles and extra requirements that foreign background teachers face at the beginning of their careers in Finland allows us to tailor onboarding programs to better serve their needs.

Our literature review on onboarding and mentoring explores the benefits of onboarding, turnover rates and well-being. It also highlights the need for creating new knowledge and learning at work. This need is further explored through theories of learning at work and adult learning, which shed light on the humanistic aspects of learning. These theories help us understand how adult learning should

be organized and what aspects need attention to create a successful onboarding program (Figure 2).

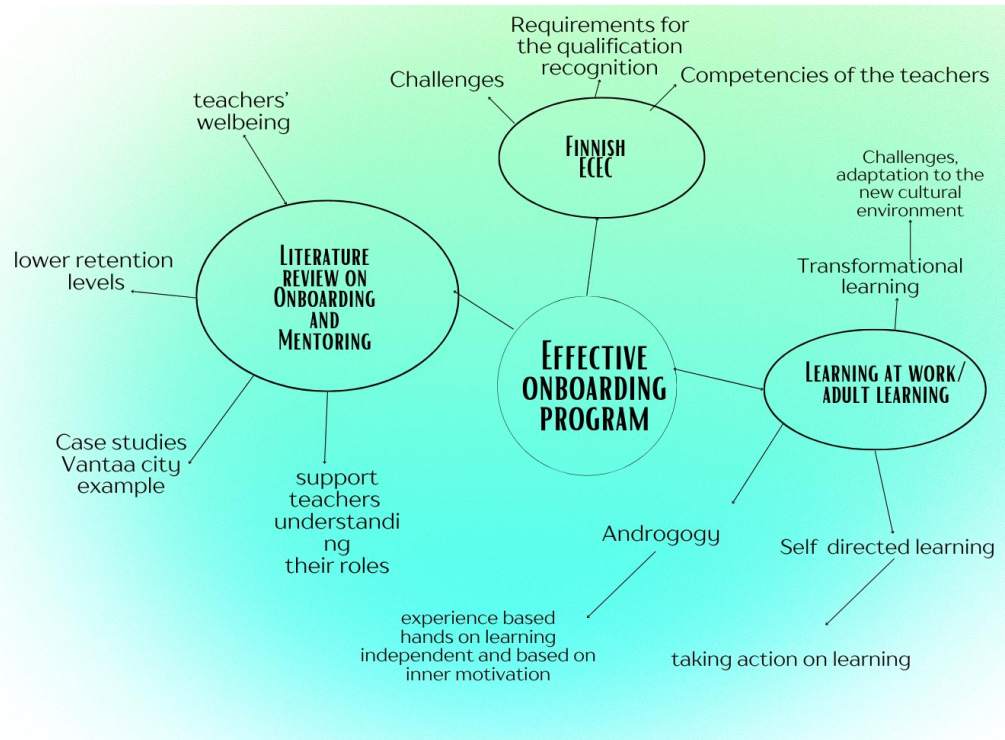


Figure 2. Framework synthesis (generated with Canva)

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological approach

The methodological approach of this research is founded on constructivism, a philosophical framework that emphasises how human thinking shapes the understanding and knowledge of the world (Atlas.ti 2024). Constructivism allows individuals to explore and construct meaning from their own experiences, their interactions, and their social context. The social phenomena studied in this thesis need to be continually revised and reinterpreted (Ghauri, Grønhaug, & Strange 2020, 96) since educational settings such as Early childhood tend to change their practices and legislations within different periods.

To get a comprehensive and detailed understanding of these individual experiences and the complexity of the situation (Creswell & Creswell 2018, 51), the research was based on a qualitative method and phenomenological framework. This type of inductive and subjective “insider view” style (Ghauri et al 2020, 97) allowed for gaining more information in the natural setting of those ECEC teachers who participated in the first survey of the study.

In addition, the phenomenological framework allowed us to gather information from a holistic perspective (Moilanen, Ojasalo, & Ritalahti 2022) and describe the commonalities and variations (Atlas.ti 2024) in the experiences lived by ECEC teachers when they started working in Finland.

This thesis focuses on two stages: the development of an anonymous online survey and the creation of two focus groups to discuss possible solutions.

The decision of these two stages came after analysing the approach of “Design thinking”. Being still an unknown process for many educational leaders, this problem-solving strategy is slowly gaining strength and presence in education settings (Gallagher et al. 2020, 11). The technique includes a total of five phases, as presented in Figure 3: empathise (understanding the challenge), define (framing and gathering information), ideate (generating and refining ideas), prototype and test.

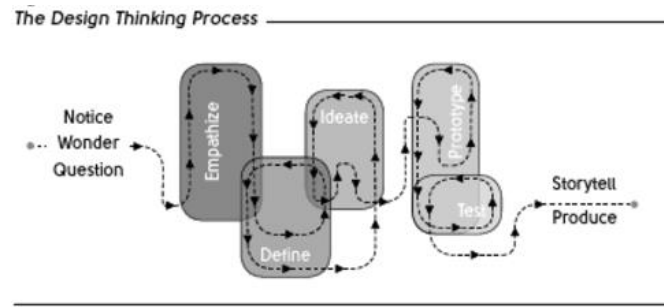


Figure 3. The five phases of Design Thinking (Gallagher & Thordarson 2020, 16)

It is important to be aware that the names of the phases might vary depending on the specific sector or field where the framework is used, but the content or intention of each of them is always similar. For example, in the Design Thinking for Educators Toolkit created by IDEO (2012), these phases are categorised as discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation and evolution (IDEO 2012, 15). For the interest of this study, we used the names given by Gallagher & Thordarson (2020), and only the first three phases were followed: empathise, define, and ideate

As summarised by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2017, 20-21), phenomenologists seem to differ on the nature of this approach. However, authors such as Curtis, Hammersley or Rossman agreed that phenomenology believes in the importance of subjective consciousness and documenting experiences, giving significance to the process of understanding how and why the situation is perceived as it is by those sharing their experiences. These are the exact points the researchers focused on while developing the first part of this study.

Using the online survey, participants had the opportunity to share and describe their experiences from the comfort of anonymity. This brought up a lot of information on how foreigners felt during their first year working in private English-speaking daycares and what materials or practices they would have benefited from at that time. The researchers achieved a deep understanding of the situation and answered the first two stages of Design thinking by having the opportunity to empathise with participants' answers and experiences, but also to define more clearly the real problem to be solved. This allowed the second study phase to be designed from a more accurate perspective.

This type of emphasis description differs from the main characteristics of quantitative methods. Quantitative methods focus on testing and verifying facts through an objective “outsider view” (Ghauri et al 2020, 97). Variables can be measured, summarised and generalised using statistical procedures (Creswell & Creswell 2018, 51). However, the focus of our first stage was never numerical. It was directed towards a specific situation, so results could not have been generalised to a different group of the population or a different problem.

In the second phase, two focus groups of 4 people were organised. These smaller groups, considered as part of the ideate phase of Design thinking, facilitated individual reasoning, group interactions and brainstorming (Gallagher et al. 2020, 97; IDEO 2012, 48). To effectively implement solutions, people need to understand them and be part of the solution-creating process (Gallagher et al. 2020, 13). Hence, it is important to have a professional collaboration (Gallagher et al. 2020, 20) and focus on more realistic ideas when choosing solutions to our problems. (IDEO 2012, 54).

3.2 Data acquisition methods

The methods chosen for data acquisition in this research were an online survey (which focused on the open-ended answers given by participants) and focus group discussions (semi-structured discussions to promote brainstorming and collaboration processes)

3.2.1 Online survey

A survey can be described as a method that aims to collect data and generate insights about a specific problem or group of people (Atlas.ti 2024). In our research online survey was targeted at a sample of the bigger group, which is English-speaking teachers of the private ECEC in Finland. Some authors, such as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017), defined surveys as a method that describes the nature of existing circumstances (2017, 334).

Since the subject matter of this research was well-known before the start of the study (Moilanen et al. 2022), the choice of this method seemed the most accurate to ensure the validity of the information. The approach to the survey was from an exploratory (Cohen et al. 2017, 335) and cross-sectional (Cohen et al. 2017, 347) perspective, since the researchers' main goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the problem through the data offered by respondents at a single point in time.

In addition, the online survey format was chosen due to the advantages of this modality over face-to-face surveys or interview options. The use of this online survey supported the participants' anonymity (which encourages their honesty and the reliability of our data), made the data collection process faster (Moilanen et al. 2022), allowed the researchers to reach participants from different geographical areas in Finland and participants could answer at their own pace (Atlas.fi 2024).

However, there were disadvantages to take into consideration, such as the risk of lower returns, the impossibility of answering immediately to questions from participants or the unwillingness of respondents to write an explanation of their thoughts and experiences (Cohen et al. 2017, 278). As a prevention measure, a detailed description of our study, as well as simple language instructions and ethical considerations (Moilanen et al. 2022), were included as the first page of the questionnaire. The average response time was planned up to 15 minutes, and the researchers' personal contact information was shared to ensure participants could address their doubts before answering questions (Moilanen et al. 2022).

Although surveys are associated with quantitative research, this study used a survey with a qualitative focus. As mentioned, the primary aim was not to gather numerical percentages or statistical data from participants' responses. Instead, the survey utilised open-ended questions (Atlas.fi 2024), allowing individuals to freely express and elaborate on their personal experiences and thoughts regarding the issue under study (Appendix 1). This approach was chosen to capture the depth of participants' perspectives, which is often lost in quantitative analysis.

The responses were analysed qualitatively, valuing each experience equally and focusing on the content rather than reducing the answers to statistical data.

The creation of a well-defined set of questions was essential for the success of this data collection method. Inspired by the strategic tool of Value Proposition Design, the design of questions was organised following the three components of the customer profile.

As presented in Figure 4, the questions helped us to, first, understand the job and reality of our participants; then, to understand their pains, meaning anything that prevents them from getting their teaching job done accordingly to expectations; finally, the understanding of gains, meaning the outcomes or solutions that the respondents wanted (Osterwalder et al. 2014, 12-16)

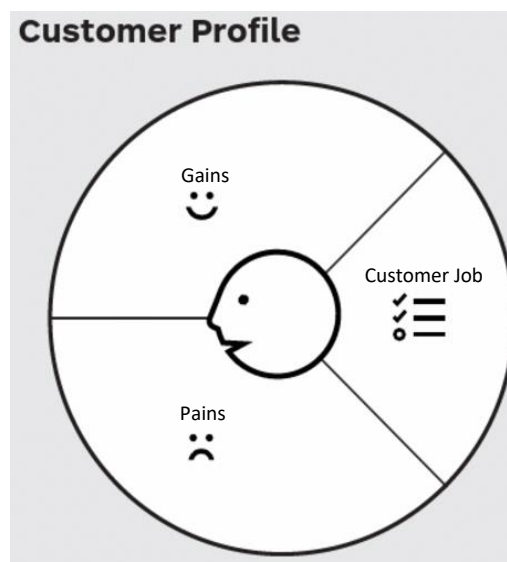


Figure 4. Customer Profile (adapted from Osterwalder, Pigneur, Bernarda, & Smith 2014, 23)

In addition, the choice of questions for our questionnaire was strongly influenced and framed by the learning at work theory. The questions were focused on the ECEC teachers and their need for learning (andragogy), understanding how they follow their own development (SDL) and their need for new knowledge in the field (transformational learning).

3.2.2 Focus groups

Focus group, as described by Ghauri, Grønhaug, & Strange (2020), is a qualitative method which allows the interaction between the interviewer, respondent and the other respondents (Ghauri et al. 2020, 124). Researchers organised a total of two focus groups, with 4 participants each, formed by teachers actively working in Tampere (focus group 1) and in Helsinki (focus group 2). Ghauri, Grønhaug, & Strange (2020) guided the researchers' decision to maintain the number of participants for each group focus between 6 to 10 since, as they explained, too small or too large groups can make the focus ineffective (Ghauri et al. 2020, 125). By keeping the size of the groups as smaller discussion groups, the deeper analysis level of the matter under discussion was promoted (Moilanen et al. 2022, Atlas.ti 2024).

The discussions were held on the online platform Zoom, and despite having a clear preorganised structure, a natural flow of conversation was promoted.

Some of the advantages of using this method include its inexpensive, flexible and convenient way of gathering information in a short time, allowing researchers to understand the way people behave and feel, thanks to rich and in-depth data produced through discussions (Ghauri et al. 2020, 124-126).

The main goal was learning the meaning that participants hold about the problem, without considering prior assumptions from the researchers or affirmations from the literature (Creswell & Creswell 2018, 296). All this creative thinking and generation of new ideas could be used as solutions to the problem under analysis (Atlas.ti 2024).

However, one important disadvantage of this method is not only related to the difficulty of finding the correct people to participate, but also the high time consuming derived from summarizing, categorizing and analysing the large amounts of data collected. (Ghauri et al. 2020, 126). Managing group dynamics in a virtual environment while ensuring all participants feel comfortable using the necessary

technology (Atlas.ti 2024) was another challenge that could have derived from the use of this method.

Before the discussions, researchers thoughtfully constructed a set of open-ended questions, from broader to more specific (Atlas.ti 2024), taking into consideration the data obtained in the first phase of the research. Once the questions were ready, and to ensure the smooth development of focus groups, the researchers divided their tasks as a team: one was designated as the moderator while the other was the recorder.

The moderator oversaw promoting the interaction of participants while respecting their individual turns, ensuring each participant could express their opinions, creating a comfortable environment and guaranteeing that the discussion stayed focused and productive (Atlas.ti 2024; Ghauri et al. 2020, 125). The recorder tasks included taking notes and recording full phrases and body language (Gallagher & Thordarson 2020, 37), which would be used as data to analyze later on.

To avoid misunderstanding, an instructions sheet (Appendix 2) was sent to all participants a week before the development of the discussions. Information related to duration, researchers' roles, participation measures and ethical considerations was included in this document. Researchers informed the participants that discussions would be recorded until the end of the study, since reviewing the discussions was also an important part of the data collection process.

Each focus group discussion included the presentation of the researchers, research goal and final expectations for the discussion, personal reflection time (to ensure everyone could understand the questions and have time to prepare their opinion), brainstorming period (listening to and respecting participants turns), conclusions (summarized by the moderator) and queries or further questions.

3.3 Analysis methods

The data received from the online survey were used as a guideline for the researchers. The participants' answers gave an overview of the areas that ECEC

teachers have more difficulties with, and the areas which worry them the most. At the same time, these answers helped to establish the topics that, later on, the researchers had to use and discuss during the second stage of the research (meaning the focus groups).

The data received from the focus group discussions were analysed individually by both researchers, who used coding to create categories within the transcription of the discussions. After the individual analysis, the researchers compared their codes and findings and created the results of this research.

3.4 Ethical considerations

This research followed the general ethical considerations of qualitative studies, as well as the ethical principles determined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and by the universities of Applied Science in Finland.

As a qualitative approach thesis, respecting participants' individuality and autonomy to make decisions while ensuring an honest, transparent, and truthful view of the aims of the research (Atlas.ti 2024; Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019, 11) was essential to maintain throughout the process. This included acknowledging the potential benefits of the research while minimising potential harms (Atlas.ti 2024), as well as considering the effects of research on participants (Cohen et al. 2017, 112).

The research, divided into two stages, notified all participants of their rights and the researchers' expectations before entering the two phases.

The first part of our research took place with an online survey. Anonymity was a significant factor at this first stage, so aspects related to sensitive information, such as nationality, gender, or age group, were voluntary to fill in (Arene s.a.). It was important to present the purpose of the research in a clear and detailed manner, what participation involved, the potential benefits and risks, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time (Atlas.ti 2024; Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019, 11-12). The first page

of our survey aimed at this specific purpose, and only after this information was shared, participants could start the survey.

In the second part of the study, due to the nature of the method chosen, ethical principles related to anonymity and confidentiality were at risk. A week before the group discussion, instructions in the form of an online pamphlet were distributed among the participants, addressing anonymity and confidentiality, as well as requesting their consent through signing the instructions document.

Since anonymity could not be guaranteed at this point, it was not promised (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019) in the instructions' pamphlet. However, measures to respect this anonymity for those who wished were promoted (for example, by giving the opportunity of using pseudonyms or having cameras turned off). Participants were also divided into two different discussion groups with a combination of ECEC professionals based in the Helsinki and Tampere areas, to protect their identity and privacy (Atlas.ti 2024) within the possibilities. The researchers knew the identity of the participants but ensured the value of confidentiality and reminded other participants about the importance of not disclosing any information revealed during the discussion with people outside the focus group (Atlas.ti 2024).

The role of the researchers included promoting a sense of safety, respect, cultural diversity, and sensitivity. Researchers' biases had to be ignored (Atlas.ti 2024), as these could have interfered with or influenced the discussions and, therefore, the end data and results of the research. However, since the participants of the second part of the study were familiar with the researchers, personal opinions and perspectives could have been shared before the study. Listening to answers and analysing the results from an objective perspective avoided misinterpretations of data, which would have led to unethical practices (Ghauri, P. et al. 2020, 27).

Another important consideration was data collection and processing. The researchers of this thesis were the only ones allowed to access the data obtained through the online survey and the group focus discussions. Participants were informed of the video recording of each focus group discussion with the purpose of

researchers reviewing and analysing the data once the discussions were over. They were also informed about all data being destroyed once this thesis was accepted and published, as it would not be needed at that point (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019, 16).

3.5 Limitations of the study

This research is working through the themes of foreign teachers' inclusion in the private English-speaking ECEC sector and mentoring theories and practices to support the quality of this educational level, which has specific limitations.

Following a qualitative research design and considering the professional belonging of the researchers to the field under study, it was a challenge to interpret results from an objective perspective. Potential biases, meaning beliefs, values, and prior experiences, could have affected the end interpretation of the collected data. However, to reduce subjective analysis, triangulation was employed thanks to the collaboration of two researchers in the development of this thesis.

Due to the nature and specific group under analysis, the results of this thesis cannot be generalised, since they belong to a specific context and sampling group in society. However, a comprehensive and in-depth explanation of the results is provided, so others could assess the external validity of the research findings (Cohen et al. 2017, 253).

The literature review offered a broad general perception of the ECEC sector in Finland. However, differences between public and private sector demands were difficult to analyse with the available resources. In addition, while in primary and secondary levels of education the foreign teacher's role seemed to be analyzed through different articles and studies, there was a noticeable lack of research and clear guidelines in this area when focusing on ECEC.

When reviewing the literature, research on mentorship in the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is notably lacking. This gap in the literature does not allow us to get a realistic picture of the problem. There are close

to no studies done about onboarding programs in the private ECEC sector. Furthermore, research on formal mentorship programs is generally lacking. Instead of using organised, systematic techniques, most current research and examples of mentorship-based onboarding programs tend to concentrate on individual-level mentoring. Although individual mentorship allows the application of a tailored approach to learning for new employees' needs, it is also known to lack critical discussions about general development at the workplace. They tend to be more mentor-oriented. (Klages, Lundestad, & Sundar 2020.) This limitation implies that more thorough research is required to assess the efficacy and use of structured mentorship programs in diverse professional settings.

4 RESULTS

The main data for this thesis were retrieved from the online questionnaire and the group discussions.

The online questionnaire (Appendix 1) was answered by 31 professionals. It was compiled of 24 questions, which included both quantitative and qualitative nature questions. This structure aimed to understand the demographics of our respondents and the existing problem. In addition, the questions were created to guide us in creating group topics which, later, we could use as discussion topics in our focus groups.

10 % of the respondents identified as a man, 87% as women, and 1 person preferred not to answer. The substantial majority of the respondents were between the age categories of 20 to 40 years old. Demographically, there was a representation of teachers from different backgrounds, such as Americans, Italians and Greeks. The biggest representation was Spanish teachers, with a 13% share. While 86% of the respondents hold a degree in education, a total of 74 % were qualified as ECEC teachers.

To understand the different levels of information teachers had about the Finnish education system when starting their teaching duties in Finland, we paid attention to the qualifications recognition section of the questionnaire. Most of the participants got their qualification somewhere else than Finland; 7 people got their qualification directly recognised by OPH, which made them eligible to start implementing their tasks straight away; 1 of them got partial recognition with extra requirements such as mandatory essays, additional credits or extra courses related to Early Childhood Education.

Question 19 ("What challenges did you encounter at the start of your educational career?") shaped the group discussion's main topics. The number of options given to respondents was large to get detailed information (see Figure 4)

Most of the respondents agreed that the main obstacles in their first years of teaching were: the limited access to information in English language and understanding the Finnish education system (understanding the changes and regulations happening in the field, and what requirements they bring to their everyday practices, and uncertainty navigating the cultural differences).

19. What challenges did you encounter at the start of your educational career in Finland?

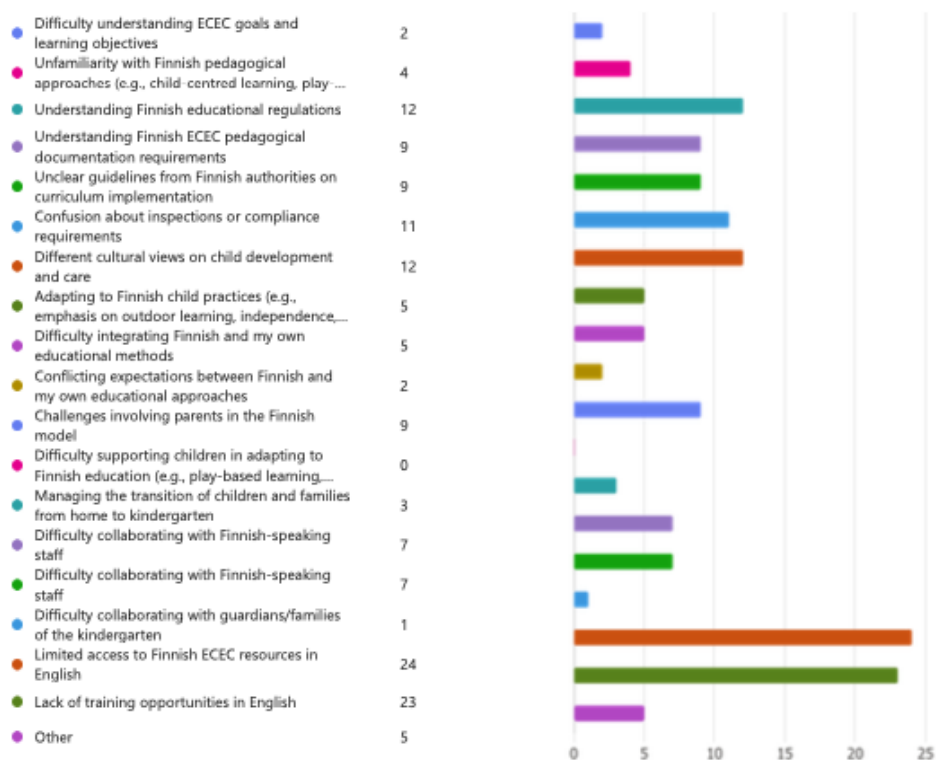


Figure 5. Online survey screenshot, question 19

Additionally, in question number 21, many respondents mentioned that the key to their success in the first year was the practical and emotional support from their more experienced coworkers.

Based on this information, we created 3 categories of questions (see figure 6) for our focus groups: access to the information, cultural discrepancies and mentoring and support. These were meant to be used by the researchers to obtain more insights into their general onboarding experiences and to ensure the flow of the conversation.

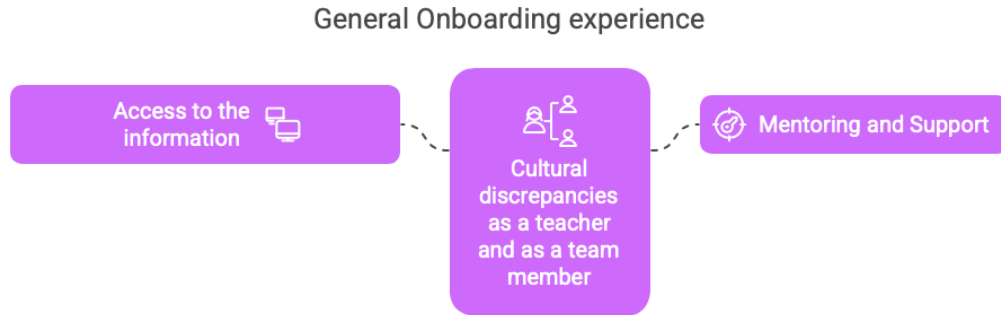


Figure 6. General onboarding experience (generated by AI tool Napkin AI)

We held two discussion groups formed by teachers who are employed in the Tampere area, and by teachers in Helsinki. After the discussions online were recorded, and the transcription was ready, each researcher conducted their own analysis and coding of all the data. Once the individual analysis was finished, results were compared, and a final code of findings was achieved by combining the researchers' efforts.

As presented in figure 7, the results were coded into 4 final categories:

- Language and information barriers
- Mentoring and peer assistance
- High workload and expectations
- Organisational culture variations.

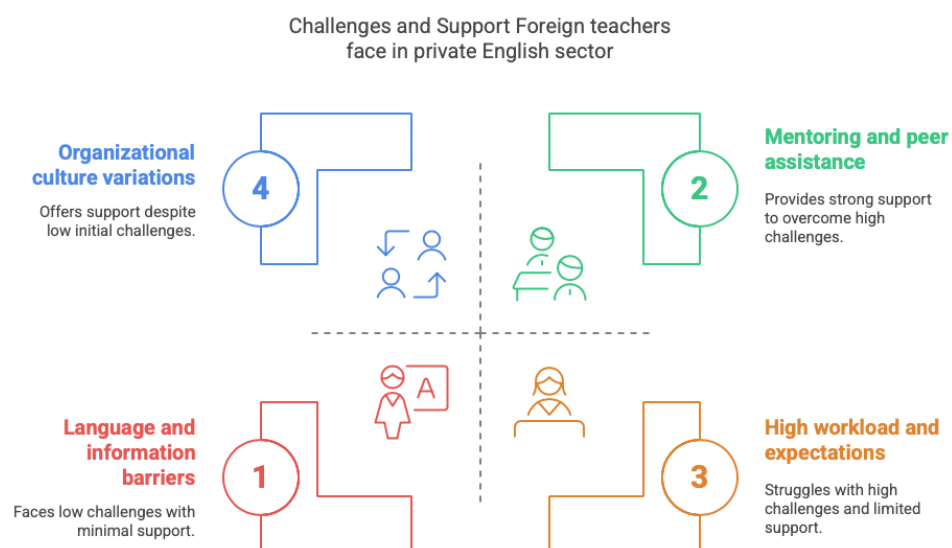


Figure 7. Generated onboarding experience (generated by AI tool Napkin AI)

4.1 Category 1: Language and Information Barriers

Obtaining information, particularly in Finnish.

During the interview, almost all the respondents, especially those who started working after the 2018 reform and with limited Finnish language skills, highlighted the ambiguity at the beginning of their careers.

It would be nice to have everything formally written at the beginning of the work relationship. (Respondent 6)

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, every workplace is legally obliged to provide the file with information such as a safety plan, operational plan, and pedagogical plan of the daycare as part of their onboarding. There are also details that teachers need to be aware of, depending on the age group they are working with, such as children's annual health checkups, facilitation of the multiprofessional collaboration with other professionals and families, or expectations for teachers working in Finland. Those can be clear and simple for experienced educators, but overwhelming for newcomers who may hesitate to seek clarification.

Since most of this documentation gets modified at the beginning of every school year, and this moment may coincide with the hiring period of the new staff, the real picture of onboarding is very different to the one wished.

Many of the participants in this research reported feeling emotionally erratic due to a lack of time or resources to stay updated on issues related to their workplace.

In the beginning, you feel lost in things as nobody tells you what to do. (Respondent 1)

In addition, respondents highlighted the limited access to information in English, which brings uncertainty and lowers teachers' motivation.

I know that we have to make every year one pedagogical plan, but there is one example that Helsinki City has, and it's in Finnish (Respondent 2)

I also struggled a lot with learning the processes in Finland. It took me a long time to understand when the child is diagnosed, how to diagnose, and how to contact a special needs teacher, because I feel that so few people know about it. Even the managers don't have the answers many times. (Respondent 3)

Another participant expressed the unique aspects of the Finnish educational model and how challenging it can be to find quality English language resources about that model. Teachers often rely on English-language literature, which may not accurately reflect Finnish examples.

And then they're like, oh, but we have one book in English for you. So it's like, well, that's nice. But, it's I think it's a little bit unique because Finland does things, yeah, so differently, that I don't know if, like, even if we did our own research on, materials in English, if they would necessarily have it. (Respondent 4)

As a result, foreign background teachers experience internal tensions. They become unsure about their practices, bringing also frustration due to the lack of English documentation and the uncertainty about when those documents will be translated.

I feel that something is missing in the English language, and many times, they don't provide things in English. (Respondent 8)

So, we have the Finnish documents, but the English ones are yet to come, and they will come in some months or in some time. (Respondent 1)

Some of the respondents mentioned feeling delayed in their educational practices, which has negatively affected their self-confidence as teachers at the beginning of their careers. Illeris (2003) describes workplace learning as taking responsibility for one's actions and at the same time learning (172). According to our respondents, whenever they wanted to expand their knowledge, they felt that the training and developmental discussions offered in the English language are very limited in comparison with Finnish language ones.

Well, another challenge, I guess, is that there is a lot of trainings in Finnish language for early childhood teachers, but then in English, there is not that much, options available. (Respondent 6)

As we mentioned earlier in this thesis, most adult learning happens in the workplace. Although moving to a new country is a great opportunity for requalification (Illeris 2003), there should be enough opportunities and choices for the new employees' further development and professional training

4.2 Category 2: Support Systems

Mentoring and peer assistance

Although they are not as common in the educational sector, mentoring programs are routinely employed in business environments to increase productivity and reduce employee turnover. Starting in a new workplace involves a range of complicated feelings. Especially in the educational field, where learning is a part of the continuum, emotional distress may cause lots of insecurities. (Israel, Kamman, McCray & Sindelar 2014, 47-48.) Hence, the mentors play a crucial role in providing uninterrupted learning opportunities to their mentees.

We had these teachers' meetings that also somehow give information about, like, especially how to fill out the documents. (Respondent 1)

Nearly all respondents recalled the colleague who assisted them during their first years. Despite its informal nature, many of them expressed gratitude and felt fortunate to have a coworker navigating them through workplace challenges. Spontaneously, colleagues are the ones who are delivering the needed support and encouragement to their new coworkers during the first stages of organizational socialisation in many educational institutions (Israel et al. 2014, 49).

I was very lucky for the people that I met at the daycare that helped me and supported me. (Respondent 4)

This support was provided as needed, and the teachers utilised their colleagues' past experiences as quick solutions. Respondents answered that having more experienced coworkers around them was time-efficient. They could get all the information they sought faster and avoid spending long hours searching and reading through hefty piles of documents.

...amount of stuff that they told me that I learned in less than one year, actually. (Respondent 4)

In addition to the knowledge sharing, having a more experienced coworker around provided them with emotional support as well. Receiving feedback in the initial stages of the work was especially beneficial to understand the work process and to reduce their stress and uncertainties. Guiding them through job-related concerns, giving feedback, and grounding can boost new teachers' self-confidence and resilience in their jobs. (Israel et al. 2014.) Respondents equalised their colleagues' informal mentoring like "*support*", "*feeling close*", or "*it felt easier*".

Early in their careers, teachers require support and regular feedback to maintain high self-esteem. A lack of information and difficulty in staying updated can negatively impact their optimism regarding job performance and lead to work burnout (Yang Kao et al 2022). They often experience uncertainty, questioning whether their actions are correct or incorrect.

In the beginning, I always felt like I am missing something. (Respondent 1)

The respondents confirmed that having a supportive community was sometimes better than having lots of training. They also expressed the option of having a designated person whom they could freely ask, since, due to the hectic work nature of the early childhood environments, teachers get hesitant to ask questions as often as they would like to.

4.3 Category 3: Workload & Expectations

Teachers are expected to meet high standards. juggling obligations and controlling stress.

Being a teacher in Finland is a role that comes together with holistic and dynamic leadership responsibilities (Rodd 2014, 32). As explained earlier in this thesis, in Finland, teachers represent a group of highly qualified professionals (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas 2021, 3) who are strongly trusted and very free and independent in their role.

During the focus groups, many foreign teachers explained their feelings on this expectation. They felt nervous about their independence, and aspects such as operating autonomously, taking big decisions for their own pedagogical agenda or the collaboration they built with the parents and their colleagues were among the matters they had to relearn about.

Something that was a little bit, like, daunting, even, like, a little bit scary sometimes is that since teachers have way more trust than agency and what they are doing, it is understood that in many times, you don't need to communicate to the management. (Respondent 5)

Responses underlined how unexpected it was for educators to adopt a flat leadership style, collaborating with their peers for all types of tasks.

Until here, I am expected to do this, and then the rest of it is collaborative. (Respondent 3)

Adjusting to this new approach and set up was one of the areas where most of our participants had to develop skills.

When I was in my country I used to work alone and then here I needed to work with other teachers, I had to cooperate with them, and I was not used to that. (Respondent 8)

The development of skills, however, expands to other areas also. One of our participants mentioned the need to acquire knowledge on the welfare system functions and on children's support by a team of multidisciplinary experts in Finland as areas that onboarding processes should pay attention to. These are essential to develop a quality teaching task and to help teachers determine what is best for the students, especially in the private sector, where the number of personnel resources is limited and depends on factors other than pedagogical.

For me also, I said, like, in the in the private, like, you are that multi-professional collaboration in one person, all in one. You need to know this and that and ponder how to act in certain situations. (Respondent 5)

From the discussions, it was clear that teachers from foreign backgrounds tend to spend lots of energy and time planning lessons which include a lot of academic learning. Therefore, there were lots of discussions about having little planning time or feeling not enough.

When I moved here, I have always been focusing a lot on, like, the contents and how they're learning, and that's been like a switch for me that I had to slow down and say, okay. I shouldn't be teaching these or it's good to teach children, but not to pressure them. (Respondent 2)

Taking work home to achieve the quality desired seemed an extended practice amongst participants in their first years working in Finland. It took them some time and experience to rethink differently and achieve work-life balance.

And in the beginning, I used to put a lot of hours at home to plan things because once in the day care, I didn't have enough time (Respondent 6)

The Finnish system promotes creativity and requires following children's interests when creating activities (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Hence, the importance of being up to date with the educational trends and innovations happening in the sector. It is not only understanding what needs to be done as part of the teaching job, but also complex discourses happening around certain concepts as well.

So, for example, like, yeah, we've been talking a lot about the pedagogical, system and how, like, things are changing. Like, for example, they want to, like, focus more on the quiet reserved kids now instead of always putting your focus on, like, the more, like, behavioral problem kids, like the loud kids. (Respondent 6)

Learning to appreciate the importance of play and outdoor teaching was also an area of focus for these teachers. Coming from countries where content is a must, focusing on aspects such as emotional development or social skills was a slow process they had to work on.

My first experience here, like, I was thinking whenever they will go outside or have free playtime, I will think that it will be too much. And even I will think that we could use this time to do another activity, for instance, or something like that. That was my mind before. (Respondent 5)

In addition, with the expansion of multicultural background families in Finland, teachers are required to have multicultural literacy. Understanding how to communicate with parents and what kind of nuances to pay attention to in pedagogical

planning. As private kindergartens are also private businesses, there is customer satisfaction pressure added to teachers' responsibilities and duties.

It is also very important working in an international environment to get like, to be able to explain this to international families that come to Finland, how this is perceived here. And I really like the trust that families have in this regard. (Respondent 4)

4.4 Organisational Culture & Practices:

Variations in educational practices and organizational culture

Illeris (2003) describes adult learning as driven by motivation, requiring requalification, and being transformational. When foreign teachers move to Finland, they often arrive with high motivation. Despite their degrees being recognised by the Finnish government, they need to deepen their understanding of Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Additionally, adapting to a new educational environment that significantly differs from their previous experiences often involves a process of identity building, which is a transformational process (Illeris 2003, 175). When teachers move to a new country, their previous experiences might not always align with their new job. This situation forces them to reconstruct their knowledge as adults.

Respondents answered having numerous cultural encounters, for example, on the ways approaching children. Teachers coming from Southern cultures, where being affectionate with students is a societal norm, needed to rebuild their understanding about child gearing in Finland.

My coworker told me in the beginning of my career we need to remind children about the boundaries and personal space. And I was like, what? What's that? (Respondent 5)

However, once the educational message behind the “rather cold” approach was explained and clear to them, they connected it to their past experiences as children themselves and managed to promote the concept of consent and body autonomy. There was a good number of exchanges on this matter in both of our focus groups, being raised by almost all the respondents.

Children’s agency and rights are promoted by Finnish ECEC curricula profoundly. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022). Some teachers admitted that they needed time and support from coworkers to adjust to children being involved in the decision-making.

You can encourage them, but then at the end, they just decide.

That was quite different for me. (Respondent 2)

Another difference was again the teachers’ understanding of the curriculum. One of the respondents explained how people who studied the same materials are comprehending it differently depending on their personal experiences.

They had gone through the same studies, so we had a similar vision.

Well, of course, different missions are still, but more similar. But now in Finland, I find sometimes, very shocking, differences on our thoughts. (Respondent 5)

Another common topic was the trust put in the teachers’ expertise in contrast to the parent pleasing they underwent in their countries. The Finnish education system relies on the teachers’ agency and their judgment skills. Thus, they are very independent in organising their activities within the framework steered by Finnish legislation and national curricula.

And in Italy, I had the feeling that parents and even some of my coworkers didn't trust my decisions. Even if I knew what I was doing. (Respondent 1)

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis and the provided data have given an answer to our main research question: “What kind of support should foreign teachers receive when understanding and putting into practice the Finnish Early Childhood Education model through a mentoring program to ensure the quality of ECEC?”

Illeris (2003a) describes the three interconnected dimensions of learning, which are cognitive, social and emotional (170). Considering these, updating the new teacher with information, walking them through job-related anxieties, and coaching them are the main inputs mentors can contribute to the new teachers' learning process.

Due to their busy work schedules, daycare managers must realise that they do not have the time to guide new hires through every aspect of daycare life, particularly at the beginning of the new educational year, when most of the new teachers start their teaching practices. For these new employees, having access to the information is a must, which can be time and energy-consuming when you, as a professional, do not know where to look for it. For these reasons, a readily prepared information kit or tips to ease access to the information with links and working tools can reduce the feeling of uncertainty. This will give teachers the freedom of choosing and taking responsibility into their own hands, as mentioned by Illeris (2003a).

This research made big discoveries through the focus groups. The discussions showed that there is a big disparity in availability and accessibility to the information in Finnish and English resources. While Finnish teachers are getting information, having access to more resources related to their role in ECEC, English-speaking professionals are only getting a limited scope of information, even from non-Finnish sources sometimes. It is this, the lack of autonomy and restricted number of resources, which often translates into teachers losing motivation for searching for new information or drifting away from Finnish ECEC practices and trends.

It was also clear from the discussions that the foreign teachers are seeking a space for discussion and belonging to an educational community. Many of them have acknowledged that they may not be interested in learning via educational slides or training. Rather, they want readily available information and, more crucially, communities where individuals can exchange ideas and gain knowledge from one another.

According to Community of Practice (CoP) theory, knowledge is something that is shared because of participation in a community that has the same values, interests, language and norms (Pentimalli and Remery 2020). Every community has their own way of engagement in the learning. For some, it is theories, for some, doing and practices. (Wenger 1998.) Individuals can engage in learning when they acculturate to the language and norms of the new community and assimilate to it (Wegner and Nücker 2015). To be fully engaged in a community's learning process, we need to understand the group's expectations regarding how learning should occur.

The significant difference between learning at work from learning at school is in its reliance on doing rather than saying. Hence, having a community of practice becomes a crucial part of organisational socialising and understanding the practices of the organisation. To create a community of practice, it is important that a group of practising professionals (Hara 2009) come together and share their own stories. It allows other community members not only to learn what to do, but also to create meaning for what needs to be done in order to achieve success in tasks. (Hara 2009). Community of practice also allows newcomers to the community to benefit from the supportive group to network and participate in the knowledge-creating process, which might make them feel very important.

From our research, we found that teachers would like to discuss and get feedback on the numerous observations and reflections they have already gathered. This approach can activate their agency by recognising their professionalism, alleviating feelings of insecurity, and adding more meaning to their professional lives. Communities of practice can provide an ongoing learning process and help with building a strong identity as well as support in finding meaning and belonging. (Boud and Middleton 2003,202.)

Additionally, small development programs should address practical issues where professionals from multiple backgrounds can participate and share. Practical insights from colleagues, such as practical nurses who may not use complex pedagogical terms but have valuable experience, are crucial. Hearing their coworkers' past experiences and their own methods for tackling the challenges may help the new workers to accelerate their socialisation process and save time on fulfilling their jobs. When educational discussions involve straightforward content and are related to individuals' personal experiences, it creates a more inclusive and safer environment for knowledge sharing and learning. (Misawa & McClain 2019).

For example, most of our respondents mentioned going through a transformational phase, from the cultural point of view, while readjusting their previous experiences to new cultural expectations. There were lots of new things for them to reflect on, readjust and be surprised by in their new working environments. This phase is usually very vulnerable for many adults as it demands lots of reflection and unlearning, followed by complicated emotions (Illeris 2003, 176). Having a mentor who gives them feedback and guides them individually through the learning process, considering the type of knowledge they need (Misawa & McClain 2019) may contribute positively to those professionals alleviating the emotional load they have on their shoulders.

In addition, multifaceted discussions may create questions and critical points to be explored further, both on theoretical and practical aspects, such as addressing equality in daycare, generating materials, and sharing useful resources. This practical knowledge, often not provided in university, comes from experience and can be more beneficial than formal training sessions. It should be the daycare managers who ensure more organised and systematic development projects that would support teachers in their role.

Another important point discovered through this research is the need to pay attention to the experiences teachers bring from their own culture. Cultural experiences shape employees' identities, which guide their learning and reaction to certain situations. (Misawa & McClain 2019.) Working style and expectations, perspectives on learning processes, ways of communicating with their team or

parents, or finding harmony in Finnish working culture were some of the hassles respondents acknowledged having. Hence, communicating clearly about the expectations and providing feedback on the situation and setting clear professional goals may positively affect teachers' career resilience and longevity at the workplace (Kuo-Yang Kao et al. 2022).

The emotional aspect of mentoring was mentioned numerous times through the discussions. Not only teaching and showing the way, but also simply checking on the new workers, helping them on building more safe relationships with their work environment. Kindergarten managers need to consider that moving to another country is already a big transformation and causes a lot of emotions and personal challenges.

As a conclusion, we can confirm that there is room for improving foreign teachers' onboarding process in English-speaking daycares. Answering our research questions, we conclude:

- What kind of mentoring would ease teachers' first year within the Finnish educational system?

Teachers preferred having a community experience where they share their knowledge in a more relaxed and stress-free atmosphere, rather than having obligatory training and slides. This was a surprise to researchers, who thought training was more appreciated than community at the beginning of this research. At the same time, having a platform to access the information and training offers that will highlight the practical sides of the work can help them to feel part of the Finnish ECEC process.

- What type of impact would the onboarding program have on helping mentors facilitate the adjustment of the new teachers in the Finnish ECEC setting?

The mentoring program will keep mentors' information up to date, helping them to understand the challenges new teachers suffer from and addressing those areas in need. In addition, this type of organising onboarding program should reduce the stress by having scheduled support times for the new staff member.

- What type of support would mentoring offer to teachers' everyday practices at their daycare?

Mentoring would especially help with the emotional well-being of the new teachers by eliminating the emotional load and reducing insecurities. Through the collaboration of a mentor and working space, the new teachers will obtain more support for their pedagogical responsibilities and get to know the organisational culture of their workplace.

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APPENDICES

1 (5)

Appendix 1. Online survey

Online Survey for master's Thesis Research:

“Onboarding program for foreign background teachers working in private English daycares in Finland”

Dear participant,

Thank you for collaborating on this research. We are Sura and Delia, students of the MBA program “Educational Leadership” by Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) located in Tampere (Finland). Our research aims to help us unfold how an onboarding / mentoring program could help foreign background teachers working in Finland to understand and apply the Finnish educational model. We focus on the experiences of educators actively working in Finland and allocated to private English kindergartens.

This questionnaire is designed as the first round of a total of two interviews to gather information about your personal experiences and perceptions in relation to our topic. Your insights and experiences are precious in understanding the impact an onboarding / mentoring program could have for foreign background teachers working in Finland. After analysing the results of this first round, you will be contacted for a second group discussion (if you would like to be part of this second interview, please share your contact details by sending us an email.

Ethical Considerations:

1. **Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
2. **Informed Consent:** By completing this questionnaire, you are providing informed consent to participate in this study.
3. **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Your responses will be kept anonymous and confidential. No identifying information will be linked to your responses, and data will be reported in aggregate form.

2 (5)

4. **Data Security:** All data collected will be securely stored and only accessible to the research team. Data will be destroyed after the publication of our research.

Instructions to fill in the questionnaire:

1. Read and answer the questions honestly. There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your personal experiences and opinions.
2. Questions marked with (*) are mandatory to reply to.
3. End your answers within 2 weeks of when you received the questionnaire link.

If you have any questions or need further information, do not hesitate to contact us.

With gratitude,
Delia and Sura

1- Demographic Information

(*All demographic information is optional and will be used for statistical purposes only. Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous, and no personal information will be shared or identifiable)

1. Gender:

What is your gender?

(Male/Female/Other or prefer not to say)

2. Age:

What is your age? Please, provide your age range:

(20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61 and above)

3. Nationality:

What is your nationality?

4. Current location

What city do you live in?

5. How long have you been living in Finland?

(Less than 1 year, 1-3 years, 3-5 years, 5-10 years, 10+ years)

3 (5)

2- Educational background*

- Do you hold a degree in Early Childhood Education? (Yes/No)
If not, do you have a degree in education? (Yes/No).
- YES: Could you indicate the level of education you are qualified to teach?

- Did you get your qualification: in Finland, your home country, or other?

- How was your qualification recognized in Finland by the Finnish National Agency of Education (Opetushallitus)?

3- Current job-related information:*

- Are you currently working in a private English kindergarten in Finland? (Yes/No)
If yes, what is your role title?

- Have you been in your current position for more than a year? (Yes/No)
- What type of contract do you have at your work place? (permanent contract, fixed-term term contract, part-time contract, substitute contract, or hourly contract?)

4- Teaching Experience:*

- Have you worked as a kindergarten teacher in other countries before coming to Finland? (Yes/No)
- Have you been teaching for more than a year? (Yes/No)
If yes, please, specify your years of experience teaching:
- In Finland:

- Overall:

5- Understanding the Finnish Educational Model*

- Did you have any prior knowledge of the Finnish ECEC model before moving to Finland? (Yes/No) 4 (5)

How did you learn about the Finnish ECEC model before moving to Finland?

- What challenges did you encounter at the start of your educational career in Finland?

(Please mark all that apply to your personal situation)

- Difficulty understanding ECEC goals and learning objectives
- Unfamiliarity with Finnish pedagogical approaches (e.g., child-centred learning, play-based approaches)
- Understanding Finnish educational regulations
- Understanding Finnish ECEC pedagogical documentation requirements
- Unclear guidelines from Finnish authorities on curriculum implementation
- Confusion about inspections or compliance requirements
- Different cultural views on child development and care
- Adapting to Finnish child practices (e.g., emphasis on outdoor learning, independence, etc.)
- Difficulty integrating Finnish and my own educational methods
- Conflicting expectations between Finnish and my own educational approaches
- Challenges involving parents in the Finnish model
- Difficulty supporting children in adapting to Finnish education (e.g., play-based learning, outdoor activities)
- Managing the transition of children and families from home to kindergarten
- Difficulty collaborating with Finnish-speaking staff
- Difficulty collaborating with non-Finnish-speaking staff
- Difficulty collaborating with guardians/families of the kindergarten
- Limited access to Finnish ECEC resources in English
- Lack of training opportunities in English
- Others (please, specify):

5 (5)

6- Support received at your current workplace*

Questions related to the mentoring program in this section refer to a structured process in which a more experienced or knowledgeable individual (mentor) provides guidance, support, and feedback to help a less experienced individual (mentee) develop their skills, knowledge, and confidence in their role. This may involve regular meetings, practical training sessions, and ongoing communication to ensure the mentee's successful integration and growth within the organization.

- Did you receive mentorship support at the beginning of your work relationship? (YES/NO)

Please, answer the following questions according to your situation:

- If you received mentor support at your current workplace, what kind of mentorship was it?

How do you feel this impacted your career and helped you?

- If you did not receive mentor support at your current workplace, how do you feel having this support could have impacted your career and helped you?

- Additional training: What type of additional training could have helped you at the beginning of your work relationship? Please, offer examples:

Conclusion:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your feedback is crucial to the success of this research.

Appendix 2. Information sheet for focus group

<p style="text-align: center;">“Onboarding program for foreign background teachers working in private English daycares in Finland”</p> <p>Dear participant,</p> <p>Welcome to the second phase of our research. In this part, you are going to be part of a group discussion where discussion about how an onboarding / mentoring program could help foreign background teachers working in Finland to understand and apply the Finnish educational model.</p> <p>This pamphlet includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers roles • Explanation of group discussion dynamic • Ethical considerations • Permission to be recorded <p>After you familiarize yourself with the study, we kindly ask you to add your name at the end of this pamphlet and send it to one of us via email.</p> <p>Thank you for your collaboration. Your insights are crucial to the success of this research.</p> <p>Delia and Sura</p>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Researchers</h2>  <p>We are Sura and Delia, students of the MBA program “Educational Leadership” by Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) located in Tampere (Finland).</p> <p>Our research aims to help us unfold how an onboarding / mentoring program could help foreign background teachers working in Finland to understand and apply the Finnish educational model. We focus on the experiences of educators actively working in Finland and allocated to private English kindergartens.</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">Instructions</h2>  <p>To ensure an effective communication and gather comprehensive data, our discussion will follow this structure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ We'll introduce ourselves and explain our roles. ◦ We'll share the goal of our research and this group discussion. 2. Conversation Period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ We promote open conversation and guide you through open-ended questions (if needed). ◦ We'll ensure you have time to reflect and prepare your opinion. ◦ Brainstorming Period (You'll share your thoughts in turns). ◦ We'll emphasize listening to and respecting each other's turns. 3. Conclusions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Summary of the discussion. ◦ We'll address any queries or further inquiries you might have. 	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Group discussion</h2>  <p>WHEN? Saturday, 22nd of February 2025 WHERE? Online. You will receive a link to our Zoom meeting in your personal email before the meeting. TIME: 10:15am</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">Ethical considerations</h2> <p>As researchers, we offer honest and transparent communication to all our participants. Our main considerations are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymity: While we can't fully guarantee anonymity, we promote measures to respect it for those who wish, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using pseudonyms. - Keeping cameras turned off. • Confidentiality: We, as researchers, know your identities but we are committed to maintaining confidentiality. Please remember not to disclose any information shared during our discussion to anyone outside the focus group. <h2 style="text-align: center;">Data</h2>  <p>Group discussion will be recorded and kept in storage until the final publication of the research. Only researchers will have access to this data.</p> <p style="background-color: #003366; color: white; padding: 5px;">I give permission to be recorded during the group discussion. I understand I must ensure confidentiality and that researchers are free to use any data obtained during the group discussion</p> <p>NAME:</p> <p>DATE:</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">“Onboarding program for foreign background teachers working in private English daycares in Finland”</p> <p>Dear participant,</p> <p>Welcome to the second phase of our research. In this part, you are going to be part of a group discussion where discussion about how an onboarding / mentoring program could help foreign background teachers working in Finland to understand and apply the Finnish educational model.</p> <p>This pamphlet includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers roles • Explanation of group discussion dynamic • Ethical considerations • Permission to be recorded <p>After you familiarize yourself with the study, we kindly ask you to add your name at the end of this pamphlet and send it to one of us via email.</p> <p>Thank you for your collaboration. Your insights are crucial to the success of this research.</p> <p>Delia and Sura</p>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Researchers</h2>  <p>We are Sura and Delia, students of the MBA program “Educational Leadership” by Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) located in Tampere (Finland).</p> <p>Our research aims to help us unfold how an onboarding / mentoring program could help foreign background teachers working in Finland to understand and apply the Finnish educational model. We focus on the experiences of educators actively working in Finland and allocated to private English kindergartens.</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">Instructions</h2>  <p>To ensure an effective communication and gather comprehensive data, our discussion will follow this structure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ We'll introduce ourselves and explain our roles. ◦ We'll share the goal of our research and this group discussion. 2. Conversation Period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ We promote open conversation and guide you through open-ended questions (if needed). ◦ We'll ensure you have time to reflect and prepare your opinion. ◦ Brainstorming Period (You'll share your thoughts in turns). ◦ We'll emphasize listening to and respecting each other's turns. 3. Conclusions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Summary of the discussion. ◦ We'll address any queries or further inquiries you might have. 	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Group discussion</h2>  <p>WHEN? Tuesday, 18th of February 2025 WHERE? Online. You will receive a link to our Zoom meeting in your personal email before the meeting. TIME: 18:00pm</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">Ethical considerations</h2> <p>As researchers, we offer honest and transparent communication to all our participants. Our main considerations are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymity: While we can't fully guarantee anonymity, we promote measures to respect it for those who wish, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using pseudonyms. - Keeping cameras turned off. • Confidentiality: We, as researchers, know your identities but we are committed to maintaining confidentiality. Please remember not to disclose any information shared during our discussion to anyone outside the focus group. <h2 style="text-align: center;">Data</h2>  <p>Group discussion will be recorded and kept in storage until the final publication of the research. Only researchers will have access to this data.</p> <p style="background-color: #003366; color: white; padding: 5px;">I give permission to be recorded during the group discussion. I understand I must ensure confidentiality and that researchers are free to use any data obtained during the group discussion</p> <p>NAME:</p> <p>DATE:</p>