



## Critical viewpoint to early childhood education teachers' well-being at work

Outi Ylitapio-Mäntylä<sup>1</sup>  
Satu Uusiautti<sup>2</sup>  
Kaarina Määttä<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Early childhood education teachers' happiness at work reflects in children. Finnish day care system has faced plenty of changes and they can also reflect in well-being at day care. The aim of this article to dissect the state of well-being and thriving at work in Finnish day care centers from early childhood education teachers' point of view and to discuss how well-being could be promoted. The data comprises group interviews (N=9) collected with memory-work method among North-Finnish early childhood education teachers (N=4). The results revealed that several factors were reported as threatening early childhood education teachers' well-being. These kinds of factors were, among others, increasing amount of administrative tasks as well as concern about their educational task becoming narrower, the sufficiency of one's own resources, and how the economic measures for efficiency have started to extend to day care as well. Perceived well-being increases when early childhood education teachers have time to encounter an individual child and concentrate on their basic work, rearing and teaching children. Based on the findings, suggestions how to enhance early childhood education teachers' well-being are discussed. Promotion of well-being necessitates development actions both at the level of society, day care system and early childhood education teachers' personal level. In this article, we highlight how organizational structures enhance or hinder well-being.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; early childhood education teacher; well-being at work; stress; memory-work method

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<sup>1</sup> (Corresponding author) Ed.D., Senior Researcher, Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, [Outi.Ylitapio-Mantyla@ulapland.fi](mailto:Outi.Ylitapio-Mantyla@ulapland.fi)

<sup>2</sup> Ed.D., Post Doc Researcher, Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, [satu@uusiautti.fi](mailto:satu@uusiautti.fi)

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D., Professor of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, [Kaarina.Maatta@ulapland.fi](mailto:Kaarina.Maatta@ulapland.fi)

## Introduction

Children's and adults' well-being go hand in hand—also in day care. Enthusiastic teachers transmit their joy of work to children and vice versa: children who are happy at day care increase adults' work thrive there. Teachers' happiness at work reflects in children and therefore, it is important to dissect well-being and thriving at work in Finnish day care.

In Finland, both parents of the vast majority of families with children under school age are in full-time employment and all children below school age are entitled to receive municipal or private day care. Under these circumstances, a reliable, safe and reasonably priced day-care system is of vital importance. (MSAH, 2006.) The official documents of early childhood education (Statistics of Finland, 2003; MSAH, 2006) define early childhood education as an educational interaction that takes place within small children's living surroundings aiming at promoting children's balanced and healthy growth, development, and learning. Early childhood education organized and controlled by the society comprises the wholeness of care, education, and teaching (Decree on children's day care, 1973/239).

In Finnish day care centers, early childhood education (ECE) teachers are working as nursery nurses and directors at day care centers. ECE teachers are the heads of child groups and responsible for planning activities. They work at day care centers in different kinds of groups with children aged between one to six years old. ECE teachers can also work in pre-school education organized by the day care center or school. They are required to have a lower university degree (Bachelor of Education) or a bachelor's degree in the social sciences with additional pedagogical course (Heinämäki, 2008).

Finnish day care is target-oriented nursing, education, and teaching rooted in the 1860s' day care activities and early childhood education teacher training (Lujala, 2007, p. 71). For decades, the emphasis has varied between caring and teaching: sometimes the focus has been on nursing and caring, some other times on teaching which occurs in the texts of early childhood education curricula (see Turunen, 2008). Nowadays, Finnish day care discourse underlines early childhood education pedagogy (Lujala, 2008). All the past, present, and future discussions are, however, based on children's well-being, which is the primary goal of

the rearing and teaching activities that take place in day care. Children have to be happy and their growth and development have to be supported.

When it comes to ECE teachers or preschool teachers, the focus in studies has been on stress and coping (e.g. Burge et al., 1996; Chan & Hui, 1996; Mantheim et al., 1996; Smith & Murke, 1992). For example, Kelly and Berthelsen (1995) argued that there is a need for research to explore teachers' experiences of stress within their specific teaching context, such as preschool or childcare, as well as within the wider contexts of the school campus and the educational, organizational and social system. Both the internal demands which teachers place upon themselves in their daily work and the external demands from organizational and social pressures must be understood in order to provide support for teachers.

Indications show that working in child care is stressful (Maslach, 1982; Martin & Baldwin, 1996; Savolainen, 2001) and teachers' well-being has been studied abundantly (e.g. Fink & Stoll, 2000; Rasku & Kinnunen, 1999; Santavirta et al., 2001; Windschildt, 2002). Teachers seem to score higher in well-being: they make healthy choices, they have what they need for a healthy life, they view their life in positive terms – however, they do not report the best work environments (Lopez & Agrawal, 2009). Indeed, well-being is crumbled as lassitude seems to play the main role also in early childhood education teachers' work nowadays (e.g. Syrjäläinen, 2009; Gannerud, 2001) and it seems relevant to examine their well-being in the context of their work environment, day care centers. Many factors may be the reason for teachers' fatigue, such as continuous changes in work content, competition, insecurity about employment, and efficiency demands (see also Julkunen, 2008, pp. 210-214).

The subsequent feelings of fatigue, cynicism, and inefficiency can lead even to an occupational crisis (Hutri, 2002). Even the fact that everybody talks about work lassitude all the time may increase perceived fatigue (Widenberg, 2007, p. 106). However, if we focus only on the problems and negative aspects of work, the image of work life becomes unilateral (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011). In today's working life, it is important to take a balanced perspective by not only trying to fix what is wrong but also taking a positive, strength-based approach to organizations and human resource management (Luthans & Youssef, 2009, p. 579). Therefore, in this article, we want to adopt this particular approach:

we will explore ECE teachers' experiences about stress and well-being at day care centers and discuss the findings from the perspective of well-being at work.

The focus is not on ECE teachers' personal well-being but it is analyzed as a phenomenon connected to the surrounding day-care culture. Furthermore, we will discuss what the challenges or obstacles to teachers' well-being at day care centers are and how day care centers as work places could be developed from this point of view.

### **What does Positive Approach to Well-being at Work mean?**

Well-being is comprehensive social, physical, and emotional experience (Warr, 1990). Employees' well-being is not just a matter of health or duty of care. There is also a tangible link between employees' well-being and effectiveness in the workplace (Levi et al., 2000). Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos (2002, p. 718) have created a model of healthy work which illustrates the connection between employees' well-being and work. Work that promotes well-being consists of favorable work practices (e.g. autonomy at work), positive psychological processes and mechanisms (e.g. trust, commitment, responsibility), and healthy outcomes (e.g. feeling of self-efficacy, proactivity, well-being). All these are interconnected and interact with the external environment as well.

Furthermore, individuals' perceptions of their jobs do not depend entirely on the objective job characteristics. According to Arnold et al. (2007), humanistic work values—in other words, the normative beliefs individuals hold about whether work should be meaningful—have an important influence on the likelihood of finding meaning in current work and psychological well-being. This kind of idea of humanistic work values are in line with the definition of healthy work as well: “Healthy work exists where people feel good, achieve high performance, and have high levels of well-being (Quick, 1999, p. 123)”. Thus, healthy work does not rest solely on the above mentioned objective characteristics but positive feeling is also important; in other words, the feeling of finding a suitable job for oneself and being able to use one's strengths at work are the salient factors for well-being at work.

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Well-being can be dissected from the point of view of individual strengths that are at the core of positive psychology (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Carruthers & Hood, 2005). Focus on human strengths brings positive aspect into well-being at work. Seligman and Peterson (2003) have analyzed human strengths and how individuals have the possibility to achieve positivity in various life situations. Open mind, critical thinking, and courage, caring for other people, justice, self-regulation, optimism, and hope, among other things, are strengths with which people can achieve well-being in life and at work (Seligman et al., 2005; Carver & Scheier, 2002).

Supporting human strengths in working life enhances coping at work (Luthans & Youssef, 2009) but is not, however, unproblematic. According to Peterson and Park (2006), for example, strengths of the heart (e.g. love) tend not to co-occur with strengths of the head (e.g. self-regulation) and that individually-focused strengths (e.g. creativity) tend not to co-occur with other-focused strengths (e.g. fairness). Furthermore, various strengths are appreciated in different cultures; for example, American workers are likely to perceive work as individual achievement whereas Japanese workers regard work as a social duty (Peterson and Park, 2004). However, in an era of multiculturalism and continuously changing working life, recognition that different people bring different strengths of character to work place is necessary (see also Luthans & Youssef, 2009).

## **Method**

### *Research questions and the purpose of this article*

In this article, early childhood education teachers' well-being at work is addressed as a contextual phenomenon. Finnish day care system has faced massive changes recently and our purpose is to illustrate the state of ECE teachers' well-being in Finnish day care centers. On the one hand, our aim is to analyze the essence of well-being and its challenges leaning on ECE teachers' narratives. On the other hand, we want to discuss as our conclusions how well-being can be enhanced at day care centers. This article answers the following research questions:

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- 1) How do ECE teachers describe their well-being at work in the state of change in the Finnish day care system?
- 2) What are the main challenges and obstacles to ECE teachers' well-being in Finland?

As a conclusion, we will discuss how, according to the results and relevant literature concerning teachers' well-being, also ECE teachers' well-being could be promoted at the day care centers.

### *Memory-work method*

The data for the original research was collected through the memory-work method adopted from Frigga Haug (1987). The data used in this article is a part of wide research concerning ECE teachers' work where the power and gendered practices related to education were analyzed (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2009b). The data was collected in group meetings (N=9) among four female ECE teachers between autumn 2002 and spring 2004. The ECE teachers, who participated in this research, had worked in municipal day care for ten to over twenty years. The data is based on discussions between the ECE teachers and the researcher in a collective memory-work group. In the group, the ECE teachers related episodes from their work. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours. During the meetings, phenomena related to day care, rearing, and teaching were discussed. Discussions also covered challenges and coping at work which are at the center in this article.

With the memory-work method, it is possible to get a handle on everyday happenings that are often invisible. The fundamental idea of the memory-work method is that a group of people meet together to discuss a particular theme using memories from childhood and youth. Reflecting the past helps to understand the process of socialization and participation in social and cultural practices (e.g. Berg, 2008; Haug, 1987). Using memories and discussing them also opens up potential to affect the future and change habits and behaviors, for example, in teaching (Ylitapio-Mäntylä & Mäkiranta, 2010). With the memory-work method, it is possible to render new knowledge and forms of understanding that reach beyond established discourses. It may provide one way of understanding the cultural and

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social influence in the lived practices and experiences of everyday life (Jansson et al., 2008, pp. 228, 230).

### *Analysis*

The analysis was based on the narrative structure of the discussions. It is possible to address an individual's experiences through a narrative. Yet, it is impossible to reach life or an experience as such but they become audible to a people self and others when narrated. The researcher is being told about lived life in a certain time, place, and situation. Experiential and narrative information are produced at the very moment when the narrative is told and that the researcher interprets (Bruner, 2004). A group discussion and remembering together bring out new perspectives and help naming the experiences together. In a manner of speaking, discussion encourages others' remembering and narration; and simultaneously, the narrated and heard stories can be deliberated (Jansson et al., 2008). Questioning and critical analysis may be central already in group discussions. Collective discussions help revealing invisible everyday narratives and remembering the gaps in one's own memories and unspoken stories (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

Furthermore, critical and empathetic perspectives guided the reading of the data in this research. An empathetic way of reading means that the researcher focuses his/her eye on the events the ECE teachers told as if they were narratives that the researcher can empathize and experience again. The purpose of critical reading, for its part, is to ask the data questions from diverse points of view.

While narrative reading would focus on the story behind an excerpt from a narrative and what the excerpt is about, empathetic reading asks how I, as a researcher/listener, experience the ECE teacher's story. Critical reading focuses on the following questions: How does the ECE teacher describe her own place in her working community from the perspective of well-being? Why does the ECE teacher think of children? In what way does the ECE teacher perceive the day care center as a provider of well-being?

Thus, analysis means continuous reading of the data, analytic deliberation, and returning by the data all over again. Furthermore, analysis consists of studying the data through theoretical concepts in order to interpret the hidden everyday phenomenon (Davies et al., 2006) and through which the data is turned from everyday experience into scientific knowledge.

Ethical questions are always salient when doing research but they have to be contemplated particularly carefully when the purpose is to study and analyze people's narratives (e.g. Josselson, 2011; Mäkiranta & Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2011). Simultaneously, the researcher is a part of the research, analysis, and the narrative the research produces (Josselson, 2011; Elbaz-Luwich, 2005). The researcher is an interpreter who is in constant dialogue with the researcher's knowledge and the one the data produces (Estola, 2003). The spoken and narrated story is transformed by the research into an unfamiliar text. Indeed, Ruthellen Josselson (2011) points out that, in analysis, the researcher analyses the texts. After the researcher's interpretations, readers read and interpret the research text in their own way and therefore, the text lives all the time.

## Results

### *Changing work – crumbling well-being*

The changes that take place at work mold ECE teachers' work by crumbling or strengthening their well-being. One great change in Finnish early childhood education was the one in preschool education in 2000 guaranteeing every six-year-old child the possibility to attend free preschool education. It has also caused wide-ranging challenges in ECE teachers' work affecting their working culture in a variety of ways.

According to ECE teachers' narratives, along the change in preschool education, the official teaching, evaluation, and observation of preschool children are emphasized and reflect in other age groups at the day care center. Personal development files, individual education plans and curricula are now compiled to every age group more systematically than before (e.g. Koeger et al., 1999). Teaching has risen at the center of operation as the municipalities



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have gotten the responsibility to arrange preschool education to every six-year-old child at least 700 hundred hours per year.

Preschool-education-related work tasks make the ECE teachers work as per the system (e.g. Fisher & Frey, 2001). They work according to a certain pattern: “Preschool teaching and other tasks that we have to conduct with a certain role or they suppose us to conduct them with a certain role. And then, if you deviate from it, it demands a lot from you if the co-workers do not see it in the same way.” (The ECE teacher No. 4) Day care as an institution make people move in step and an ECE teacher himself/herself can renew the familiar ways of action by constructing the working culture at the day care center. The ways of action at the day care community do not solely strengthen or produce certain kind of action but ECE teachers produce the construction of the day care community by their own actions and choices. The day care community and an ECE teacher establish an interconnected, shifting, and changing relationship (see also McNay, 1992, p. 60). ECE teachers' autonomy is threatened when they are obliged to change their working practices and cannot implement rearing and teaching methods in a way they want any longer. They have to conform to the demands and agreements of the work community. Then, their work is not necessarily a preferred activity any longer.

Both the division of the school subjects and requirements to children's knowledge are emphasized both in practice and in curricula. Based on the data, especially the emphasis on cognitive skills dominates extensively both in curricula and action as well as the thought that there is one way of teaching correctly—although there is not (MacNaughton, 2005).

Children are different and the teacher should notice children based on their abilities, knowledge, and skills when teaching (see Drasgow et al., 2001). This thought would be possible, if caring and encounter between the child and the adult was highlighted in the day care practices and curricula (e.g. Diller, 1996; Noddings, 1995) because caring can be seen as a fundamental factor in individuals' well-being. The dynamics and nature of caring may change along the changes in day care. One ECE teacher contemplated how the change in preschool education affected the level of knowing a child: “I think that preschool education affects so that it doesn't enable creating such a relationship with parents that you have with those children you nurse for a long time [...]. It is somewhat really sudden and a sort of

fragmented. And somehow like, you know, you had been longing for to get to know the parents and that's something detestable [in the new preschool education]." (The ECE teacher No. 2)

Every preschool child spends one year at the day care center because of which the cooperation between an ECE teacher and preschool children's parents remains short. Therefore, ECE teachers find working in the 3-6-year-old children's group more rewarding because they are able to follow children's growth for several years and support the children's development. In this kind of long-span work ECE teachers can experience the joy of work when following children's development and learning.

An ECE teacher may experience fatigue as well: "Sometimes, I have the feeling of powerlessness: that I don't know what I'm doing, that my professional skill is not enough in some areas in order to make the group function well. Or if one child terrorizes the group in that way and I'm not able to intervene it to make things work. Sometimes, I suffer from it." (The ECE teacher No. 1) This ECE teacher had found her professional skills insufficient for controlling the functioning of a child group. She is afraid of losing her grip and losing control over work causes concern and distress. The ECE teacher is worried about children and her own coping.

The ECE teacher's experience of insufficiency can be seen as her concern over children and their well-being (e.g. Bagdi & Vacca 2005). Even one child who expresses restlessness or aggressiveness, negative things, by his/her behavior worries the ECE teacher (see also Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998). Concern about the child's well-being attaches and engages the ECE teacher in her work which may result in a situation where she sets too high demands on her work. Concern about the child's well-being and her own inadequacy reflect in the ECE teacher's well-being. The thought about a perfect teacher may lie in the background as teachers are expected to be diligent virtuosos and both emotionally and socially balanced people (see also Vuorikoski, 2003a). Work engagement gives rise to the feelings of insufficiency and inadequacy that may lead to work lassitude. The feeling of insufficiency may emerge when the ECE teacher experiences the feelings of failure as an educator

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thinking that insufficiency illustrates her inadequacy as a worker. Thus, the feeling of self-efficacy becomes weaker.

In the previous excerpt, the teacher is worried about her proficiency and shows her humaneness although she simultaneously predisposes herself by admitting her feelings of inadequacy. Laying one open to others can happen in a good work community which have a confidential atmosphere and where people help each other in their work and support in problem situations (e.g. Klem & Connell, 2004).

#### *Performance and efficiency requirements at day care centers*

The goals created by market economy call for efficiency and productivity and are directed also in school and day care institutions. Therefore, change, development, renewal, production, and flexibility are part of educators' and teachers' daily work as well. (Gugliemi & Tatrow, 1998; Kyriacou, 2001; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2009b, pp. 178-184.)

“I think that at the moment, the spirit of the age is that it is emphasized that the system requires something and the system requires sorts of things that are not reasonable at all for the basic work.” (The ECE teacher No. 4) In the preceding quotation, the ECE teacher compares the action that the society demands with an ECE teacher's basic work, rearing and teaching children. The ECE teacher criticizes day care and is simultaneously aware that as an ECE teacher she participates in producing action in accordance with the spirit of the age. “You know, the basic pattern of the life includes that hurry and that we go along with the same although we all know that this is not for good. And yet our system is that we have to go as we don't make profit and [everything else] is too expensive.” (The ECE teacher No. 4). The ECE teacher in question thinks that she has to get into the busyness: otherwise she will not bring in profit. Teachers are answerable and they are required to regulate and observe themselves (Forrester, 2005).

According to the interviews, ECE teachers think that they are educated to observe their economic efficiency: “We should, you know, as day care staff, think about the child and the field and those interactional relationships: how they affect the child. So, we sort of resort to

the same thing in a certain way as we are supposed to have the certain capacities, whereas it doesn't [work] here, as we should kind of inform the bosses about how it affects in the child group and they should report forwards how it affects an individual child's life." (The ECE teacher No. 2) This ECE teacher is concerned that the profit calculation forgets and ignores an individual child. Children's happy and imaginary playing is invisible action when considered from the perspective of money and economy. It cannot be compiled as statistics nor can they be expressed as figures of capacity. The Finnish decree on day care determines the size of the child group and the number of educators per group (Decree on children's day care, 1973/239). There are not any limits for the group sizes as long as the number of adults in relation to the number of children is in accordance with the decree. A common practical rule has been that, in maximum, there are twelve children in a group of under-3-year-old children and 21 in a group of 3-6-year-old children.

ECE teachers' narratives about well-being proved that teachers have to conform to the management's way of action that can be called "performing". Yet, working with children necessitates caring as well. ECE teachers adopt both ways of action and therefore have to work in the middle ground between these two demands. (See also Forrester, 2005.)

Every now and then, everyday life at the day care center means in practice that there are over twenty children and too few adults in relation to the number of children. Large child groups at the day care center hinder teachers to confront every child properly during the day. One teacher pondered: "And then there is that kind of limitedness that you cannot stop and listen to every one of those twenty children really. You sort of remember with a good conscious that you haven't paid attention to that child for a long time and when you notice him/her and talk with that child and sit with him/her in an unobserved way. So the next day, he/she would come to your lap and you are like 'wow, does he/she like me that much'. So the child shows that he/she likes you." (The ECE teacher No. 3) Child groups are big and ECE teachers do not have time to pay attention to every child every day. Being aware of this, the teacher regulates his/her own coping (see also Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006.) Self-regulation can be considered as a human strength. The previous example shows that when noticing a child personally the ECE teacher gets positive feedback from the child. Both a

child and an adult can experience joy and empowering feelings when they have an opportunity to confront each other in an unhurried way.

Sometimes, working goes well and feels nice even if one has plenty of unfinished tasks: “But indeed, there really is such periods when you cope better at work and draw strength from many things thinking like ‘Oh, that too’. You know, you find such positive things from children that ‘oh he/she is like that, oh he/she is wonderful and how nice we have here’. You have such a comprehensive feeling that this work is wonderful and that you can do it. And then you have periods like ‘oh no’ and just today, I was thinking that I hadn’t written up the operation plans and tomorrow we’ll have parents’ meeting and the plans are still undone. So, certainly, when you have a lot of unfinished tasks, in arrears, you find out how exhausted you are mentally although you could sleep well and everything. But they bother your mind somehow”. (The ECE teacher No. 1) The ECE teacher describes how her feelings towards her job vary from the joy of work to mental fatigue. She experiences the joy of work as a comprehensive feeling when working with children making fatigue step aside. Administrative tasks, such as compiling an operation plan, require time. The ECE teacher tells how the writing work was postponed until the last moment causing fatigue. She describes her fatigue as mental because she does not feel like being physically exhausted. (See also Travers, 2001.)

Frustration towards work is invoked when teachers’ time has to be spent on administrative tasks and not with children. Negative feelings are often directed towards other adults, colleagues, parents or other co-workers (Nias, 1996; Taris et al., 2004). Caring about children and concern about their well-being attach and engage ECE teachers in their work. It may lead them to set insurmountable demands on their work. In addition to outside pressures, ECE teachers set their own goals that may be too demanding in relation to working conditions and their own coping.

### **How Can Day Care Centers be Developed as Well-being-Promoting Work Places?**

According to the results of this study, early childhood education curricula direct teachers’ work in day care. The change in early childhood education at the turn of the millennium has

shifted ECE teachers' work toward teacherhood leaving care and rearing in the background (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2009a). Furthermore, ECE teachers' work is controlled by administrative and financial frames. Teaching and education are measured by assessment tools adopted from economic life which is highly criticized by ECE teachers (see Forrester, 2005). Not all requirements for efficiency, flexibility and quality are necessarily bad—development projects always bring something new in the work—yet, they can be stressful if ECE teachers are not given enough resources for carrying out these projects (see also Lehto, 2006). Therefore, lack of time slows down quality and development work affecting coping and well-being at work as well.

The ECE teachers in this research thought that their professional field has expanded too much leaving the basic task, teaching, in the shadow of other work tasks. Changes in work are not the only way of developing ECE teachers' work. Their work can be advanced by participating in in-service training, contemplating the ways of cooperation with colleagues, reading vocational literature, and observing children's activities and plays.

Based on ECE teachers' stories, work lassitude was connected with other feelings, such as frustration and insufficiency. All the recent changes at work together with responsible nature of their work and low salary may lead to stress and fatigue. An ECE teacher is just one of the educators at the day care center. Therefore, the work consists of team work with other educators. However, ECE teachers' pedagogical expertise places them in a responsible position. Therefore, despite the stress factors and demands in their work, ECE teachers are expected to work as good educators. The conception of a good teacher and education grounds on the idea that a teacher takes care of children, is interested in them as individuals, and accepts them as they are (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011). An educator should have a perception of himself/herself as an educator as well as of the meaning of good life and care (Goldstein & Lake, 2000).

Developing work requires constant discussion among the members of the work community. Educational questions are not always easy and employees may have divergent opinion on teaching and rearing. First of all, colleagues have to be able to talk about issues related to education and teaching and dissect the demands set to their work together and critically:

What could be changed and developed so that everyone, both children and adults, would find being in the work community meaningful? Therefore, it is important to discuss how day care centers should be developed in order to support ECE teachers' well-being at work. They have to be able to talk about work lassitude without the feeling of being threatened. In such a work community, where the atmosphere is confidential and respectful to others, people are likely to feel good and enjoy their work (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011). Also day care management has the ability and responsibility to provide work environments and conditions that give its workers the best opportunity to do their jobs well and that, consequently, these factors will result in satisfaction and the motivation to do even higher-quality work (e.g. Basom & Frase, 2004; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Gilbreath & Benson, 2004). Humans have an innate drive to grow, change, and overcome, if they are allowed to (Biswas-Diener, 2010). It means, in practice, that ECE teachers should be able to plan and organize their work so that their basic tasks are not threatened when participating in for example development projects and supplementary education.

Facing and discussing the problems in the above-mentioned manner typifies critical thinking, which is one of the human strengths (Seligman and Peterson 2003). According to Baltes and Freund (2006, p. 34) the concept of human strengths is contextually dynamic because the function of a certain human behavior depends on the context and its outcome as well. Most of human behavior, thus, takes place in the context of human relationships. In teaching and rearing professions, this notion is of particular importance because teachers' coping and thrive, physical, mental, and emotional well-being reflect in children's well-being (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Huebner et al., 2009). ECE teachers' joy of work therefore affects children's well-being in a beneficial way because positive feelings enhance people's functioning (Rowe, 1987).

Despite the stressors found in childcare centers (e.g. child behavior and guidance issues, conflict or poor communications between staff and supervisor, parent-related demands, low pay and long hours, low status, lack of relievers, unpaid overtime, limited resources, and differing philosophies, work ethics, skills and training between workers and directors), teacher well-being factors can also discourage teachers and make them feel insecure or worried: teachers may experience stress and preoccupation with their own situation if they



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are not able to devote the time and attention needed to meet individual children's needs (see also McGrath & Huntington, 2007). However, being a teacher may be a source of satisfaction, comfort and empowerment because teachers likely work in their dream occupation or they have vocation for teaching (Estola, 2003; Estola et al., 2003; Koustelios & Koustelios, 1998; Mwamwenda, 1998; Simola, 2002)—like nurses have for caring and nursing (e.g. Paldanius & Määttä, 2011).

Because it is children who bring joy to ECE teachers' work, teachers should have enough time and resources to work with children. More attention should be paid on group sizes despite the fact that they are regulated by law. For example, when some of the adults at a day care center are in in-service training, sick leave, or on holiday, substitutes should be hired to have enough adults available for children. If the basic conditions in ECE teachers' work have been taken care of well, the meaningfulness of working is easy to find. Nursing, caring and, teaching children and the joy of learning that occurs in children's faces provide strength in ECE teachers' work (see also Rantala & Määttä, 2011). Well-being at work will be enhanced when the teacher self feels being cared by others: by a child, a colleague, a supervisor, or a child's parent (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011).

Various tasks and challenges at work are factors that advance Finnish early childhood educators' expertise as long as the tasks are interesting and thus motivating (see Hoppo & Määttä, 2011). The present research showed how versatile and demanding ECE teachers' work is. Indeed, it has been proved that for example perceived stress is related to decreases in happiness assessed by both state and trait measures (Schiffirin & Nelson, 2010). Therefore, interventions designed to increase happiness may benefit from the inclusion of activities to manage and cope with stress and to spot one's strengths (Schiffirin & Nelson, 2010; Biswas-Diener, 2010). Informal working atmosphere, autonomy, flexible working schedules and hours, and opportunity to participate in decision-making, predict work satisfaction, trust in the supervision of work, and coping with stress (Laubach, 2005; see also Spence Laschinger et al., 2004).



## Discussion

Self-concepts and core values are the sources of stability for teachers through which they maintain a sense of purpose in their work (Korthagen, 2004). Furthermore, Korthagen (2004, p.93) claims that “it is important for teachers to learn how they can get (back) in touch with their core qualities” as these qualities are “in danger of being lost when a technical, instrumental approach to competence is employed”. This statement seems to hold true when it comes to ECE teachers' perceptions of their work as they thought their basic task was almost forgotten in whirlwind of various development projects and requirements at their work. Development of healthy workplaces is an essential aspect of quality early childhood education as all those who work at day care have the right to work in an environment that is safe, healthy, and productive (McGrath & Huntington, 2007).

As was also brought out in Introduction, teachers stress and coping have been studied widely from a variety of perspectives among others in relation to job demands-job resources (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), equity and investments (van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999), physical activity (Carson et al., 2010), and perceived level of self-efficacy (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Chan, 2002) just to name few. For example, studies about perceived level of self-efficacy have proven that the core dimension of preventing and treating teachers' stress. Our finding about perceiving ECE teachers' work meaningful is in line with these finding but what is worth highlighting is that, in addition, this research employed the approach on well-being of the ECE teachers and not just on means of preventing or treating teachers' stress. When it comes to the gamut of qualitative methods of studying teachers' stress (cf. Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Sonnentag, 2001; Van Hoof, Geurts, Kompier, & Taris, 2007), the method introduced in this research appeared suitable and contributing a new approach to the theme (cf. Schonfeld, Rhee, & Xia, 1995; Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995).

The study can also be compared to studies on Finnish teachers in general. Finnish teachers still are politically quite conservative (Rinne et al., 2002) and teachers have always been highly appreciated in the Finnish society. Even the modern Finnish teachers have reported being content with their work and consider their work as rewarding (Santavirta, 2001)—although Finnish teachers in general do also talk about increased hurry and workload

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(Simola, 2002). Although satisfaction is clearly better than in other Nordic Countries (Räty et al., 1995; Nordisk skolbarometer, 2001), it does not mean that teachers' well-being should be taken for granted and critical studies on teachers' well-being at all levels of education are needed.

To conclude, the fundamental assumption is that employees have to be mentally, physically, and socially healthy in order to experience well-being at work. Meaningful work is the source of human well-being. All in all, ECE teachers' well-being is important as it does not concern just them but also the children they work with. If ECE teachers perceive their work satisfying and enjoyable, day care centers both as working places and children's everyday environment become positive places to be. When reflecting the significance of the emergence of well-being at day care center, it is worth remembering that it is not just any place where children spend their day while parents are working (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2010)—quite the opposite: The child care provider is one of the most important elements in quality child care and therefore, it is not unimportant what kind of surroundings day care provide for children's development and growth (e.g. Hagegull & Bohlin, 1995; Boshce & Jacobs, 1997). Because, in addition to children, the main characters at day care centers are the adults who are responsible for offering such high-quality child care.

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