



Exploring Service Accessibility for Families and Children in Vantaa: A Diary Study from an Early Childhood Social Pedagogue's Perspective

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Palvelujen saavutettavuus Vantaan kunnassa lapsiperheille: päiväkirjamuotoinen tarkastelu varhaiskasvatuksen sosionomin näkökulmasta

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54

Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia ja selkeyttää sosiaalipedagogien roolia varhaiskasvatuksessa sekä sitä, kuinka he käyttävät ammatillista osaamistaan perheiden tukemiseen kunnallisten palvelujen kautta. Tavoitteena oli vahvistaa ammatillista identiteettiä ja syventää ymmärrystä sosiaalipedagogin päivittäisistä tehtävistä ja vaikutusmahdollisuuksista varhaiskasvatuksessa.

Tämä päiväkirjamuotoinen opinnäytetyö toteutettiin kahdeksan viikon aikana. Keskiössä oli sen tarkastelu, miten sosiaalipedagogista tietoa sovelletaan käytännön päivähoitotyössä ja kuinka se edistää lasten ja perheiden hyvinvointia. Teoreettinen viitekehys rakentui sosiaalipedagogiikan, ammatillisen roolin, kunnallisten palveluiden, palvelujen saavutettavuuden ja esteiden ympärille. Viikoittaiset päiväkirjamerkinnot kuvasivat keskeisiä tehtäviä, vuorovaikutustilanteita ja reflektointeja, ja niitä analysoitiin ajankohtaisen kirjallisuuden ja tutkimuksen avulla.

Tulokset toivat esiin sosiaalipedagogien keskeisen roolin tukevien, osallistavien ja ratkaisukeskeisten käytäntöjen edistäjinä varhaiskasvatusympäristöissä. Työ sisälsi usein perhekohtaisten haasteiden tunnistamista, ohjauksen tarjoamista sekä yhteistyötä muiden ammattilaisten kanssa. Päiväkirja toi esiin myös tarpeen selkeyttää ja vahvistaa sosiaalipedagogin roolia varhaiskasvatuksen tiimeissä, sillä se on monissa ympäristöissä yhä epäselvä. Tämä opinnäytetyö tarjoaa käytännönläheisiä näkökulmia ja kannustaa jatkokeskusteluun sosiaalipalvelujen integroinnista varhaiskasvatukseen.

Asiasanat: sosiaalipedagogiikka, varhaiskasvatus, perheiden tukeminen, moniammatillinen yhteistyö, kunnalliset palvelut.

Sharmin Wadud

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The purpose of this thesis was to explore and clarify the role of social pedagogues in daycare settings and how they use their professional expertise to support families through municipal services. The aim was to strengthen professional identity and deepen understanding of their everyday responsibilities and influence in early childhood education.

This diary-based thesis was developed over eight weeks. The focus was on identifying how social pedagogical knowledge is applied in practical daycare work and how it contributes to the well-being of children and families. The theoretical framework was built around social pedagogy, professional roles, municipal services, service accessibility, and related barriers. Weekly diary entries detailed key tasks, interactions, and reflections, and were analyzed using relevant literature and research.

The findings highlighted the essential role of social pedagogues in fostering supportive, inclusive, and solution-focused practices in daycare environments. Their work often involved recognizing family-specific challenges, offering guidance, and collaborating with other professionals. The diary also underscored the need for greater clarity and recognition of the social pedagogue's role within early childhood education teams, as it remains somewhat undefined in many settings. This thesis offers practical insights and encourages continued dialogue about integrating social services in daycare environments.

Keywords: social pedagogy, early childhood education, family support, multidisciplinary collaboration, municipal services

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1 Introduction

This is a diary-based thesis, commonly known as a PONT or in Finnish Päiväkirjamuotoinen opinäyntyö. This structure is particularly suited for me as I am working full-time within an organization. It is especially beneficial for those looking to grow in their current role or newcomers to their field (Heinola 2024). While the typical recommended duration for this type of thesis is 12-15 weeks, I took approximately 4-5 months to complete the entire process, however, the diary is based on 8 weeks of insights and experiences of the work.

The main objective of this thesis was to identify the specific role of social pedagogues in day care settings and how they support families in accessing various services when needed. I began working at Latupuisto Day Care at the beginning of 2024. However, I decided to focus my thesis on this topic after completing my third placement there, when I realized that the role of my position was still somewhat unclear to me. According to my job description, I am expected to assist families in finding and accessing the support services they need. However, I found this to be quite challenging because of my vague role and authority. In this thesis, I will try to explore the reasons behind this.

In writing this thesis, I have used AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly to refine the text, enhance cohesion, and check for grammatical accuracy.

2 Current situation

2.1 Background

In February 2024, I began as a social pedagogue in early childhood education and care (ECEC), a position that was not clearly understood by management at the time. My supervisor was unfamiliar with the specific duties of a social pedagogue, as I was the first in that role in the organization. Later, they provided a job description from the Vantaa municipality; However, the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018) provides a general framework for early childhood education, also allowing employers and municipalities a certain degree of flexibility in defining the specific roles and responsibilities of staff members. This lack of clarity is symptomatic of a broader issue within the field, where the responsibilities of social pedagogues in daycare settings remain ambiguous.

According to the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018), by 2030, at least two-thirds of staff working in early childhood education must hold a relevant higher education degree. Of these, at least half are required to be qualified early childhood education

teachers, while the remaining positions may include professionals such as social pedagogues. This aims to strengthen the pedagogical expertise and quality of early childhood education services in Finland. Despite this distinction, there is a widespread misconception that social pedagogues fulfill the same functions as early childhood teachers. However, social pedagogues, focusing on holistic child development and family engagement, differ fundamentally from early childhood educators, which emphasizes cognitive and pedagogical skills (Early Childhood Education and Care Act 540/2018). During work, several times in multi-professional meetings, these misconceptions have frequently led to confusion about the role of the social pedagogue, complicating collaboration and potentially hindering the quality of care provided to children. Furthermore, I have observed that the complexity and fragmentation of the municipal service system present significant challenges for families seeking support. Unlike other areas of social work, where clients typically initiate contact with service providers, social pedagogues in daycare settings primarily focus on the holistic well-being of the child. Support needs often become apparent in response to developmental, behavioral, or social concerns, rather than through direct service requests. Through my work, I observed that navigating the municipal service system can be confusing and overwhelming for some families, as it involves multiple agencies and unclear procedures. This complexity also impacts my professional role, requiring me to function as a caregiver and as a facilitator and intermediary, helping families understand their options and guiding them through the process to ensure timely and appropriate support.

2.2 Working life partner

Latupuisto Daycare, which was constructed in January 2024, has eight groups, each further divided into two smaller groups, for a total of 16 (Vantaa 2024). They operate using a modern nest system, where the groups work collaboratively to provide the best possible services. The goal of this daycare unlike other municipal daycares is to develop the work to strengthen, create, and instill pedagogical methods of operation, where to find cooperation opportunities with other operators and develop services so that it meets the needs of municipal residents even better (Vantaa 2024).

In this thesis process, Latupuisto Daycare has agreed to participate in the research by allowing access to its daily operations. Daycare is particularly suitable for my thesis as it provides an important role in child-centered practices and inclusive education which ensures that every child receives the necessary support and opportunities for growth and development.

Given Vantaa Municipality's rapid population growth and increasing cultural diversity, this setting offers a unique opportunity to explore issues related to service accessibility for families, particularly for immigrant families and those with young children. As a social

pedagogue working in this environment, I will have the opportunity to observe and analyze how daycare services interact with the broader municipal support systems, which will provide valuable insights for my research.

2.3 The goal of the thesis

This thesis aims to investigate the complexity of accessing municipal services in the Vantaa municipality, particularly from the perspective of a social pedagogue working in early childhood education. A central focus is on the interaction between social pedagogues, families, and municipal service providers.

One objective of this thesis is to clarify the multifaceted role of the social pedagogue in Finland's daycare settings, where responsibilities often overlap education, care, and social work. The research will explore how social pedagogues support children's holistic development, assist families, and act as a bridge to municipal services.

Another key objective is to analyze the barriers families face in accessing essential municipal services, especially in healthcare, social support, and child development. Particular attention will be given to bureaucratic obstacles, language barriers, and service gaps affecting vulnerable groups, including Immigrant families.

Finland's welfare state is designed to offer universal services; however, research suggests that not all population groups equally experience access. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), navigating the social and healthcare service system can be particularly challenging for immigrants due to unclear procedures and unfamiliarity. institutional cultures, and difficulties in understanding eligibility criteria (THL 2024). Additionally, studies show that language barriers significantly hinder communication between immigrant families and service providers, which may result in misunderstandings or reluctance to seek help (Satakieli 2024). The digitalization of services has also introduced new access challenges for those with limited digital or linguistic literacy (Ilmarinen, Aalto, and Muuri 2024). These findings suggest that, although services are theoretically available, practical access remains uneven, warranting further investigation into how these dynamics manifest in early childhood education settings.

3 Research Method

In this thesis, an ethnographic research approach will be employed, combining diary entries, ethnographic observation, interviews, and a review of existing literature to explore service accessibility and the role of social pedagogues in a daycare setting. Ethnography, as defined

by O'Reilly (2011), relies on iterative, reflexive practices where data collection, analysis, and writing are closely interconnected, occurring simultaneously throughout the research process. This approach suits the study of daily practices, challenges, and interactions in a real-world setting, such as daycare, where I, as a social pedagogue, document my experiences to gain deeper insights.

3.1 Ethnographic Observation

According to Atkinson and Hammersley (1998), ethnographic observation is a core method that focuses on the systematic and immersive study of behaviors and practices within a specific context. In this thesis, ethnographic observation will naturally occur within my social pedagogue role at Latupuisto Daycare. The observation process will involve watching, listening, and recording daily interactions between staff, children, and families, as well as between families and municipal services. The aim is to identify behavioral patterns and practices related to service accessibility and the pedagogical role in the daycare context.

These insights will be documented through diary entries, allowing for continuous reflection and modification of observations if needed. Given the ethnographic nature of the research, observation will be guided by the real-life context of service interactions and daily routines, rather than pre-determined hypotheses.

3.2 Diary Entries

In this thesis, diary entries served as both a data collection tool and a reflective process, where I documented daily experiences, thoughts, and challenges encountered while working in daycare. These entries will capture real-time reflections on service accessibility, the barriers families face, and my role as a social pedagogue in navigating these issues. Diary entries are particularly suited for ethnographic research as they allow for continuous, iterative reflection.

3.3 Data Analysis as Thematic Analysis

Data from diary entries, ethnographic observations, and interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is particularly effective for unpacking complex social phenomena, making it a suitable method for this study. It is also better suited for smaller datasets, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced meanings within the data. Usually, the process involves several steps, which are as follows (Braun and Clarke 2006)

1. Familiarization with data reading through diary entries and interview transcripts multiple times.

2. Generating initial codes- Coding the data by identifying recurring themes or issues, such as service accessibility challenges, the social pedagogue's role, or family interactions with services.
3. Searching for themes- Grouping similar codes into overarching themes (e.g., "bureaucratic barriers," "language challenges," or "support networks").
4. Reviewing themes- Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.
5. Defining and naming themes- Articulating the key insights that arise from the analysis.

This approach will enable me to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social pedagogues and families encounter service access challenges, and how these insights can inform policy and practice improvements.

3.4 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will complement the diary and observational data by providing a more in-depth understanding of how colleagues and other daycare professionals perceive social pedagogues' role in supporting families' access to services. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow for more open conversation, where the interviewer can adapt questions based on the responses, leading to richer data collection.

In this thesis, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with a few of my colleagues to understand how they perceive the role of social pedagogue and the challenges they face in helping families access services.

The interviews will be guided by open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their perspectives freely. This method is essential for exploring complex, relative issues such as service accessibility, where pre-determined, closed questions may limit the depth of responses.

3.5 Rationale for Interviews

The semi-structured interview format offers the flexibility to explore unexpected themes that may emerge during the conversation, which aligns with the exploratory nature of the ethnographic and diary-based approach. Additionally, it allows the interviewee to reflect on their experiences in a way that complements the diary data, providing a broader context to the themes identified through my observations and reflections.

However, it should be noted that the thesis is focused on a single daycare center, limiting the generalizability of the findings. While this may restrict the range of the study, the rich,

qualitative data gathered from diary entries, observations, and interviews will provide valuable context-specific insights.

While the main data sources will be diary entries, observations, and interviews, the research will also include a literature review to contextualize the findings within existing academic discourse. Key literature on social pedagogy, municipal service access, and ethnographic research methods will be reviewed to frame the research in a broader theoretical and practical context. This will help to validate the research findings by connecting them with established theories and prior research.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this research, particularly involving children and vulnerable families, several ethical issues will be considered:

Informed Consent- Written consent will be obtained from all participants depending on the necessity, including daycare staff, families, and service providers.

Confidentiality- All diary entries and interview data will be anonymized to protect participants' identities. Data will be securely stored to ensure privacy, and all the information will be deleted after the thesis process, which will not be used.

Bias and Reflexivity- Since the diary-based approach involves subjective reflection, I will remain conscious of my biases and seek to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process. This will involve critically reflecting on my role as a researcher and my interpretations of the data.

Additionally, to ensure academic integrity, all sources referenced in this thesis were properly cited and credited in accordance with Laurea's guidelines.

4 Theory

4.1 Social pedagogue and their role

Social pedagogy is an interdisciplinary field that integrates both social and educational aspects of child development, focusing on fostering participation, agency, and community involvement (Nivala & Ryyänen 2019). Within early childhood education, the formal role of the early childhood education was established through the Early Childhood Education Act (L 540/2018). Social workers in ECEC or social pedagogues make independent judgments in social and pedagogical matters, working closely with families and multidisciplinary teams to support children's development (Talientia ND). Their work is framed by early childhood

education legislation, local or municipal guidelines, and according to national guidelines, further shaped by social sector regulations.

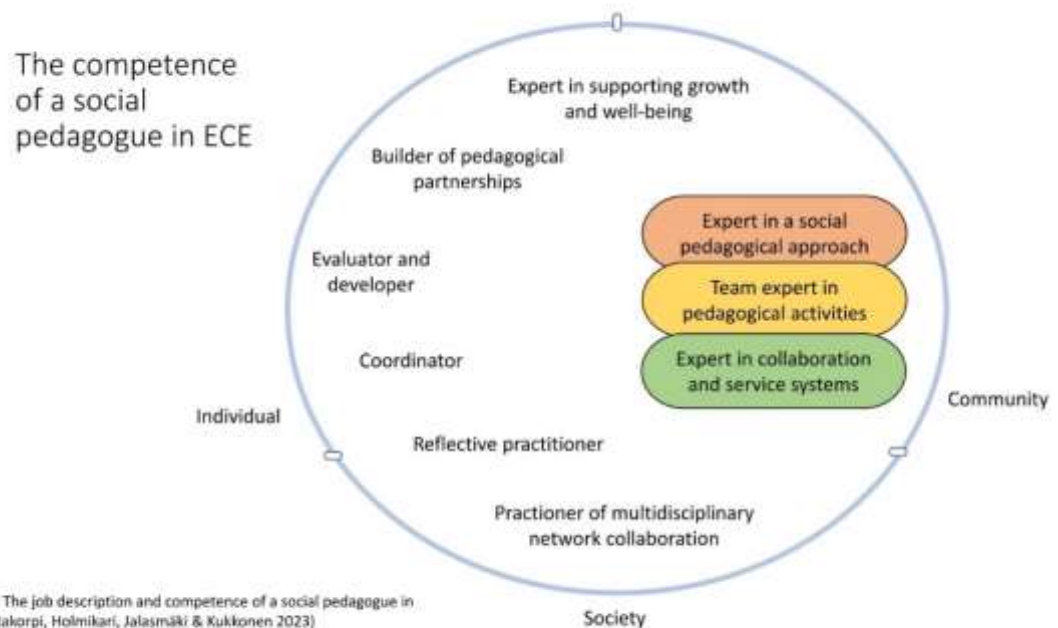


Figure 1-The competence of a social pedagogue in ECE

The diagram illustrates the multidimensional nature of the social pedagogue's role. This includes competencies such as expertise in supporting growth and well-being, building pedagogical partnerships, and acting as both evaluators and developers. It also emphasizes that social pedagogues serve as coordinators and reflective practitioners, highlighting their responsibility for collaboration and multidisciplinary teamwork. These roles are not only significant within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) framework but extend to the community and broader societal context, showing how the social pedagogue helps bridge the gap between the individual, community, and society.

Vygotsky's social development theory aligns well with these competencies. Vygotsky (1978) argued that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development, particularly in the early years. He introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which highlights the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support. Social pedagogues, through their interactions with children, parents, and colleagues, act as mediators in this process, helping children to reach

their full potential by offering support that aligns with each child's developmental needs. This theoretical framework underscores the importance of collaboration in learning, which is also a core principle in social pedagogy.

Additionally, Eichsteller and Holthoff's (2011) diamond model complements Vygotsky's ideas by illustrating how social pedagogues help uncover and polish an individual's inner potential, like guiding a child through their ZPD. The focus is on nurturing each child's personal growth and fostering emotional, cognitive, and social development within a community. In early childhood education, this translates into a variety of responsibilities, including planning, implementing, and evaluating pedagogical activities that promote well-being, growth, and peer relationships (Eichsteller and Holthoff's 2011). These activities are designed to create safe, healthy learning environments that support children's development.

The next diagram, The Social Pedagogical Working Approach by Nivala and Rynnänen (2019), visualizes the six key characteristics that define the social pedagogical approach in early childhood education. These include supporting agency and participation, fostering a sense of community, encouraging dialogical encounters, and integrating functionality and creativity. The innermost layer of the diagram refers to the intertwining of theory and practice, emphasizing the reflective nature of the pedagogue's work.

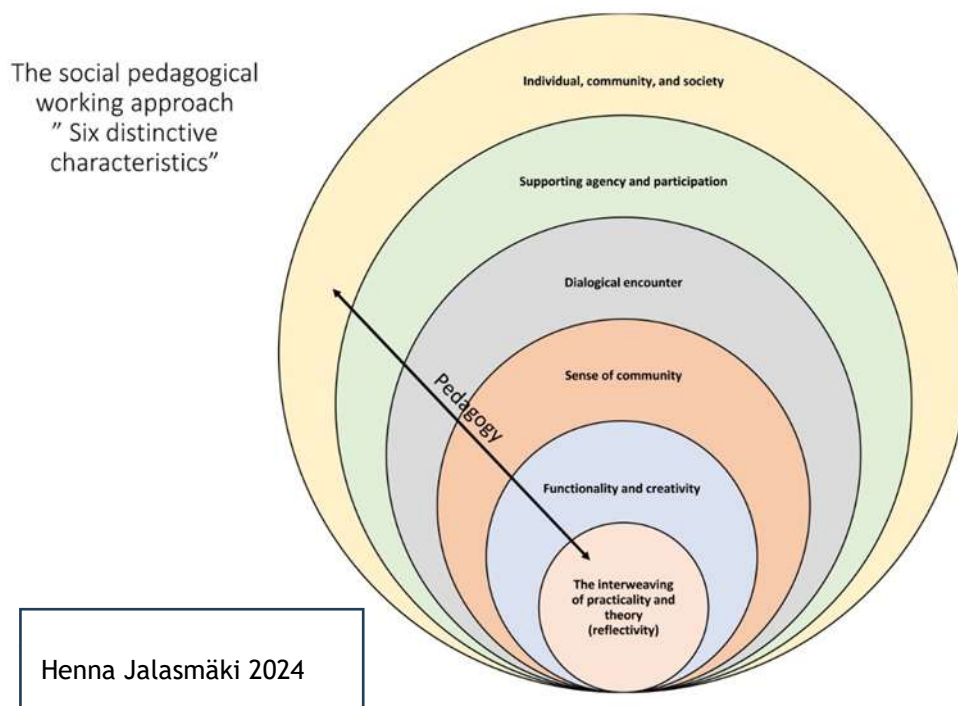


Figure 2 - The pedagogue's role of a social worker at ECEC

This model underscores the pedagogue's role in creating learning environments where children's participation and agency are prioritized. As the pedagogue facilitates social interaction, they contribute not only to the child's cognitive and emotional development but also to their growing sense of community and belonging. This community-building aspect is central to social pedagogy and is a core objective in early childhood education settings.

The early childhood education social pedagogue's role is defined by their responsibility for the social-pedagogical activities within a child's group, ensuring the achievement of both developmental and educational goals. Drawing from Vygotsky's theory, the pedagogue closely observes each child's well-being, learning, and development, providing tailored support in collaboration with families. This holistic approach ensures that the child's cognitive development is nurtured within the educational setting and through social interactions with peers and adults. The pedagogue's work is firmly based on the early childhood education and preschool curriculum, emphasizing cooperative learning environments.

Despite the importance of this role, the definition of the early childhood education social pedagogue is still developing. According to Väisänen (2022), the construction of the profession remains in its early stages, leading to uncertainty about its scope. Similarly, Hämäläinen and Nieminen (2022) point out that the job description of social pedagogues remains somewhat unclear, which can challenge both their autonomy and effectiveness in multidisciplinary teams. This ambiguity reflects the evolving nature of the profession, which is continually shaped by the needs of children, families, and legislative frameworks.

4.2 Municipal services

Municipal services are a municipality's fundamental responsibility and serve as a direct connection to its citizens. The accessibility and quality of these services significantly impact a city's social, economic, and environmental performance and overall urban development (Suomi.fi 2024).

Finland has around 300 municipalities, where Vantaa is the 4th largest municipality with 250000 people. Under the Constitution of Finland, municipalities are self-governing units and have the right to tax their residents, and in return, they are responsible for providing certain services. The basic services are mostly funded with municipal taxes, central government transfers, and fees for certain services. (Suomi.fi 2024)

4.3 Service accessibility and its barriers

Accessibility refers to the practice of ensuring that information, activities, and environments are understandable, meaningful, and usable by as many people as possible (CWRU 2024). It is widely acknowledged as a critical component of service design; however, many technologies

remain difficult to access for individuals who have limited technological skills, face language barriers, or struggle to navigate complex bureaucratic processes (Putnam, C., Rose, E. J., & MacDonald, C. M. 2023).

According to Ilmarinen, K., Vuorenmaa, M., Karvonen, S., & Lammi-Taskula, J. (2023), there are several complications that families with children face when attempting to access municipal services in Finland. These include bureaucratic inefficiencies, fragmented service pathways, and a lack of coordination between social, healthcare, and educational sectors. When families attempt to find essential help for their children, such as medical treatment, developmental evaluations, or social services, these problems cause delays and uncertainty. Furthermore, while the digitization of services was intended to increase efficiency, it has also resulted in a digital divide, making it difficult for some families to interact with these systems, particularly those who lack access to technology or digital literacy.

5 Weekly report

5.1 First week - Orientation

In this phase, I will write my 8-week experiences and reflect each week at the end of the week based on the literature. In my first week of writing, I would like to share my experience of my orientation period. Orientation was much needed to understand my job responsibilities and employers' expectations. Although my official thesis writing period began in the autumn, my employment had already commenced at the beginning of the spring. As a result, my orientation phase was completed several months prior. To provide a more holistic perspective on my professional development, I have chosen to integrate reflections from the orientation period with current professional experiences in the first week of the diary. This approach offers a broader and more contextualized understanding of my role from the outset.

Monday and Tuesday

My first day on the job was a little out of the ordinary because there was a daycare worker strike happening. So, for the first two days, I didn't have the usual orientation that new hires get. Instead, I spent the time exploring the office on my own, getting to know the space and figuring out where everything was. It was actually a good way to start easing in and familiarizing myself with the new environment at my own pace.

Even though many employees were absent due to the strike, a few daycare workers were still on-site during those two days, creating a unique opportunity for me to connect with various team members. This more relaxed atmosphere allowed me to introduce myself in a casual, informal way and made it easier to start building relationships right from the beginning. I felt

comfortable asking questions and learning about different aspects of the job, which helped me ease into the work culture and understand some of the workplace dynamics. The slower pace also gave me space to observe and absorb valuable insights without the pressure of a structured orientation, making the whole experience a smooth and welcoming start.

At the same time, I was eager to understand the regular workflow, especially since I wasn't yet fully informed about my specific responsibilities. From day one, I noticed that my colleagues were curious as well—they wanted to know more about the role of a *sosionomi* in daycare and what my particular duties would involve.

Wednesday and Thursday

In these two days, I finally had the chance to sit down with my boss for a more formal orientation. They introduced me to my actual team, went over my general schedule, and explained what my day-to-day responsibilities would look like. However, I soon realized that the orientation material seemed to focus on a teacher's duties rather than my role as a Social pedagogue or in Finnish Varhaiskasvatuksen Socionomi. While there are some similarities, the roles do differ in important ways. For instance, a teacher is mainly responsible for organizing and leading group activities and collaborating with colleagues on educational planning. In contrast, as a social pedagogue, my focus should be on supporting the children's well-being, guiding their pedagogical development, and providing family support when needed.

This mix-up created some initial confusion for both my boss and me, especially because I am the first person in this role within the organization, so there was not a clear framework in place for my specific responsibilities. Without any prior work experience, I initially missed the difference in orientation content. A few days later, my boss recognized the misalignment and adjusted the guidance I received, providing a basic structure based on Vantaa municipality standards. However, we were still working to clearly define what my role as a *Social Pedagogue* should entail in this specific setting, which remains a work in progress.

Friday

The orientation phase continued today, during which I met with a colleague who serves as the developmental social pedagogue (*kehityssosionomi*) at our daycare. Her role differs significantly from mine, as her responsibilities span the entire daycare center, rather than focusing on a specific group. While I will work closely with a single group and handle specific pedagogy tasks, her role involves providing foundational support for children's social development, well-being, and family engagement on a broader scale. She collaborates with various staff members to implement a holistic approach to these areas.

This meeting was valuable for me, as it clarified my responsibilities and helped me better understand the scope of my role. Following our discussion, I worked alongside the teacher in my assigned group to create tools such as emotion cards and visual aids that are usually used

to facilitate communication with children. Additionally, today marked my first experience following the daycare's general daily routine, which gave me a more practical understanding of my day-to-day tasks.

Conclusion

In every workplace, employee orientation is essential for new hires as it makes them feel welcomed and equips them with a clear understanding of their role and the tools, resources, and guidance they need to perform their job. This overall process helps to minimize any uncertainty about their responsibilities, helping them set realistic expectations and easing potential anxiety about what to expect in their first weeks on the job (De Jong-Fatal, I. 2023).

Reflecting on my initial days in a daycare setting provided insight into the ambiguities and evolving nature of a social pedagogue's role within ECEC. The quieter starting atmosphere facilitated casual interactions with the workers who were present. These conversations allowed me to introduce myself informally, which proved invaluable in building foundational connections. This experience aligns with Bonifacio, R. (2024) findings that informal communication contributes to developing a positive work environment by fostering camaraderie and enhancing employee morale.

However, during the formal orientation phase, I started to comprehend the difficulties of being a social pedagogue, particularly in environments where people are unaware of the nuances of social pedagogy. Under the direction of my supervisor, the majority of the first orientation courses I attended included duties that are normally assigned to teachers, like organizing activities and managing groups. This highlighted a broader issue within ECEC settings, where the role of a social pedagogue is often blurred or inadequately differentiated from other roles (Hämäläinen 2012). Thus, social pedagogues often face challenges around role definition, particularly when working alongside educators who may be accustomed to viewing child support primarily through an educational rather than a social-emotional lens (Hämäläinen 2012). For me, this mix-up initially created confusion regarding my specific duties and objectives. My role as a social pedagogue is meant to center around children's well-being, social-emotional development, and family support aligns with the literature which describes social pedagogues as professionals who take a holistic approach to child development, emphasizing social relationships, emotional health, and community integration alongside academic growth (Cameron & Moss 2011). It can be challenging to explain the role of a social pedagogue to those who may not fully understand how it differs from that of a nanny or teacher.

Concluding on a note that being the first person in this role within the organization meant that there was no established framework for my duties, which was a challenge for my role as it lacked historical structure or precedents. As my supervisor worked to refine the expectations for my role, I became more aware of the importance of structured frameworks to guide new hires effectively, particularly in organizations unfamiliar with social pedagogy. A structured approach is vital not only to ease role integration but also to avoid role ambiguity that could compromise the effectiveness of social pedagogical practices in ECEC settings.

5.2 Second week - Weekly Practices of a Social Pedagogue in Daycare

The role of a social pedagogue in daycare settings is deeply rooted in fostering children's emotional, social, and physical development. Through structured routines, social pedagogues create environments where children feel safe and grow well.

This week's reflection highlights the practices and philosophies underpinning Finnish daycare systems, particularly focusing on how these routines contribute to children's holistic development and align with the broader goals of social pedagogy. Each week includes a set of recurring work plans designed to ensure the group's smooth and efficient operation. In the coming week, I will focus on the weekly activities at daycare, where I am responsible professionally for creating a supportive and enriching environment for the children and facilitating their emotional and social development through structured routines.

Monday

After a relaxed weekend, Mondays usually begin on a calm note at our daycare. Mondays typically don't follow a rigid schedule; activities are tailored based on the children's attendance, mood, and energy levels. This flexibility allows us to ease into the week, creating a welcoming and adaptive environment for children and staff.

After breakfast, we headed to the yard for an hour of outdoor play. In Finnish daycare settings, outdoor play holds a special place and is strongly emphasized by pedagogical guidelines. I believe it is not just a routine activity, but a vital part of the children's daily experience, contributing significantly to their physical and emotional well-being. Outdoor activities are instrumental in developing gross motor skills as the children run, climb, and move freely. They also provide rich sensory experiences and opportunities for social interaction (King, J. 2024).

Later in the day, we had the opportunity to visit and explore another group's play area. This exchange allowed the children to step out of their familiar zones and experience a new environment. Such changes are beneficial in expanding their adaptability and social skills, as

they encounter new peers, toys, and setups. It also provides them with a broader range of sensory and cognitive stimuli, which are crucial for their development.

Tuesday

Every Tuesday, after our outdoor activity, we have a gym session. Kids love this session, which is full of colorful gym tracks that they love discovering and playing on. This physical activity is vital for the children's gross motor development, helping them strengthen their muscles, coordination, and balance. As a social pedagogue, I make sure the gym session is safe and fun, creating a supportive space for the children to test their physical boundaries. Gym sessions help children develop self-confidence as they master new movements, and it also provides them with the opportunity to cooperate with others in group activities.

In the afternoon, we had a team meeting with my workmate, where we discussed our group goals and how we can achieve those goals.

Wednesday

This Wednesday was a special day as it was November 20th, marking Children's Rights Day. For every child, every right. This date holds great significance: in 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations ND).

The day became even more memorable with the first snowfall of the year. The children were thrilled, spending part of their outdoor time building a snowman. Indoors, we celebrated with a music concert where we sang the Finnish song **Lapsella on oikeus**, meaning **Children have rights**, with some other songs.

At lunchtime, the celebration continued as Vantaa municipality marked the occasion by treating the children to ice cream. The day followed our usual daycare rhythm, blending learning, play, and special moments to make the celebration meaningful and enjoyable for the children.

Thursday

Today, I attended a first aid course specifically designed for working with children under 3 years old. The 8-hour course was held in Tikkurila, and as a result, I didn't have any shifts at my workplace.

The course was extremely informative and focused on handling common emergencies that can arise when working with young children. It covered essential skills such as recognizing and responding to allergic reactions, managing choking incidents, and providing basic first aid in urgent situations.

I found the training to be practical and highly relevant to the nature of our work. In my opinion, such courses should be mandatory for anyone in care-related professions, as they provide critical knowledge that could potentially save lives.

Friday

On Fridays, we have a music session called *Pilti-POP*, led by two teachers in the yard, where all the children under 3 years old in the organization gather at 10 a.m. to sing together. Music is vital to early childhood development, as it supports language skills, rhythm, memory, and emotional expression. Exposure to rhythmic patterns helps children develop motor coordination and timing, which are integral to physical development and daily activities (Gallahue & Donnelly 2007).

During these sessions, I help the children engage with the music by encouraging them to sing along, explore rhythms, and play simple instruments like tambourines or maracas.

I think these music sessions also enhance social interaction by encouraging the children to play together, listen to each other, and respond to the music as a group. Music serves as a wonderful tool for building a sense of community within the daycare, allowing the children to connect in a meaningful and joyful way.

Conclusion

Starting from Monday, Outdoor activity is part of the everyday routine. Outdoor play is a cornerstone of Finnish daycare philosophy, supported by research emphasizing its impact on children's physical and emotional well-being. Studies by Fjørtoft (2004) highlight that natural environments enhance gross motor development and stimulate creativity. The structured outdoor play observed in Finnish daycares also reflects the guidelines provided by Finnish early childhood education, which advocate for daily outdoor activities to promote health, social interaction, and sensory engagement (VASU 2022). By observing and guiding children during outdoor play, social pedagogues facilitate the development of interpersonal skills and self-regulation, foundational for lifelong learning (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

The structured gym sessions on Tuesdays provide children with opportunities to strengthen gross motor skills, coordination, and confidence. Gallahue and Donnelly (2007) suggest that such activities are vital during early childhood as they lay the groundwork for future physical competence. Involving children in cooperative activities, such as obstacle courses, aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through social interaction. By fostering a safe and engaging environment, the pedagogue supports children in testing their physical limits and learning social norms like cooperation and turn-taking.

The recognition of Wednesday's Children's Rights Day shows how local practices may include global awareness. The Finnish emphasis on children's rights and inclusive education is in line with the celebration of this day through music, outdoor activities, and group treats. Children's sense of self-worth and belonging, which are essential components of socioemotional development, are fostered by this method (UNICEF 2013). Children learn empathy and their place in the community when cultural and social themes are incorporated into nursery routines.

First aid training is included to emphasize how important it is to offer teachers and other carers the skills they need to keep kids safe. The values of quality care as stated by Mycprnow (No date) are through hands-on training in emergency responses, such as handling choking or allergic reactions. Ongoing professional development equips professionals to meet the evolving needs of the children in their care.

On Fridays, music sessions provide an engaging platform for language development, rhythm recognition, and emotional expression. Research shows that music activities enhance cognitive and socio-emotional skills in early childhood (Gerry, d. Unrau, A. and Trainor, J. L. 2012). Music also fosters a sense of community, helping children to build relationships and feel connected within their peer group. These sessions are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, which highlights the role of meaningful interactions in a supportive environment.

Reflecting overall on that week, I can see a strong example of evidence-based practice in early childhood education, emphasizing the holistic development of children. Each activity aligns with established theories and practices in early childhood pedagogy and social pedagogy.

5.3 Third week- Documenting challenges and collaboration with families

In the coming weeks, I plan to reflect on some incidents with families seeking assistance or services, focusing on the challenges they face when navigating municipal systems. These interactions are an essential part of my professional role, which involves supporting families in difficult situations, particularly those related to raising children. Since trust is the foundation of effective support, these interactions often begin with informal conversations, for example, parents pick up or drop kids at daycare. These conversations must flow easily, allowing families to ask me questions freely and enabling me to ask them questions without hesitation.

Moreover, to provide meaningful assistance, I must understand their family dynamics, practice cultural sensitivity, demonstrate empathy, and genuinely value their perspectives. However, I find this task to be challenging at times. While I've lived in this Western region for

nearly two decades, I occasionally feel that my understanding of Western culture is not as nuanced or comprehensive as my familiarity with Eastern cultural contexts. To bridge this gap, I continuously seek to deepen my cultural competence through reflection, dialogue, and learning from diverse experiences.

One aspect worth mentioning is the following: not every day at daycare presents notable events; therefore, I will highlight a few relevant cases from the past couple of week that align with this week's theme.

Monday

This Monday was a bit challenging as one of our colleagues was out sick and we didn't receive a substitute. Originally, we had planned to take the children to another daycare yard for our morning outing. However, due to the staffing situation, we decided to collaborate with the other group on-site to ensure smoother operations. Fortunately, two of the children had a free day, which reduced the total number to 14, making it more manageable. At 12:30, we had a general staff meeting where we discussed the upcoming Christmas celebration. Each group was encouraged to start planning early to avoid any last-minute issues.

Later in the day, I had a meaningful interaction with the mother of a two-year-old child who wanted to talk about some recent behavioral changes in her child at home. The parents had recently gone through a divorce, which seems to be affecting the children, and the family was clearly concerned but uncertain about how to support their child.

During our conversation, I actively listened to her concerns, validated her emotions, and reassured her that such behavioral shifts can be a normal response to both developmental stages and changes in the family environment. Together, we explored potential contributing factors from both the home and daycare settings. I suggested reaching out to a Neuvola for professional support. The guidance was given verbally; however, I reassured her that she could reach out to me again at any time for further assistance.

Tuesday

Today, we held our regular gym session, which included a structured play activity where children were asked to find balls of the same color and place them in the corresponding basket. The activity was well-received and encouraged both physical movement and color recognition skills. We had also planned team meeting; however, due to the unexpected sick leave of two colleagues, it was postponed. Since these meetings are typically held every three weeks, we agreed, it would be more beneficial to reschedule it for next week rather than cancel it entirely.

Reflecting on a case from last week, I had a meaningful but challenging conversation with the mother of a boy in my group. She is a single mother from Iran who moved to Finland a year ago. Due to a language barrier, we communicated mostly through a translation app, which sometimes led to misunderstandings. She expressed feelings of isolation, a lack of social support, and difficulty accessing language courses. As Hutchison (2018) notes, newcomers often face intersecting challenges, including linguistic and social barriers. I provided some information about available municipal services and reassured her of ongoing support.

This interaction highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive communication and the need for timely access to support services for immigrant families. It also reminded me of the crucial role we play in offering empathy, consistency, and guidance, especially to those who are navigating such profound transitions.

Wednesday

Today began with our usual morning breakfast, during which my colleague and I discussed the day's operational activities. We engaged the children in a painting activity, and I also decorated our window with a winter-themed design, which brought a seasonal atmosphere to the room. Later in the day, we participated in a PROVAKA meeting, which focuses on promoting positive early childhood education practices.

Last week, I had a meaningful conversation with an immigrant family from a neighboring group who are originally from the same country as me. This shared background made communication easier, and the family felt comfortable opening up about their situation. The share they are struggling to apply for a larger apartment to accommodate their growing needs. Their current home is too small, but their primary challenge was navigating the digital systems required for housing applications. Both parents had limited formal education and digital literacy, making the online application process overwhelming.

Nowadays, most applications are processed online, demanding digital literacy, technical skills, and access to reliable internet. These requirements are scary for this family, compounded by their limited understanding of the Finnish housing system application and lack of local networks. We talked and booked an appointment so that I or a development social worker (kehityssocionomi) could help navigate how she gets help from the municipality for the application process.

Thursday

Today sharing an event where a family recently moved to Vantaa for new job but faced challenges in securing an urgent daycare place for their child. Both parents had started working and needed immediate childcare support. Unlike standard daycare applications,

which involve waiting periods, their situation required emergency assistance, but they were unaware of how to access help.

In this case, I provided practical guidance on navigating the local daycare system, including contact information for emergency childcare services. However, this interaction underscored a broader systemic issue: the lack of accessible information and personalized support for families in urgent need. Municipal systems must be more responsive to such situations to alleviate unnecessary stress for families. Even though municipal services are available to support families, many immigrants are unaware of their existence or how to access them. This lack of awareness stems from various factors, including language barriers, limited social networks, and inadequate dissemination of information tailored to diverse cultural contexts. As a result, families who could benefit from these services often remain unsupported, struggling to navigate unfamiliar systems without guidance.

Friday

This morning, after breakfast, we played music to create a cheerful atmosphere and help the children start their day on a positive note. The morning proceeded smoothly overall. During this time, I had an informal conversation with a mother from Ukraine who expressed concerns about her young daughter's development. Having moved to Finland two years ago after experiencing trauma during pregnancy due to the war, the mother observed that her child, over three years old, did not interact with peers or respond to situations. These observations raised concerns about potential developmental delays or special needs.

Using Bronfenbrenner's framework, I considered how external stressors, such as war and migration, might have influenced both the mother and child. I guided her on how to seek support from Neuvola (the Finnish child health clinic system) and other medical professionals who could assess her daughter's needs. This interaction highlighted the importance of early intervention and culturally sensitive communication in addressing developmental challenges.

Conclusion

These case situations I shared this week illustrate the multifaceted challenges families face when navigating municipal systems, particularly in the context of cultural and systemic barriers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a valuable lens for understanding how changes in family structures or external environments impact individual behavior and well-being. For instance, the divorced mother's case illustrates how microsystem disruptions influence a child's development. Similarly, Hutchison's (2018) emphasis on the intersectionality of immigrant struggles resonates with the experiences of families facing linguistic, social, and systemic challenges.

Despite these insights, my professional role often feels constrained. While I can guide families toward available resources, I lack the authority to address systemic issues, such as delays in integration programs or the inaccessibility of digital systems. This limitation underscores the need for systemic advocacy to complement individual support efforts. Moreover, it is vital to address the digital divide, as families with limited technical skills are disproportionately disadvantaged when accessing essential services (Helsper 2012).

Building trust, practicing cultural sensitivity, and providing practical guidance are foundational to supporting families in navigating systemic barriers. However, as these case studies reveal, systemic issues such as digital exclusion, lack of timely integration programs, and insufficient emergency support exacerbate the struggles faced by vulnerable populations (Wall 2017).

These interactions validate the importance of bridging the gap between families and municipal systems. Policy recommendations include streamlining integration services, improving access to digital literacy training, and ensuring that emergency support systems are more responsive to families' needs. As social pedagogues and caregivers, fostering trust and advocating for systemic change are critical steps toward empowering families and addressing their immediate and long-term challenges (Solley 2016).

5.4 Fourth week- Understanding Municipal Service Access

This week, I plan to document and reflect on various situations where I observed families navigating municipal services. My focus will be on identifying the most commonly needed services, understanding the barriers families face in accessing them, and analyzing how I, as a social pedagogue, facilitate or act as an intermediary to help overcome these challenges. Additionally, I will reflect on why it can sometimes be difficult to guide clients toward these services on time.

Since this week includes a public holiday on Friday for Finnish Independence Day, I will focus on documenting and analyzing cases over four working days.

Monday

Mondays always begin in a relaxed and easygoing way to ensure that both adults and children ease into the week without feeling overwhelmed. Today, we enjoyed a water play activity, which the children found both fun and refreshing. We also held a general meeting where we discussed the upcoming winter vacation and the necessary preparations for the winter break period. Each group was given guidance on how to plan accordingly to ensure a smooth transition during that time.

Today, I met a family who was informed by the pediatrician that their child needed speech therapy for delayed language development. In Finland, speech therapy is often a critical municipal service for children with developmental challenges. The family faced long waiting times and complex referral pathways which made the overall process linger.

To help this family, I collaborated with the family and the daycare's development social worker and special needs teacher to ensure the child's needs were prioritized. By contacting the local health center and providing detailed reports from the daycare, the teacher makes the referral. However, the family still had to wait four months before their child's first therapy session.

Tuesday

Today after breakfast, we went straight outside for our morning outing, followed by a one-hour gym session. With the 2-year-old group, the gym session doesn't require any elaborate setups—what matters most is creating a safe space that encourages movement, exploration, and fun. After lunch, I had a meeting with my team partner, where we discussed our group's operating strategy and set some goals to guide our work moving forward.

I also want to reflect on an encounter from a few days ago that left a strong impression on me. I met a newly arrived immigrant family at the daycare that was struggling to secure stable housing. They had applied for municipal housing but found the process overwhelming due to language barriers and a lack of awareness about the available support services. Such challenges are common among newly arrived immigrants, especially those with limited language skills and little knowledge of their social rights or where to seek appropriate assistance. The complexity of the process has been taking a significant toll on their mental health, emphasizing the severe impact these barriers can have on vulnerable families during their initial adjustment period. I tried to support the family by booking an appointment with *Asumisneuvonta*, a housing advisory service that offers clients essential guidance throughout the entire process.

Wednesday

From recent experience, I noticed some families have limited knowledge of even basic services and often require assistance with nearly every aspect of navigating municipal systems. This lack of awareness can lead to feelings of inadequacy and disconnection, which underscores the importance of integrating these families into society. However, the Finnish government is planning significant changes to the Integration Act, which will place greater responsibility on immigrants for their integration (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024). Starting in January 2025, municipalities will take over Employment and Economic (TE) services, shifting the responsibility for integration to local levels. This reform has faced criticism from Finland's six largest cities, which argue that these new

responsibilities are being assigned without sufficient funding, making the integration of newcomers more challenging (Yle 2024a).

Today, I worked with a family whose child started daycare a couple of months ago. However, they had not submitted their financial statement, which is required to calculate daycare fees based on family income. As a result, they received the highest monthly bill, which was far beyond their budget. The family was unaware of how to address the issue and sought support.

I guided them through the process of submitting their financial information to the municipal system and explained how it impacts the fee structure. By helping them understand the system and correcting the oversight, I aimed to ensure they could manage the costs more effectively and avoid similar issues in the future.

Thursday

Today, after breakfast, we began our day outdoors with the Finnish national anthem in recognition of tomorrow's Independence Day. This activity was designed to introduce the children to Finnish cultural traditions and national celebrations in a simple, age-appropriate way. Activities like these play an important role in fostering a sense of community and belonging, especially in a multicultural daycare setting. They offer children from immigrant backgrounds an opportunity to become familiar with local customs and shared national values, helping to support their integration and cultural understanding from an early age.

In connection with this, I've also been reflecting on a broader issue I've encountered in my interactions with several families, particularly those who are newly arrived or from immigrant backgrounds. While Finnish municipalities offer a wide range of affordable and often free recreational and hobby activities for residents, many families are unaware of these opportunities or unsure how to access them. A common misconception is that such activities are expensive, which discourages families from exploring the options available.

This challenge is especially evident among families with limited support networks or low digital literacy, as most of the relevant information and registration processes are online. Despite showing genuine interest in enrolling their children—or even themselves—in recreational programs, they often struggle to navigate the system. These barriers can significantly hinder participation in social and community life.

This highlights the critical need for more proactive communication and tailored support to ensure that vulnerable families are aware of and able to benefit from the resources available to them. Promoting access to these opportunities can play a key role in enhancing integration, social inclusion, and overall well-being for children and their families.

Conclusion

The weekly documentation featured the multifaceted challenges that families face when navigating municipal services in Finland. Though these barriers often stem from a lack of knowledge about available resources, language barriers, and complex bureaucratic systems, however, in my opinion, government policies are also responsible for not integrating newcomers and even vulnerable groups properly (Yle 2023).

Reflecting on those situations, one significant challenge was the time-sensitive nature of many families' situations. For example, securing speech therapy or emergency daycare often involves navigating waiting lists and referral pathways, which can leave families feeling helpless despite their urgent needs. Additionally, immigrant families, who may have limited knowledge of Finland's municipal services or face language and digital literacy barriers, often require additional guidance and time. These situations are essential for understanding the root causes of systemic delays, but it is difficult to do so in real time when immediate support is needed.

Another difficulty lies in building trust with families. While trust is crucial for open communication, many families - especially those who are vulnerable or socially isolated, may initially hesitate to disclose their challenges. This hesitancy can make it harder to accurately assess their needs and guide them toward appropriate services on time.

The Finnish Government's vision for a 'strong and committed Finland' emphasizes the importance of inclusive and accessible services for all residents—especially in municipalities like Vantaa, where immigrants make up around 30% of the population—regardless of their background or income level. However, systemic delays and digital divides remain significant barriers that require broader structural reforms. For example, the government's commitment to digitalization (YLE 2018) offers opportunities for innovation but must also ensure that families with limited digital literacy are not excluded.

While it is difficult to reflect on and resolve these challenges at the moment, doing so over time allows for a deeper understanding of both systemic issues and individual needs. In a strong Finland, as envisioned by the government, every child and family should have the opportunity to thrive, where social pedagogues can make a small step toward making this vision a reality.

5.5 Fifth week- Overall Well-being and collaboration with a multi-professional team

Every employee's primary goal in daycare settings is to ensure the well-being of children. However, guiding colleagues toward best practices for achieving this can be challenging. A significant issue in the field is the frequent presence of substitute workers who often lack the necessary knowledge and, in some cases, the motivation to improve the quality of their work.

For extreme worker shortages, daycare jobs are comparatively accessible, and almost anyone can become a workforce member after taking short courses of three to six months or even language courses. This has created a lot of workers with different levels of skill and passion. Local Government and county Employers KT state that Finland still lacks enough early childhood educators (Yle News today 2024b) . One in five daycare teachers in Finland today is unqualified, moreover, substitutes are sometimes given jobs without an orientation which affects the quality of care and education that children receive.

This week, I will be working with a multi-professional team and with several substitute employees as I do often, because of the persistent worker shortage and absent staff. I will be concentrating on maintaining a high standard of care even with these challenges and making sure that children get the right support.

Monday

The week began with the immediate challenge of working alongside substitute staff, a recurring issue in our daycare due to persistent workforce shortages. Inconsistent staffing disrupted the group's rhythm, leaving some children visibly uneasy around unfamiliar caregivers. While substitutes with strong interpersonal skills could adapt seamlessly, others struggled to engage, underscoring the variability in preparedness among temporary workers. This inconsistency not only affected children's emotional stability but also created gaps in service continuity, reflecting broader systemic issues such as underfunding and insufficient investment in training for substitute personnel (Yle 2024b).

Amid these challenges, the week's focus shifted to collaborative efforts during multi-professional meetings. On Monday, I met with the development teacher, special education teacher, and my group's teacher to review a case involving a child whose situation had been escalated to child protection services. Together, we prepared documentation and strategies for Tuesday's meeting with the child's parents and the municipal child protection worker. These discussions emphasized the importance of streamlined communication to ensure timely referrals and holistic support for families in crisis. Later, I participated in a PROVAKA (Provaka - Positive Group-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education or, in Finnish, Positiivinen Ryhmässä Oppiva Varhaiskasvatus) team meeting, an initiative aimed at fostering positive learning environments through evidence-based pedagogical practices. As a social pedagogue, I highlighted the need to bridge gaps between families and municipal services, advocating for clearer pathways to urgent resources like counseling or housing support.

These interactions reinforced how multi-professional collaboration can mitigate systemic barriers, even as staffing instability persists. By facilitating dialogue between educators, social workers, and municipal actors, my role as a mediator became pivotal in aligning fragmented services with the immediate needs of children and families. However, the

recurring reliance on substitutes, many untrained or unprepared, remains a structural flaw, echoing Finland's broader struggle to retain qualified early childhood professionals (Yle 2024b). Addressing this will require systemic reforms to ensure stability and expertise in care settings, ultimately safeguarding children's well-being and service accessibility.

Tuesday

The day followed its usual routine, beginning with a gym session where the children's energy and laughter created a lively atmosphere. However, the mood shifted in the afternoon during a child protection meeting with a family facing challenges after a recent separation. The discussion focused on the child's behavioral difficulties, such as withdrawal and emotional outbursts. While the parents expressed relief at the open communication about the next steps, the conversation highlighted some systemic issues.

One major concern was the impact of substitute workers who, unfamiliar with the child's history, failed to recognize subtle signs of distress. This situation aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes that interactions within different environments shape a child's well-being. In this case, the instability in daycare (microsystem) was worsened by delays in accessing external support, such as therapy referrals (exosystem).

Building trust through clear communication helped ease the parents' concerns, but the lack of sufficient staff training and the fragmentation of municipal services remained significant challenges. Cameron and Moss (2011), in *Social Pedagogy and Working with Children and Young People*, argue that these gaps in support often leave educators struggling to fill roles meant for social workers or therapists. By the end of the day, it became evident that while collaboration between educators, social workers, and parents can help mitigate some of these challenges, Finland's dependence on underqualified substitutes and disconnected services continues to create obstacles for both children and caregivers.

Wednesday and Thursday

On Wednesday, we were unable to carry out our planned program, which typically involves a small trip in collaboration with another group. This disruption occurred due to staffing issues, as a substitute had been scheduled but did not show up for work due to unforeseen circumstances. A similar issue arose on Thursday, further compounding the challenge.

The absence of a substitute left me handling 8-9 children alone during breakfast for an hour—a task usually managed by three staff members. This situation was not only exhausting but also raised serious concerns about the children's safety. Although I eventually received assistance, the delay in support created significant stress.

One of the ongoing issues within the organization is the irregular attendance of substitutes and the inconsistent availability of regular staff due to various reasons. This leads to an unfair workload distribution, where those who are consistently present bear a disproportionate share of responsibilities. A positive work-life balance is essential for employee well-being, contributing to job satisfaction, productivity, and mental health. Conversely, an imbalanced workload is closely linked to increased stress, burnout, and negative health outcomes (Hariri, Othman, Anuar, Lin, & Zainudin 2024).

To address these concerns, we held a small meeting with our available group members and our supervisor. We discussed how the unequal workload distribution is affecting both staff well-being and the quality of care provided to the children. The lack of adequate staffing prevents us from giving the children the full attention and support they need, leading to disruptions in their daily routines.

Our team consists of four members, but two colleagues on long-term sick leave, the remaining staff are under constant strain. As a potential solution, we proposed assigning a fixed substitute rather than rotating temporary workers, as frequent changes create instability within the group. Additionally, we explored short-term strategies to manage the workload until our colleagues return. This ongoing situation is draining our energy levels daily, making it imperative to implement sustainable solutions that support both employees and the children in our care.

Friday

The final day of the week marked the end of an exceptionally demanding period. However, there was positive news as two new employees were confirmed to join our group. Additionally, among the two colleagues who had been on long-term sick leave, one decided to leave the position, while the other transitioned to a different group.

As part of our activities, we engaged children in creating Friendship Day cards and discussed the significance of friendship in life. Early friendships play a crucial role in children's emotional and social development, fostering skills such as conflict resolution, communication, and cooperation. Furthermore, friendships provide a sense of belonging, which contributes to higher self-esteem and helps reduce anxiety and depression. These early social experiences lay the foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

Similarly, in professional settings, a positive work atmosphere and strong collegial relationships significantly impact employees' well-being. Supportive colleagues enhance the work experience, reduce stress, and contribute to a more balanced and fulfilling professional life. Cultivating a supportive and collegial environment is essential for both professional effectiveness and overall job satisfaction.

Conclusion

ECEC's central focus is the safety of children. However, there are variations in staffing, reliance on substitutes who are underqualified, and systemic gaps in support structures that considerably affect both the quality of care and educators' professional well-being. The reliance on substitute workers, mostly unqualified or unoriented before placement, is one ongoing concern in the daycare industry. Research suggests that staff continuity is crucial for children's emotional security and social development, as frequent changes in caregivers disrupt attachment processes (Ahnert, L., Pinquart, M., & Lamb, M. E. 2006). This instability aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes how interactions within different environmental systems shape a child's development.

The importance of multi-professional collaboration was evident in meetings held with a development teacher, a special education teacher, and child protection services. The PROVAKA initiative reinforced the need for coordinated efforts between education and social services to support children at risk. However, fragmented municipal support structures often place additional responsibilities on workers, requiring them to navigate roles that should be filled by social workers or therapists (Cameron & Moss 2011). Research by Whalley (2017) highlights the importance of integrated working in early years settings, stressing that effective multi-agency collaboration improves early intervention outcomes for children. However, these benefits are often undermined by structural barriers, such as delayed access to support services and the absence of trained professionals to address complex needs (Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., & Siraj, I. 2015). This was evident in a case involving a child affected by parental separation, where inconsistent daycare staffing further complicated the child's emotional adjustment.

Another pressing issue is the unequal distribution of workload among regular employees due to staffing shortages. Studies indicate that high workloads and poor work-life balance contribute to stress and burnout among early childhood educators (Cumming 2017; Hariri et al. 2024). In our setting, an absent substitute led to a situation where one educator had to manage 8-9 children alone for an hour, highlighting serious safety concerns and the risk of burnout. According to the OECD (2019), stable educator-child relationships are crucial to high-quality early childhood education, and policy recommendations emphasize the importance of structural stability in staffing to enhance child outcomes.

Finally, the week's experiences underline the urgent need for systemic reforms in Finland's early childhood education sector. Addressing workforce shortages, improving substitute training, and strengthening multi-professional collaboration are essential steps toward ensuring both educator well-being and child development.

5.6 Sixth week - Holistic Growth and Professional Development

Holistic growth involves all aspects of one's growth since they are interwoven together (Creative World of Learning 2025). Understanding holistic development means looking at all parts of a child's growth and recognizing how they are connected. It goes beyond just focusing on one area, such as learning or physical growth, and instead considers the whole child - how they think, feel, interact with others, and grow physically.

This approach not only provides support at the immediate learning level but also has a lifelong impact at the level of handling complexities, building relationships, and contributing to society. (Creative World of Learning 2025).

This week, I aim to see how my daily interactions align with the holistic approach. I will pay close attention to moments where the principles of social pedagogy seem to support the children's development, for example, in how they play, connect with others, or show confidence. At the same time, I will reflect on how I have grown in my role since the first week. Even though the time is short, I hope to notice small changes in both the children and myself.

Monday

Today, I met with our new colleagues who joined as teacher and provided a brief overview of our daily activities. We discussed our group dynamics, which include 16 children from 9 different nations, as well as two children with special needs. Our conversation focused on understanding their behavioral patterns and exploring effective strategies to support them in various situations.

In the afternoon, we had our weekly meeting in the hall. It is a general meeting that is held every other week where all groups of our daycare participate and discuss various agendas based on the situation. During the discussion, this time we covered various topics, including how to teach table manners to different age groups. We focused on guiding children in using a fork properly and encouraging polite conversation at the table rather than everyone speaking or shouting at the same time.

Tuesday

Tuesdays are usually our gym session days, but this week, we decided to do something different. We teamed up with a group of 3-5-year-olds and went on a trip to the forest. It was a great opportunity for the children to socialize with different age groups, which helped them develop their social and imaginative skills. Exploring the forest together sparked their

creativity, encouraged teamwork, and gave them the freedom to engage in unstructured play something that is known to support their overall development (Louv 2008).

This week was extra special because we finally got plenty of snow after a long time. The kids were thrilled! They spent the morning building snowmen, eating a lot of snow as ice cream, and coming up with all sorts of fun games. It was amazing to see how something as simple as snow could bring so much joy and creativity. We even held our **morning circle outside**. We sang a few snow-themed songs and enjoyed the crisp air, which made the experience even more magical.

Wednesday

Since we changed our usual Tuesday routine, we decided to hold our gym session on Wednesday instead—an activity that children always look forward to. We begin each session with a fun and engaging warm-up, often using music to create an energetic atmosphere. The activities vary but typically include balance games, climbing bars, swinging, throwing balls, and jumping, all designed to support physical development while ensuring the children enjoy the experience. Each activity is carefully structured to enhance coordination, strength, and motor skills, making a joyful and beneficial part of their learning.

However, we have observed that not all children engage in every activity in the same way. Some children, particularly those with greater physical confidence, eagerly participate and fully enjoy the session. Others, however, hesitate—whether due to discomfort, lack of confidence, or fear of not performing well. While we recognize the importance of physical activity for all children, we also acknowledge that forcing participation is not the most effective approach.

Rather than pushing hesitant children to take part, we focus on understanding the underlying reasons for their reluctance. By creating a supportive environment and gradually introducing them to activities at their own pace, we try to help them build confidence, encourage them, and ensure that participation stems from genuine interest rather than external pressure. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a positive relationship with physical activity, where children feel empowered to explore their abilities in a way that respects their individual comfort levels and developmental readiness (Vygotsky1978).

Thursday and Friday

These two days were particularly challenging for me. My colleague was on sick leave, and I was also feeling unwell with a mild flu and cough. Initially, I thought I could manage, but in hindsight, I realized that was a mistake—I should have taken a sick leave myself. Trying to push through while feeling physically drained only led to me feeling overwhelmed.

Although I was able to get a substitute, guiding them through the daily tasks required energy that I simply didn't have. Explaining the routines, expectations, and specific needs of the children takes mental clarity, and I wasn't in the right condition to provide that support effectively. Fortunately, we had a few absences, with only five children attending each day instead of the usual eight. This lightened the workload slightly, but the experience reinforced an important lesson: taking care of my well-being is just as important as fulfilling my responsibilities.

Despite the challenges of these two days, there were also some advantages. Since I was leading the group independently, I had the flexibility to decide which activities to focus on while also paying closer attention to each child's behavior. We engaged in puzzle games, reading sessions, and kitchen play, which kept the children engaged and provided valuable insights into their interactions and individual needs.

Conclusion

This week I got a chance to reflect on how children grow holistically and also on my professional development. As I mentioned earlier, six weeks is not enough time to judge my professional development. But reflecting on my progress, now I see how I handle challenges differently compared to my first weeks. Professional growth isn't always dramatic—it's often in the quiet moments of realization, in the small improvements in how we handle tough situations, and in the deeper connections we build with the children we work with.

Working with young children means supporting them in all aspects—physical, emotional, social, and cognitive—because these areas are deeply connected (Creative World of Learning 2025). I saw firsthand how different activities, from structured gym sessions to free play in the snow, contributed to their learning and well-being. Watching the children interact with nature reminded me how important unstructured play is for their development. Research supports this—being outdoors helps children develop creativity, problem-solving skills, and social connections in ways that indoor settings sometimes can't provide (Louv 2008). Their excitement in the snow was contagious. They weren't just playing; they were exploring textures, negotiating roles in their games, and expressing pure joy.

Physical activity like the gym plays a crucial role in motor skills, coordination, and even emotional confidence (Gallahue & Donnelly 2007). But what stood out to me was how differently children approached the activities. Some were eager and confident, while others hesitated, unsure if they could keep up. According to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, learning happens just beyond a child's comfort zone but with the right support.

Midweek, things became slightly challenging as my colleague was on sick leave, and I wasn't feeling great myself. Managing the group while feeling physically and mentally drained made everything harder. I found myself reflecting on educator well-being and how it impacts not

just us but the children, too. Cumming (2017) highlights that when early childhood educators experience burnout, it affects the overall learning environment. Completely agree that when I was not at my best, it was harder to be patient, creative, or fully present.

However, watching the children problem-solve, collaborate, and express their ideas reminded me of Piaget's (1962) theory, which emphasizes that children construct knowledge through play. This experience helped me realize that even when things do not go as planned, meaningful learning still happens. Sometimes, stepping back and just observing can teach us more than rushing through structured activities.

Finally, this week had 2 agendas tried to cover. First, supporting children's holistic development means creating the right environment—one where they feel safe, challenged, and free to explore. Second, professional growth isn't just about gaining new skills—it's about knowing when to push through and when to pause. As much as I want to be present for the children, I also need to recognize my limits. Taking care of myself isn't just for me; it ensures I can show up fully for them.

5.7 Seventh week- Interviews with colleagues

This week, I conducted four interviews with daycare teachers who have social service degrees and are currently teaching at Latupuisto Daycare. These interviews are crucial for understanding their perspectives on the role of social pedagogy in early childhood education. Rather than relying solely on books and theories, I aimed to capture firsthand experiences from professionals working directly in daycare settings.

The participants have between one and ten years of experience in various daycare centers, though they are all currently employed at the same organization where I am. I intentionally selected participants from a single daycare for two reasons: first, a shared organizational context allows for easier comparison of experiences; second, despite working in the same setting, the participants bring varied professional backgrounds and levels of experience, offering a range of insights into how they interpret and carry out their work.

The interview questions were developed based on theoretical literature and practical observations drawn from my diary entries and fieldwork. During the preliminary research phase, I identified key themes, including ambiguity in professional roles, interprofessional cooperation, access to municipal support services, and perceptions of social pedagogy in daycare settings. These themes were translated into 12 open-ended questions (see Appendix X), designed to elicit in-depth, narrative responses that reflect each participant's lived experience rather than conforming to fixed categories.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who could meaningfully contribute to understanding the intersection between social pedagogy and early childhood education. Although none of the interviewees officially hold the title of “social pedagogue,” most have educational training in social services and currently work in early education roles. This background enables them to reflect on the social pedagogical aspects of their work, even if these roles are not formally recognized, particularly in areas such as family engagement, emotional development, and support for vulnerable children.

Due to scheduling constraints and limited overlapping breaks, I was unable to conduct the interviews in person. Instead, I distributed the questions via email, and participants responded in writing. This format provided them the flexibility to offer thoughtful responses, which contributed significantly to understanding issues like role confusion, the under-recognition of social pedagogues, and the barriers families encounter when trying to access services. These interviews helped ground my research in real-world experiences, adding depth and realism to my overall argument.

Ethical considerations were a central aspect of the data collection process. Before sending the questions, I informed all participants about the nature and purpose of the study, explained how their responses would be used, and clarified their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained, and participant anonymity was strictly maintained. While earlier drafts of this thesis included participants’ first names for personal reference, these have been removed and replaced with pseudonyms in the final version. No identifiable information is included in the analysis or presentation of results.

The interview data will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. The responses will be reviewed and coded to identify recurring patterns and themes, particularly those that align with or challenge observations from earlier ethnographic fieldwork and diary entries. Anticipated themes include confusion around professional roles, resistance to interprofessional collaboration, and bureaucratic hurdles in accessing support services etc.

Monday- Understanding the Role of Social Pedagogues in Daycare

Today, I began the week by reviewing the weekly plan with my colleagues. We discussed our ongoing strategies and upcoming celebrations. One of the key events we focused on was Ramadan, for which we engaged children in making crafts. Additionally, some children created cards for their mothers as a Women’s Day gift.

Before nap time, we decided to have a storytelling session about different religions, as none of the children were familiar with Ramadan. Since they are only two years old, we aimed to present the concept simply and engagingly. We found it necessary to educate children about

various religions, as the city of Vantaa seeks to promote a general understanding of different religions, beliefs, and their practices (Vantaa 2023).

In the afternoon, I began reviewing responses from my email interviews. I focused on how they define the role of social pedagogues in daycare settings. Unlike early childhood educators, social pedagogues emphasize family work, social inclusion, and early intervention (Stephens 2009). However, I found some interesting information from interviewees highlighted,

“Social pedagogues have a big role in early childhood education, mostly in family work. Every time a new family starts at daycare, a social pedagogue’s role becomes very important, especially if the family doesn’t have any friends or relatives nearby” (Person A 2025. Personal Communication).

However, according to another interviewee, “In practice, the role is sometimes unintentionally overshadowed by teachers, especially social pedagogues working in groups, who may not always have their full role recognized ”(Person B 2025. Personal Communication).

This perspective aligns with own observations in daycare environments, where families new to the community often struggle with forming social connections and accessing available services. In such cases, the limited recognition of social pedagogues’ roles can further hinder their ability to offer the support these families need.

Tuesday- Responsibilities of Social Pedagogues

This week, we made a change to our usual routine. Instead of having our gym session on Tuesday, we decided to alternate the activities. On odd weeks, we will have gym sessions, while on even weeks, we can choose different activities that the children love. One of the favorite spots of our daycare is a small room filled with soft toys, cushions, and soft blocks, which they enjoy playing with. After our morning outing, we spent the rest of the day in that play zone until lunchtime, allowing the children to engage in some unstructured play and creativity.

I decided to reflect on interviews in the afternoons this whole week. Today, I reflected on the role of social pedagogues and their responsibilities in supporting children’s development based on the answers of the interviewees. One of the core responsibilities of social pedagogues is to observe families, identify challenges, and promote inclusion (Petrie 2011). This idea was echoed by an interviewee who said,

“Their role is to make sure that families don’t get alienated from society. Social pedagogues can be very useful in observing families”(Person A 2025. Personal Communication).

Another interviewee emphasized

“Social pedagogues need to be present in the child’s and family’s daily lives in supporting them in different situations of the developmental phase” (Person B 2025. Personal Communication).”

Reflecting on the daycare environment, I began to think about on regular basis, how structured meetings with social pedagogues could greatly benefit parents in understanding their child’s needs and the available support services. It’s important to note that social pedagogues don’t always have dedicated time for study or planning during working hours. However, depending on their group, they may occasionally have some time, unlike teachers. This can be quite challenging, as they often need to use their time to search for supportive materials or services to assist both children and their families. At times, I feel this is a bit unfair, as it places extra pressure on them to manage this essential work during their time.

Wednesday -The Underutilization of Social Pedagogues in Daycare

Though I have mentioned several times in this thesis that the Social pedagogues' role is underutilized and not valued properly. This major theme emerged from the interviews as well, where interviewees pointed out that their expertise is often overlooked. One interviewee mentioned,

“These types of work are so new that their expertise is not yet valued enough in daycare settings” (Person C 2025. Personal Communication).”

On the other hand, another stated,

“Finland still relies more on teachers and social workers than trained social pedagogues, and their role is not well-defined in daycare settings” (Person B 2025. Personal Communication).”

Sometimes, it is observed at the workplace that social pedagogues are marginalized in their professional role when it comes to addressing social issues, with teachers often taking the lead in these situations, even though social pedagogues are better trained to support family dynamics and early intervention. The lack of professional clarity suggests a need for better-defined roles in daycare settings (Cameron & Moss 2011).

Thursday: Systemic Barriers to Accessing Services

Today, after breakfast, we went on a short walking trip. The weather was pleasant, making it a perfect opportunity for a short walk with the kids. In the afternoon, during our daycare’s general meeting, which is known as JORY in Finnish, our manager and fellow teachers discussed the importance of appropriate conversations during lunchtime with children and among adults. After the meeting, I spent 45 minutes in the kids' nap room reflecting on those interviews with my Tuesday titles.

A recurring challenge in my interviews was families struggling to access municipal services. Many parents—especially immigrants—are unaware of what is available, often due to language barriers and bureaucratic complexity (Keskinen, S., Norocel, O., & Jørgensen, M. B. 2016). One respondent noted,

“Many parents—both those with children in daycare and those with school-aged kids—are often unaware of the various services available in their municipality, such as sports activities, youth clubs, or homework support programs” (Person B 2025. Personal Communication).”

Another interviewee pointed out,

“The websites are quite confusing, especially when they are in English” (Person D 2025. Personal Communication).”

I have been reflecting on how daycare centers could serve as hubs for sharing important information. While the idea seems straightforward, it’s actually quite complex, as it depends on parents' willingness to ask questions about their needs and how that information can be effectively communicated. If parents had clear and accessible information from social pedagogues, they would be better equipped to support their children’s development. Additionally, I considered how interpretation services during daycare meetings could play a crucial role in bridging communication gaps, making the information more accessible to all families. Moreover, on a personal note, I have found that I did not receive proper orientation or clarity about my role or guidance for my work. Much of what I have learned has been through observing others. This lack of guidance has been particularly challenging for newcomers in the field, including immigrants like me, who may be unfamiliar with local regulations and expectations. Navigating these rules can be difficult, especially for those of us coming from different national backgrounds and working in a new field.

Friday: Strengthening the Role of Social Pedagogues & Recommendations for the Future

Our usual *Piltipop* music session was cancelled this week due to the absence of the person in charge. Instead, we decided to keep the kids engaged and active by doing some fun exercise activities together. We engaged in a light exercise session with the kids, using digital visuals featuring cartoon characters. It was a joyful experience as the children eagerly tried to imitate the animated movements, laughing and staying active throughout.

This week provided valuable insights into the role of social pedagogues, along with numerous constructive suggestions. However, the challenging reality is that their work is often underrecognized, which can be disheartening. Despite their crucial contributions, social pedagogues frequently go unnoticed and undervalued within the professional environment.

This week, I gathered several effective suggestions on how social pedagogues can better engage with families, starting by positioning themselves as the first point of contact. One respondent emphasized,

“When new families start daycare, social pedagogues can provide information about our municipal services, especially at the beginning of the daycare period” (Person C 2025. Personal Communication)."

Additionally, another interview mentioned, “health clinics (Neuvola) could serve as an entry point for family support” (Person D 2025. Personal Communication). Discussing services during parent-teacher conferences could also increase awareness. As one interviewee recommended,

“During children's development discussions, we could provide brochures about different municipal services. Often, an interpreter is present, which would help immigrant parents understand available services” (Person B 2025. Personal Communication)."

As one interviewee pointed out,

“Finland is moving towards a multicultural society. To understand children and apply social pedagogy effectively, professionals need to understand their backgrounds” (Person A 2025. Personal Communication)."

Conclusion

This week focused on findings from the interviews, highlighting how important the integration of social pedagogues into daycare settings which is still evolving, needs more recognition.. Despite this, their role in preventing social exclusion, guiding families toward essential resources, and supporting holistic child development remains indispensable. However, systemic challenges—such as insufficient coordination between services and unclear role definitions within daycare settings—continue to hinder their effectiveness (Petrie, P. 2011). A potential solution is to utilize daycare centers as information hubs while fostering stronger inter-professional collaboration, which could enhance the role of social pedagogues and improve service accessibility. These insights provide valuable direction for future practices and advocacy efforts aimed at fully integrating social pedagogues into early childhood education settings.

5.8 Eighth week - importance of nature

This final week marks the conclusion of my long diary-based thesis journey. Reflecting on my experiences, I realize how much I have grown as a social pedagogue and how my understanding of the role has deepened. Initially, I felt uncertain about my responsibilities and how I could effectively support families. However, over the past weeks, I have seen that

social pedagogues are not just caregivers or support staff—we serve as connectors, advocates, and facilitators, helping families navigate various challenges, including access to municipal services (Cameron & Moss 2011).

To conclude this journey, our team dedicated this week to “FOREST TRIP” Week, a series of daily trips to the nearby forest. The goal was to observe signs of spring, find inspiration, and immerse the children in nature. With summer arriving earlier than usual, we saw this as a valuable opportunity for them to explore their surroundings, develop motor skills, and experience the joy of unstructured play.

Monday

Monday morning began at a steady pace, following our usual routine. After breakfast, we set off on our planned trip to the forest, where the children were excited. With the snow rapidly melting, they eagerly embraced what might be their last opportunity to play in it this season.

After walking 10 minutes into the forest, we came across a large fallen log. Seeing an opportunity for creative play, we transformed it into a seesaw, allowing the children to experience balance, teamwork, and coordination in a natural setting. They took turns carefully climbing onto the log, testing its movement, and laughing as they gently rocked back and forth. These kinds of spontaneous activities not only enhance motor skills but also encourage problem-solving and social interaction, essential components of early childhood development.

Later, we also found a small rocky hill, which immediately captured the children’s curiosity. With boundless enthusiasm, they began rolling down the hill, giggling as they tumbled over the soft, uneven terrain. Each time they reached the bottom, they eagerly scrambled back up to repeat the experience, displaying resilience, confidence, and joy in their movements. Observing their uninhibited play reinforced the importance of outdoor activities in fostering both physical development and emotional well-being.

Tuesday

For our trips this week, we decided to take the children to the same forest every day. This was intentional, as familiarizing young children with a specific route helps them develop a natural sense of direction and confidence in navigating their surroundings. Returning to the same place repeatedly also allows them to observe small changes in nature, strengthening their connection to the environment.

Today, we kept things simple by walking through the forest, exploring the surroundings, and collecting natural materials like leaves, pinecones, and stones. The children were eager to gather different textures and shapes, excitedly sharing their discoveries. We plan to use these materials for a craft activity next week, giving them a chance to reflect on their forest

adventures in a creative way. Beyond just collecting items, the walk itself was an adventure, every turn in the path sparked curiosity, and every familiar spot became a little more special to them.

Wednesday

As we returned to the forest for another day of exploration, the children seemed even more comfortable with their surroundings. They eagerly led the way, remembering familiar spots from the previous days. It was rewarding to see how quickly they adapted, developing a sense of independence and confidence in nature.

Today, we tried to focus on engaging five senses—listening to the rustling leaves, feeling the textures of tree bark, smelling the damp earth, and observing the subtle signs of spring emerging. The children were particularly fascinated by the sounds around them—birds chirping in the distance and also a few airplanes flying in the sky, and the crunch of twigs under their feet. We took a moment to pause and listen, encouraging them to notice how nature speaks in its quiet way.

Thursday and Friday

By today, the forest has become a familiar and welcoming space for the children. They walked with confidence, recognizing landmarks and feeling a sense of ownership over the space. This growing connection to their environment reminded me of the importance of repetition in early childhood development; returning to the same place daily allowed them to explore more deeply rather than feeling overwhelmed by constant newness.

Inspired by their natural energy, we introduced more physical activities today. The children practiced balancing on fallen logs again, jumping over small puddles, and running up and down gentle slopes. One of the highlights of the day was building a small obstacle course using sticks and branches, where the children took turns hopping, crawling, and weaving through the setup.

This Friday was unlike the others—our daycare was closed for Development Day, a time dedicated to professional growth and strategic planning. Instead of our usual work with the children, we spent the entire day in meetings with our teams, discussing challenges and exploring potential solutions for future operational activities.

Conclusion of Week 8

This final week of my diary-based thesis has been a meaningful conclusion of my journey as a social pedagogue. The “Forest Trip” theme not only marked the end of this phase but also reinforced key insights about children’s development through nature-based play. Throughout the week, I observed how outdoor experiences support growth across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

In today's fast-paced, screen-saturated world, spending time in nature is more essential than ever for children's healthy development. Numerous studies have shown that regular outdoor experiences significantly benefit children's mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Baxter 2018). Exposure to natural environments reduces stress, enhances focus, and has been shown to alleviate symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by restoring attention and promoting calmness (Cohen ND). In addition to its cognitive benefits, outdoor play naturally encourages physical activity, helping to reduce the risk of childhood obesity and associated health issues.

Our daily forest excursions served as a powerful reminder of the benefits of slowing down and reconnecting with the natural world. Watching the children engage with logs, hills, puddles, and natural materials revealed just how deeply unstructured outdoor play stimulates imagination, resilience, collaboration, and problem-solving. Simple activities, balancing on a log or listening to birds, offered rich opportunities for sensory engagement and spontaneous joy.

Ultimately, this week reaffirmed that the role of adults—whether pedagogues, parents, or educators—is not to orchestrate every moment, but to create space for meaningful, joyful experiences. Nature doesn't require elaborate plans. It simply requires presence. By intentionally making room for outdoor play, we give children what they truly need. The freedom to be curious, active, and fully themselves.

6 Summary and Reflection

This thesis aimed to explore the evolving role of social pedagogues within early childhood education in Finland, particularly in light of the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018), which mandates that by 2030, at least two-thirds of daycare staff must hold a relevant higher education degree. While half of these must be qualified early childhood education teachers, the remaining roles may include professionals such as social pedagogues. This legislative shift aims to enhance pedagogical quality and strengthen support services for families.

Over an eight-week ethnographic study in a daycare setting, I investigated the multifaceted role of social pedagogues, with a particular focus on how they assist families, especially those with migrant backgrounds, in accessing appropriate municipal services. Using a combination of ethnographic observation, diary entries, and interviews, I examined the challenges social pedagogues face and the critical support they provide.

The findings reveal that social pedagogues serve as vital yet often misunderstood links between families and essential services, including healthcare, housing, and social welfare.

They can play an integral part in fostering children’s holistic development through emotional support, structured routines, and the promotion of outdoor play. Despite this, their role within daycare teams remains underrecognized, often due to vague job descriptions and a lack of institutional clarity (Petrie 2011).

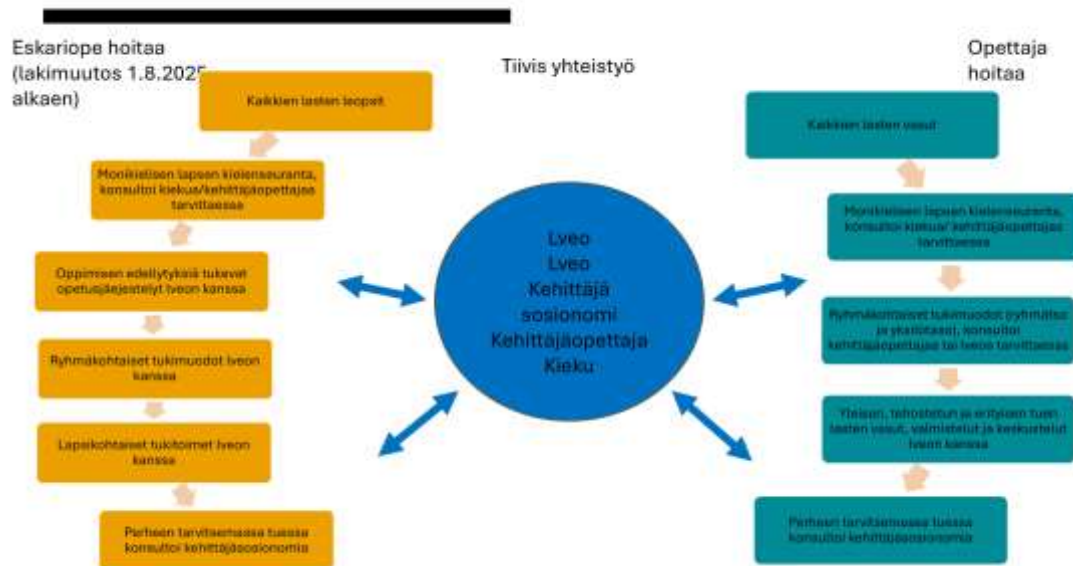


Figure 3- Close cooperation of daycare for the year 2025-26

The diagram illustrates the organization’s cooperation model, and it clearly shows that social pedagogues are not included in the official framework of collaboration. Their absence from this model highlights a critical gap in interdisciplinary cooperation, despite the fact that social pedagogues are key professionals in supporting children’s holistic development and family engagement. According to the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (VASU 2022), effective early childhood education requires multi-professional collaboration that values the unique competencies of all staff members. By not formally integrating social pedagogues into the cooperation structure, the organization risks overlooking essential perspectives related to social-emotional development, child welfare, and family support.

Furthermore, A key challenge identified in the study is the systemic barriers that impede access to support services. These include bureaucratic inefficiencies, language difficulties, and limited digital literacy among families. Additionally, some colleagues were hesitant to acknowledge the expertise of social pedagogues, preferring traditional practices over interprofessional collaboration, highlighting the ongoing need for cultural and systemic change (Kotter, J.P. 2012).

An important but underexplored aspect in this thesis is the emotional labor inherent in social pedagogical work. Unlike early childhood teachers, social pedagogues are more deeply engaged with the social and emotional dimensions of family life, often encountering complex and emotionally taxing situations (Cumming 2017). This aspect of their work warrants deeper investigation in future research.

The diary-based methodology employed in this study offered an intimate, real-time perspective of the social pedagogue's daily work, capturing both its challenges and its impact. However, the focus on a single daycare center limits the generalizability of the findings, suggesting a need for broader research across multiple and more diverse settings.

The thesis concludes with recommendations for policy and practice, including clearer role definitions, increased training for substitute and support staff, and improved digital accessibility to ensure equitable service delivery. To fully harness the potential of social pedagogues in early childhood education, their role must be more clearly defined, supported, and integrated into the wider pedagogical team.

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Chat GPT has been used throughout the thesis to refine text, and Grammarly has been used for grammatical checks.

Figures

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Appendices

Interview Questions –

-Name

-Job title

-Work experience

1. How would you describe the role of a social pedagogue in a daycare setting, and how does it differ from early childhood educators or teachers?
2. What are the main responsibilities of social pedagogues in supporting children and families?
3. Do you think daycare systems fully utilize the expertise of social pedagogues, or how could their role be better integrated?
4. What systemic changes would improve the involvement of social pedagogues in helping families access municipal services and in daycare settings?
5. What are the most common barriers families face when trying to access municipal services, and how do these challenges impact their children's well-being?
6. How can social pedagogues better support families, especially immigrants, in navigating and understanding available municipal services? Can you give an example?
7. Have you observed any systemic issues (e.g., bureaucratic inefficiencies, long waiting times) that prevent families from getting the support they need?
8. What role should municipalities play in ensuring services are accessible to all families, regardless of their background?
9. Are there gaps in communication or coordination between daycare centers and municipal service providers? If so, how can they be improved?
10. What additional training or resources would enhance the effectiveness of social pedagogues in daycare settings?
11. What improvements could be made to strengthen collaboration between daycare centers and municipal services?
12. Do you have any final suggestions on improving the role of social pedagogues in daycare and family support services?