



# (Un)expected Emotions and Teamwork: Narratives of Early Childhood Education Practitioners<sup>1</sup>

■ **Essi Hanhikoski<sup>2</sup>**

*Doctoral Researcher, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

■ **Maarit Alasuutari**

*Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

■ **Kaija Collin**

*Associate Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

■ **Tarja Liinamaa**

*Senior Lecturer, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

■ **Eija Sevón**

*Associate Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates expectations of teamwork and related emotions as described by Finnish early childhood education practitioners. The data, which consist of video-cued interviews with 15 practitioners in early childhood education and care (ECEC), are examined with narrative-discursive analysis. Emotions are approached from a socio-constructivist perspective as narratively constructed. The results are presented as three narratives identified based on teamwork expectations: 1) narrative of inadequacy, 2) narrative of injustice, and 3) narrative of support. The narratives describe how time constraints and unexpected changes in teamwork dictated from the top-down produce negative emotional narratives, as well as how the team's expected support for each other evokes positive emotions and builds communality. The findings show that not only is teamwork an important emotional context in ECEC but also the limited possibilities for influencing teamwork practices evoke negative emotions that can affect the quality of teamwork and well-being at work in ECEC.

## KEYWORDS

*early childhood education practitioners / emotions at work / expectations / narratives / teamwork / work conditions*

## Introduction

Emotions play a significant role in both workplace relationships and everyday work practices, especially when working in a team (Barsade & Gibson 2007; Ranta et al. 2022). Emotions arise as part of interactions between members of the work community and teams. In this study, we explore emotions related to teamwork in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). In this context, groups of children are usually

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<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author: Essi Hanhikoski, E-mail: [essi.a.hanhikoski@jyu.fi](mailto:essi.a.hanhikoski@jyu.fi).



led by a team of three practitioners with different educational backgrounds—teachers, nurses, and social pedagogists—and thus with diverse competences. ECEC practitioners collaborate in multiprofessional teams in emotionally demanding work environments (Kumpulainen et al. 2023). As a result, ECEC teachers' emotions directly affect the quality of educational interactions and the emotional climate of the child group (Jeon et al. 2018), and the impact of practitioners' emotions on workplace well-being, learning, and professional agency has been recognized (Benozzo & Colley 2012; Hökkä et al. 2022).

The need to improve working conditions in ECEC has been identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2017). Finnish ECEC is generally affected by the characteristics of modern working life, such as constant change, intensification, and a lack of qualified practitioners (Kangas et al. 2022), as well as by constant emotional work, not only with the children but also with colleagues in multiprofessional teamwork (see Kumpulainen et al. 2023; Ranta et al. 2022). ECEC work in Finland is also impacted by a lack of work organization practices and autonomy in the management of time resources in relation to pedagogical work, both of which challenge professionals' abilities to influence their own work (Hjelt et al. 2023; Kumpulainen et al. 2023). Thus, such challenging conditions are perceived as making it difficult for professionals to do their work to a high standard in accordance with their professional values (Kangas et al. 2022). However, studies on ECEC practitioners' emotions that consider the working environments of teams are rare.

Previous research has raised concerns about the anxiety and depression experienced by practitioners, as these factors challenge their well-being and work engagement (Ranta et al. 2022). It is therefore important to understand how to create conditions that foster effective teamwork, including opportunities for practitioners to influence their organization's team structures. In the present study, instead of looking at first-hand emotional experiences, we investigate emotions as narrative constructs produced in an interview situation (see Bamberg 1997; Kleres 2011). Nussbaum (1988) introduced the concept of *narrative emotion*, in which emotion and meaning are intertwined. This concept is used in our research to build an understanding of the emotional contexts of ECEC teamwork. We ask the following questions: What narratives can be identified in ECEC practitioners' narration concerning teamwork expectations? What kinds of emotions are associated with these expectations?

## ECEC teamwork and emotions

In this study, the emotional context of teamwork takes into account the practices of teamwork that influence ECEC practitioners' emotions. Teams consist of members of a group who share responsibility for achieving the same goals in their organization (Sundstrom et al. 1990). In Nordic ECEC, this means that the team's work is guided by curricula, building on the child's holistic well-being and learning (e.g., Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Puroila et al. 2016). Teams in Finnish ECEC are diverse, meaning members have different work experience, ways of working and interacting, and expertise based on their various educational backgrounds. While the importance of diversity on ECEC teams has been recognized (Kumpulainen et al. 2023; Ranta & Uusiautti 2022), diversity may have negative effects on team performance if members have not spent enough time together (Chatman & Flynn 2001; Williams & Allen 2008). When team members have

autonomy, trust each other, and feel safe being themselves, they are motivated to strive toward a common goal, thereby flourishing and driving change (Ranta & Uusiautti 2022; Williams & Allen 2008).

Close interactions among members and stable membership in a work team are essential for collectively shared emotions, which direct the group toward effective collective action and building cohesion (Barsade & Gibson 1998). For team performance, interactions among members and the time the team members spend together are, unsurprisingly, vital as team formation is characterized by feelings of confusion, uncertainty, tension, and conflict before the team members' roles are able to take shape so they can work together toward a common goal (Williams & Allen 2008). If teams are constantly changing, they do not have time to reach the stage where a group identity is formed and a sense of belonging and trust is established within a framework of shared values (Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006; Williams & Allen 2008). However, it has been pointed out that more time should be allocated for discussion among ECEC team members, for both professional development and building trust among practitioners (Ranta & Uusiautti 2022). A collaborative and reflective culture promotes professional development (Ahrenkiel et al. 2013; Brunsek et al. 2020), which, in turn, supports the learning and well-being of the whole ECEC community. In their study, Ranta and Uusiautti (2022) describe what elements constitute support of teamwork in ECEC, including management's support of teamwork, a supportive and open work culture, and low staff turnover. These elements, in turn, support a well-functioning team and well-being at work (Ranta & Uusiautti 2022).

Human beings constantly manage emotions and shape them in relation to the world around them (Hochschild 1983). That said, we see emotions as context-bound, and in this case, how an individual evaluates a situation in which an emotion arises affects their self-labeling of the emotion (Lazarus 1991). This situational evaluation influences how the individual experiences the emotion (Nussbaum 2003). For example, in an organization in which poor team performance prevents the achievement of important goals, anger or guilt may be aroused, depending on whether the situation is perceived as self-inflicted or caused by variables beyond one's control (see Grandey 2008). Emotions also provide us with information: negative emotions at work are often associated with perceived challenges, while positive emotions are connected with a secure situation, which fosters social openness (Fredrickson 1998, 2000; Lazarus 1991).

Lazarus (1991) defines positive emotions as arising from goal-congruent events. Positive emotions influence performance at work, such as more effective decision making, improved work motivation, and better negotiation skills, and enhance individuals' well-being at work (Barsade & Gibson 2007; Burić & Macuka 2018; Fredrickson 2000). Additionally, when team members share positive emotions, this can increase cooperation and reduce conflicts between members (Barsade & Gibson 2007). Positive emotions at work are particularly important in the context of change, as they influence acceptance of and commitment to change (Huy et al. 2014). Additionally, receiving compassion from a colleague affects an employee's perception of themselves and their work community and increases positive emotions in the workplace (Lilius et al. 2008; Rajala et al. 2017). As Nussbaum (2003) describes, compassion involves action—that is, an assessment of the seriousness of another's suffering and whether it is worthy of compassion.

The socio-constructivist approach to emotions differs from the individualistic psychological approaches in that emotions are seen as collectively constructive entities



that shape social interactions rather than only individual, subjective physiological phenomenon states (e.g., Benozzo & Colley 2012; Zembylas 2007). Benozzo and Colley (2012) present emotions as cultural and discursive practices linked to power relations. The emotions experienced by an individual also affect the behavior of others (Barsade & Gibson 2007; Goldie 2002). The rules of feeling (Hoschchild 1975), which we see as master narratives about what we should feel in certain situations, illustrate the power relations related to which emotions one is allowed to show. Thus, emotions also involve power and influence; when individuals have power and opportunities to influence their work, they are more likely to experience positive emotions and have a kind of social permission to express various feelings, thereby influencing the emotions of others (Fredrickson 2000; Hökkä *et al.* 2022). Individuals who do not have much power and opportunity for influence are more likely to experience negative emotions and feel they are expected to hide their feelings or express only positive ones (Þorsteinsdóttir & Heijstran 2022; Hecht & LaFrance 1998). Indeed, emotions are intertwined with agency at work, and strong agency at work is linked to engagement and well-being in one's job (Hökkä *et al.* 2022). Agency at work refers to practitioners' opportunities to have influence over their work, as well as their ability to participate and be involved in the community and in decisions about their work (Vähäsantanen, Rääkkönen *et al.* 2022).

In this study, we look at emotions as narrative constructs produced in an interview. Language is a means of understanding emotions (Bamberg 1997), which are experienced in response to meaningful events (Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991). Emotions are influenced by the narratives we use to make sense of our experiences, and the ways in which we tell our stories can shape how others perceive and respond to our emotions (Kleres 2011). Emotions are complex, episodic, and change over time and across a spectrum of situations (Goldie 2002), meaning they can only be fully understood by considering their temporal and contextual dimensions (Nussbaum 1988; Zembylas 2007). They are embedded within narratives and are learned and lived socially through stories (Kleres 2011). Nussbaum (1988, 2003) argues that emotion itself is the giving of meaning and acceptance of a whole story. Not only are narratives often emotional, but they themselves also have an emotional nature (Goldie 2002; Nussbaum 1988).

## Methods

### Participants and data collection

This study is part of a larger research project, of which one of the aims was to support the emotional competence of ECEC practitioners. Fifteen ECEC practitioners from three ECEC organizations participated in video-cued interviews (see Tobin 2019) for the study. The ECEC centers were located in three different-sized municipalities in various parts of Finland, with two of them being Finnish-speaking and one Swedish-speaking. The participants worked with groups of children aged three to six. Two of the ECEC centers had six child groups and the third was a smaller center with three child groups. One of the organizations provides ECEC 24 hours a day, which is a distinctive feature of Finnish ECEC. Characteristic of the multidisciplinary working community in Finnish ECEC (see Kangas *et al.* 2022), the participants had different educational backgrounds.

Six were ECEC teachers, seven were practical nurses, one was a group assistant, and one was a practical nurse student. The participants had worked in ECEC from 1 to 40 years, with an average of 10 years, including an average of 4 years and 6 months in their current ECEC organization. Written informed consent was obtained from the study participants for the video-cued recording and from the ECEC centers' children and their parents. Research permissions were also acquired from the municipalities as part of the larger research project.

The data consist of 10 video-cued interviews (see Tobin 2019) with the members of five ECEC teams, collected in Spring 2022. The interviews were both individual (seven interviews) and group interviews (three interviews) with two to four participants. The participants who took part in the group interviews were joined by members of their team. Video-cued interviews were a good way of revealing the participants' shared meaning-making and how different interviews produced parallel interpretations (see Tobin 2019). Ideally, videos can encourage interviewees to be more willing to share their experiences and are an excellent starting point for reflection.

The interviews were stimulated by short videos (5–7 minutes) produced in the participants' ECEC centers and were based on a typical workday. The videos were compiled from material filmed in the ECEC centers where the participants worked during the observation periods of the larger research project. The material for the videos was selected to represent different interactions that occur in ECEC centers, chronologically following daily routines. Various situations, such as mealtimes, children playing together, interactions between a practitioner and child, and resolving conflicts between children, were included in the videos. The participants only watched material filmed in their own groups, after which the interviewees were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the videos. Particular emphasis was placed on encouraging discussions of their emotions at work. For example, what kind of emotions do you experience in the situations shown in the video/at work in general? Describe an emotional situation in your work. What would you like to see change in your work? In addition, the discussions were deepened using probing questions to explore ideas brought up by the participants.

Interviews lasted from 16 to 72 minutes, with an average of 38 minutes, and the total time for all interviews was 6 hours and 18 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed (a total of 115 pages). As there were both group and individual interviews, they also produced different types of data. Individual interviews were more formal question-and-answer interviews; group interviews were more conversational, allowing for the participants to engage in discussions with each other. Sometimes, scheduling group interviews was challenging as staff members were still working and, therefore, responsible for children during interviews. So, the initial plan to hold group interviews was modified into individual interviews. In the analysis phase, we confirmed that the two types of interviews supported each other as the meanings produced in both were surprisingly similar. Although the individual interviews allowed for more personal reflection and narration, all narratives can be interpreted as reflective (Bamberg 2006). Therefore, it is justified to juxtapose the narratives produced in the individual and group interviews. Interestingly, although the videos did not focus on teamwork or included only minimal interaction among the practitioners, the subject of teamwork led to considerable narration both in individual interviews and group discussions.



## Analysis

Narrative analysis offers a way of looking at emotions as socially intertwined with expectations. Sarbin (1989) suggests that emotions are events—narrative emplotments—with plots, characters, and place. Instead of asking, ‘What are emotions?’, in the analysis, we should look at the situations, actors, and actions encountered in these situations; that is, ‘Who acts how to whom, and what happens?’ (Sarbin 1989, p. 188). Initially, the first author focused on the interviews individually by using the ATLAS program to extract narration related to teamwork situations. Next, narrations associated with teamwork were examined using expectation analysis (see Hyvärinen 2010; Tannen 1993). In the interviews, narrating emotions was intertwined with constructing expectations. Emotions were identified through the participants’ direct verbalization of their feelings. Thus, we paid attention to narration where emotions were openly named. However, emotions were not often labeled directly; therefore, we identified emotionally charged narration by looking for linguistic features within it (see Zilber 1998). From a Labovian point of view, a narrative is also always a negotiation among the listener’s, the narrator’s, and cultural expectations (Labov 1972; see also Hyvärinen 2010). Systematic examination of the linguistic features of expectations provided insight into shattered or fulfilled expectations (see Tannen 1993).

Expectation-driven narration was identified by looking at the following linguistic features (see Hyvärinen 2010; Tannen 1993): 1) repetitions of speech used to describe surprising, unexpected events and emphasize the importance of the events for the narrator; 2) changes in the temporal structure, such as returning to something the narrator had already said, to provide supplemental information about what was relevant to them; 3) negative forms employed in opposition to the expectation of what is typically performed and brought up when the expected event did not happen; 4) the use of modal verbs to describe the expectations set by the narrator regarding what should or could have happened to express the necessity of the event; 5) corrections used to suggest that the narrator related their expectations to another expectation by changing their point of view in the middle of a sentence; 6) evaluative language, such as adverbs and adjectives, employed to represent a strong evaluation of events; 7) conjunctions, such as ‘but’, used to specify and compare the relationship of an event to expectations; and 8) affirmative extreme expressions, which were employed to describe events that differed from expectations.

In the participants’ first responses to viewing the videos, the interviewees often contradicted the narratives initially offered by the videos. For example, Practitioners 10, 11, and 12 (ECEC center 1) did not believe the situations in the videos adequately portrayed the hectic and demanding nature of their work. This revealed a reality that contradicts expectations:

Practitioner 10: It looked really peaceful.

Practitioner 11: Yes, it did look very peaceful.

Practitioner 12: A bit unfamiliar.

Practitioner 11: Yeah [laughter].

Additionally, narrations of what happened were intertwined with stories of possible events—that is, hypothetical situations that did not happen. In this way, the narrator could emphasize their own experience and the significance of the moment for the listener, reflecting how the narrator contrasts their expectations (Bruner 1990; Hyvärinen 2010; Morson 1994). Finally, the interviews were compared, including their similarities and differences in terms of the described situations and the linguistic features of the narratives, to identify patterns of narration related to emotions constructed in teamwork.

## Findings

We found three types of narratives describing the expectations of work that practitioners connect with the emotions related to teamwork: 1) *the narrative of inadequacy*, 2) *the narrative of injustice*, and 3) *the narrative of support*. Table 1 presents these narratives, introduces the associated expectations and emotions, and describes the narratives’ linguistic features and what is produced by the narratives in relation to the expectations (i.e., the function of the narrative).

**Table 1** Narratives and their characteristics

	<b>Narrative of inadequacy</b>	<b>Narrative of injustice</b>	<b>Narrative of support</b>
Expectation	The expectation of good-quality team interaction is broken.	The expectation that the practitioner can influence changes in a work team is shattered.	The expectation of a collaborative and appreciative team spirit is realized.
Emotions attached to the narrative	Inadequacy and frustration.	Sadness, anger, and disappointment.	Appreciation, joy, and compassion.
Linguistic features of the narration	Building consensus, appealing for common agreement through the use of ‘we’ and impersonal forms.  Negatives describing work restrictions, such as ‘not able to’.  Modals and conditionals describing necessity, such as ‘must’ and ‘forced’.  Reflecting on the depth of one’s own emotions and explaining them away.	Conditionals/hypotheticals, such as ‘would be’, ‘I wish’, and ‘I could’, describing hopes related to and the possibility of an event.  Emphasizing affirmative and extreme expressions, such as ‘for sure’, ‘really’, and ‘even’.  Strong emotional presence in the interview situation.  Presenting hypothetical narratives.	Expressions that emphasize belonging, such as ‘a friend will not be left behind’ and ‘it’s like coming home’.  Building community through humor and the use of ‘we’.  Positive evaluative language describing a colleague’s professionalism; positive adjectives, extreme expressions, and adverbs, such as ‘tremendously’ and ‘I appreciate’.
Function of the narrative	Presenting the team collectively as a forced actor.	Presenting the team as an outsider in relation to the changes in team structure.	Presenting the team as a close-knit community progressing toward a shared goal.





## Narrative of inadequacy

Narratives of inadequacy involved emotional situations in which the practitioners felt they were not performing as expected during teamwork because the team's challenges related to having adequate time were perceived as impediments to success. Such narratives intensified when the interviewees were expressing emotions of inadequacy and frustration. The practitioners described the rush and lack of time as forces challenging joint discussion and collective work development, and they felt they had little, if any, means of remedying the situation, as Practitioner 1 narrated:

Practitioner 1: The morning shift leaves, and the evening shift may even take a while. Even now, I have a colleague, I don't even remember the last time I saw them [laughs]—but then, you have to do things, as we have this team meeting where there may be two teachers present and no one else, so you have to sort things out. Of course, you try to do everything, but there are also things that you have to decide on, even if not everything is, [because] we rarely have a team meeting where everyone is present. Then, of course, if there is something like that, we cannot hear about the children [...] so it's kind of quick if there is something to tell, when it is at that point, or then [we] really go around the corner to whisper [because] we do not have any kind of common time. Otherwise, when there is, of course, the team meetings are organized so that you can keep one every month on the list...

Interviewer: So, everyone can join in?

Practitioner 1: So, who gets in and who doesn't [laughs]? But we aim to be there all the time. (Practitioner 1, practical nurse, ECEC center 1)

Practitioner 1 displayed frustration through laughter and negation with the statement 'I don't even remember' and the constraining expression 'So, who gets in and who doesn't?'. These expressions broke the structure of expectation, directing the narrative toward an unfulfilled expectation. Practitioner 1 continued with the corrective word 'but' to describe a common aspiration despite the lack of shared time. She repeatedly called for a collective attempt to get all team members to attend joint meetings, but at the same time, she defended them with obligatory modal verbs, such as 'have to do', 'have to sort things out', and 'have to decide', suggesting that this is likely an unachievable ambition for reasons beyond the team members' control. Using 'we'-form negations, such as 'we cannot' and 'we do not have', she described their team as not meeting expectations. She added emphasis with the word 'really' when describing that the team must 'go whisper around the corner' to deal with urgent child-related issues in everyday working life. Repeating the words 'sure' and 'of course', she referred to the common expectation of shared team time. She explained that she understands team discussion time is important, but it is outside the control of the team.

Expressions of frustration, such as pauses, laughter, and comparisons between the video and reality were typical in their narrations. Additionally, Practitioner 2 (practical nurse, ECEC center 1) used the impersonal form when saying, 'Sometimes, one might want to sit down for a moment [laughs]', to help the listener understand their busy daily lives. Practitioners constructed small counter-narratives to reflect the high expectations



of how a professional should perform in a teamwork setting despite limited resources. For example, Practitioner 3 (ECEC teacher, ECEC center 2) used collective negation expressions to refer to requirements that cannot be met by the team: ‘None of us is a robot [laughs]. None of us is a machine’.

Practitioner 4 reflected on the fact that if she takes her planning time, the child group would be left without enough practitioners. Having expressed her emotions out loud, she eventually concluded that given temporal resources, she puts the interests of the children first:

Practitioner 4: Does one admit it, that perhaps, do I want to, do I want to admit it to my colleagues, that there is some [planning] work to be done, and so on, when you know that you ought to be in the child group? Those planning hours have not succeeded this year, unfortunately. It has been pretty bad, though. There simply has not been time.

Interviewer: It’s quite understandable if it’s understaffed.

Practitioner 4: Yes, there is understaffing, so then, you have to start with what is the most important, which is the children. (Practitioner 4, ECEC teacher, ECEC center 1)

Practitioner 4 explained her sense of inadequacy by using negations that express a lack of agency, such as ‘have not succeeded’ and ‘has not been time’. In the expression ‘ought to be in the child group’, she used the modal verb to describe obligation. She compared their performance in the team with expectations of how the team’s work should be organized to allow for shared time for discussion and collective action. With judgmental statements, such as ‘unfortunately’ and ‘simply’, she explained that the team’s discussion time is an important but ultimately impossible task due to a lack of temporal resources. Practitioners used imperatives and modals describing obligation, such as ‘must’, ‘forced’, ‘have to do’, and ‘have to decide’, to externalize the forces acting against them and present themselves as working under duress. They reported that, when there was no time to have discussions together, they engaged in short conversations focusing on the children and quickly resolved issues instead of taking part in developmental practice.

The practitioners constructed narratives of adapting to situations that evolved contrary to their expectations by defending themselves as actors in the face of necessity. The practitioners do not make themselves the subjects of these narratives, therefore, they present themselves as lacking both power and culpability. They explained away their inadequacy using negatives and emphasizing the limited temporal resources. Additionally, perceived inadequacy was distanced from the self by the construction of consensus. Practitioners justified their actions in the face of impossible demands by invoking shared responsibility. They generalized their own personal experiences as applying to the whole team by referring to the collective ‘we’ or using the impersonal form. In this way, practitioners did not shoulder the inadequacy alone but reported the challenges of finding time together as a more general phenomenon.

## Narrative of injustice

In narratives of injustice, practitioners’ expectations were shattered regarding changes in their team composition. They did not feel heard in relation to alterations in team



structure that came from the top down, which provoked sadness and anger. In the narratives, practitioners, such as Practitioner 5, detailed the loss of a good team:

Practitioner 5: Now, the teams for the upcoming autumn have been announced. So, it's just that I've been digesting it for a week now, and I'm quite okay with it, but it was a shock to me when they were announced...that I was somehow absolutely sure that I would continue in the old familiar way. I was somehow so sure that I would continue in it, that was my hope. It would have been somehow extremely natural to continue in it. The fact that I was in the situation when it was announced is why I was probably so dumbfounded. I rarely go so that I got speechless, but at that point, I was just like, 'What? This cannot be true'. It came as a real bombshell. I've been there for two years now, and we have been well built, in my opinion, as a functional team. That then...that it takes time, of course, whenever we do things anew. But I'm moving upstairs [to another child group] with good feelings after I've digested it all. I think I'll have to start learning something different up there. Oh, well, but maybe it's a place of learning for me. (Practitioner 5, practical nurse, ECEC center 2)

Practitioner 5 started by using the passive verb in the phrase 'were announced' to describe that new teams had been chosen without her involvement. She used the extreme expression 'it came as a real bombshell' to describe the 'shock' of being informed that she would not continue with her existing team as she expected. The phrase also used the impersonal form and adjective 'real' to describe that the situation was contrary to her expectations. Her emphasis on affirmative words and intensifiers, such as 'I was absolutely sure' and 'it would have been extremely natural to continue', indicates the unexpectedness of the team change. She began sentences with conjunctions, for example, 'that I was', 'that it came', and 'that it takes time', to describe the mandatory and unavoidable nature of the situation and that the decisions were taken without her involvement.

Practitioner 5 continued by recalling an emotional situation in which she became 'so dumbfounded' when trying to describe the sense of disappointment she felt. She used repetition to emphasize the situation was a complete surprise. Then, she continued to explain that the team had taken time to build and that a great amount of work had been done to achieve a well-organized team. Now, with the team change, it all must start again. When the narrative changed from the imperfect to present tense, she described putting her emotions aside and adapting to the situation by positioning herself as a new learner to cope with the situation, which served to reconstruct her earlier expectations. With the conjunction 'but', she corrected her narrative to involve the expectation of constant change.

Practitioners 6 and 7 produced narratives about sadness as they described how their team would soon be changing:

Practitioner 6: I wish there was, there would be a good, like, team, and then a nice group of children in it, so that it would always be nice every day, like now, every day to come to work.

Interviewer: How does it feel now that you've worked together, that you're going to a different team?

Practitioner 6: Well, a bit sad, at least for me.

Practitioner 7: Yes, it is, because I feel that it has been a really good and trusting team.

Practitioner 6: In my opinion, such a good interaction. And [it] is so like those kinds of consistent thoughts in the way that...way that...you know, what the other almost thinks. So, it is a little bit of a new start again. (Practitioner 6, practical nurse; Practitioner 7, ECEC teacher, ECEC center 2)

Their narration about sadness relates how they must give up a ‘really good and trusting team’ in which trust prevails because they have gotten to know each other and work together for a long time. As with Practitioner 5, Practitioners 6 and 7 described how the changes in the teams will affect their work as the easy familiarity will be lost and they will have to start working together as part of a new team from scratch. These breaks with expectations were related in narrations in which professionals rebuilt their expectations through reflections on the future, as Practitioner 8 narrated:

Practitioner 8: [I wish] that the planning of the groups and the planning of the work would really be most influenced by the needs of the children—that it would really be from there, and the activities would be allowed to be planned based on the needs of the children. (Practitioner 8, ECEC teacher, ECEC center 2)

Here, Practitioner 8 is seeking acceptance through professional values; that is, if the team change was in the best interests of the children, it would be justified and make adaptation easier. She compared the current changes in the team with the ideal, emphasizing through the repetition of ‘really’ and conditionals, such as ‘would be influenced’ and ‘would be allowed’, that the current expectation of organizing teams’ activities around the needs of the children was unmet. Additionally, Practitioner 1 (practical nurse, ECEC center 1) showed her frustration using the colorful expression ‘It always messes up the pack when someone new joins it [the team]’. She stressed the prevalence of the phenomenon with the extreme expression ‘always’, stating that changes in a team are expected, inevitable, and require constant adaptation from the practitioner.

The narratives reflected moments when the interviewees were emotionally engaged and the strong presence of emotions by changing to the present tense to denote that the narrator was essentially reliving the event. In this way, the narratives also invited the listener to share the emotional experience. Additionally, the narratives of what happened were intertwined with those of possible and hypothetical situations, that is, situations that did not happen (see Morson 1994). Conditionals, such as ‘I would hope’, ‘I could’, ‘would affect’, and ‘would be’, illustrated the expectation of uncertainty. The hypothetical narratives were ideal descriptions of the continuation of the current team, where team members remain the same, activities already developed together continue in the same pattern, and members know each other and each other’s ways of working. This comparison of the current situation with the ideal reflects their expectations for the team.

Practitioners constructed adaptations to the injustice of situations that they themselves could not change, commanding themselves to accept the situations using imperative expressions, such as ‘just have to’ and ‘have to start’. They expressed the changes in the team in passive, self-distancing terms, such as ‘there’s change around me too’ and ‘it has been announced’. Through these expressions, they signified that they themselves



were not involved in the decisions about team structure, as if they were passive viewers of what is happening around them in the team. Practitioners constructed acceptance of the changes constantly taking place within the team and beyond their control by explaining the situation through negotiations among professional values.

## Narrative of support

The narrative of support was structured around the expectation team members would support each other in their work. The realization of the ideal of a collaborative team moving toward a common goal generated appreciation and joy. This was constructed in the descriptions of the team's or team members' success and professionalism. Hand in hand with this portrayal of admiration were descriptions of empathy and the resulting acts of compassion:

Practitioner 5: I value her [referring to a colleague in the video] as a colleague and friend so tremendously, and I think she is an extremely competent educator. She knows that I value her so enormously. It's extremely easy to say that 'Today is a shitty day'. The other one knows that 'Okay, hey, I'll take a couple of kids from you' or that 'you should go out for coffee now'. (Practitioner 5, practical nurse, ECEC center 2)

Practitioner 5 portrayed her teammate's professionalism with extreme expressions, such as 'so tremendously', 'extremely competent', and 'so enormously', and with the confirming repetition of 'I value'. She described the team's atmosphere with the emphatic phrase 'extremely easy'. The narrative described the team as a familiar and trusting connection in everyday situations.

Practitioner 4: Through black humor, one can also get into a lighter state of mind—a little bit of relief that the other person understands. It kind of sums up the knowledge that I know that...that we will get through this and that it can be offset well with a little humor, that we have a kind of open and no-friend-left-behind mentality here that one can only praise. (Practitioner 4, ECEC teacher, ECEC center 1)

Practitioner 4 described how, in emotionally challenging situations, confidential black humor between team members can lighten the mood and influence the situation and the emotions shared by the team. She used positive evaluative expressions, such as 'a kind of open and no-friend-left-behind mentality' and 'one can only praise', to construct a picture of a team whose members are on the same side in difficult situations. Likewise, Practitioner 2 described flexible support for others in situations where they find the demands of the job overwhelming:

Practitioner 2: I feel that we have a team that works really well at the moment. That everyone has the same ideas about things and takes a colleague's side and then is also able to say, if there is a conflict situation or it has been a difficult morning with a certain child, 'Hey, will you take this in the afternoon?' It also helps in coping with it so that you don't have to spend eight hours wringing

your hands all the time, and then the other one helps you. There has also been talk about the fact that, if you feel that you are having a bit of a bad day, so then, say, quite frankly, 'Hey, the day has not exactly gone the best way' [...] So, if others wonder what's going on now, so that you also understand your colleague better. (Practitioner 2, practical nurse, ECEC center 1)

With expressions such as 'everyone has the same ideas' and 'takes a colleague's side', Practitioner 2 put herself firmly on the same side as her teammates. Using 'we' and the extreme expression 'really well', she created a narrative of a team overcoming difficulties by sharing emotions—a compassionate team that can resolve conflicts and discuss challenging situations. Expressing emotions can be seen here as important for teammates to understand each other's behavior.

Practitioner 9: We bring them [emotions] up in team meetings: How do the staff feel? How are the staff? Is everyone coping? Does the team feel good? Then, often different elements come up—like, have we thought differently, do we want to do things differently? And to dare to ask this question: 'Why do you do that?'—and have that conversation. So, in that way, we've had a very functional team. Things have gone really well. (Practitioner 9, practical nurse, ECEC center 3)

Practitioner 9 described how the success of a team is linked to the discussion of emotions and the joint development of operational culture because they dare to bring collective reflection and development to the table. She used 'we' to portray the team as a coherent collective, and through the use of extreme words, such as 'very functional' and 'really well', she portrayed the members as moving toward the realization of a collaborative team. Additionally, the participants captured the pedagogical situations between practitioners and children in the video, describing positively the professionalism of a colleague, as practitioner 8 illustrated:

Practitioner 8: I think in this situation, she [referring to a colleague in the video] was just extremely nice all the time [...] and she was so encouraging. (Practitioner 8, ECEC teacher, ECEC center 2)

With the extreme expressions 'extremely nice' and 'so encouraging', practitioner 8 showed appreciation for her colleague. Using positive evaluative language, such as 'I appreciate', 'I am proud', and 'lovely', the narratives in the videos captured the moments when the professionals drew attention to the activities of a colleague and described a team member's professionalism. By using these expressions, practitioners portrayed their team and colleagues in a positive manner, building a sense of community in their teams. The practitioners highlighted the team as an important emotional support force that helps them manage challenging situations with children through collegial support and the sharing of emotions. To show that they related to colleagues' expressions of negative emotions, the practitioners revealed activity-embedded moments of 'airing out' their own emotions. Using humor was described as a method for airing out emotions and fostering a good mood among the team members in difficult situations. Sharing the emotional load allowed for flexibility when making changes to the team's activities.



The narratives were constructed around team support, building communality by portraying the team and its members in a positive light. Intensifiers were employed to convince the listener that the expectations of team support were met. The narratives were characterized by contrasting expressions to describe teams as valued and to establish a sense of community around a familiar team. The practitioners took teammates' sides by using 'we' and constructed teams as tight-knit communities that work spontaneously and flexibly by capturing each other's emotions and sharing them in everyday work situations.

## Discussion

In this research, we examined what narratives can be identified in ECEC practitioners' narration concerning teamwork expectations and what kinds of emotions are associated with these expectations. The narratives showed a contradiction between the expectations of teamwork and organizational practices. Working in Finnish ECEC involves close teamwork and effective discourse (see, e.g., Kumpulainen *et al.* 2023; Ranta & Uusiautti 2022), but our research suggested that not every team is able to work in an environment that fosters teamwork.

In the narrative of inadequacy, the lack of time resources and how individuals try to manage the organizational challenges in their daily work were visible. The imbalance between the ideal good quality ECEC and the actual circumstances due to resource scarcity was interpreted as personal inadequacy. The demand for situational flexibility caused by a lack of time resources led to unpredictability in the encounters among team members and the constant adaptation of pedagogical activities to changing circumstances (see also Hjelt *et al.* 2023). This adaptation makes the work burdensome, leading practitioners to feel it is necessary to work to explain away their emotions of inadequacy and frustration. As our findings revealed, when there was not enough time allocated to teamwork, practitioners sought short moments of flexibility in their work when they could quickly agree on urgent issues. The practitioners felt this made their work reactive, instead of proactive, planned pedagogical practice, as shown also by Hjelt *et al.* (2023). Additionally, previous studies have identified that for teams to work effectively, there needs to be interaction and shared time among team members (Chatman & Flynn 2001; Ranta & Uusiautti 2022; Ranta *et al.* 2022).

In the narrative of injustice, practitioners described their feelings of injustice in the face of unexpected top-down decisions. The narrative of injustice questions the ideal of an autonomous team and staff with strong professional agency. As illustrated, in our data, the practitioners were not involved in decision making when their team compositions changed; instead, changes came from the top down, but they were justified based on the children's needs. When the expectation of being able to influence their own work collapsed, the practitioners narrated feelings of anger, sadness, and disappointment, as they felt excluded when not involved in decisions that had a major impact on their work. The possibility for individuals to influence their work and its change supports work engagement (Ukkonen-Mikkola *et al.* 2020). The findings illustrate that sociocultural conditions and resources of work performance are enablers or inhibitors of agency, rather than agentic action itself, as Eteläpelto *et al.* (2013) have previously pointed out. Our results support the findings of extant studies that there is limited autonomy and

empowerment in ECEC work (e.g., Kangas et al. 2022; Kumpulainen et al. 2023). More generally, as in other female-dominated service sectors in the Nordic countries, such as nursing, the lack of autonomy and time has a negative impact on work experiences (Þorsteinsdóttir & Heijstra 2022).

Finally, the narrative of support reflected team cohesion and togetherness. Familiarity and trust lead to a supportive team in everyday ECEC life, one where emotional situations are shared through humor to ensure a more positive emotional state. Sharing emotions was also described as being linked to the development of effective work practices within the team. A collaborative and supportive environment promotes professional development (Ahrenkiel et al. 2013; Brunsek et al. 2020), which, in turn, supports the well-being of the whole ECEC community. Additionally, our research suggests that compassion is important in promoting close and trusting relationships between practitioners (cf. Lilius et al. 2008).

The narrative of support revealed how sharing the emotional load resulting from difficult working conditions can build resilience in a team. The practitioners employed togetherness to cope with working conditions that made it impossible to do their work collectively according to professional ideals. ECEC practitioners have high ethical standards that guide their work to ensure the holistic well-being of the child (Einarsdóttir et al. 2015). The narratives illustrated simultaneous commitment to the professional values and ideas defined in the ECEC regulation (Act on ECEC 2018; The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022) and the national core curriculum for ECEC (2022) and the difficulties related to achieving them in practice. The expectations prescribed in the steering documents put practitioners in a paradoxical position: ideally, practitioners are expected to work effectively as a team and develop pedagogy to ensure the delivery of quality ECEC. In practice, the scarcity of resources makes it impossible to do the work necessary to meet these requirements.

The story types reveal the adoption of collective adaptation in the face of necessity when professional expectations and values conflict with the realities of work. Adaptation has been previously identified as a survival strategy when one's own work ideals and resources do not match (see, e.g., Thunman 2016). Emotion suppression as a means of regulating negative emotions has been found to be common among ECEC practitioners in the international ECEC context (Jeon & Ardeleanu 2020; Jeon et al. 2018). Suppressing emotions has a negative impact on well-being at work as it is associated with stress (Jeon & Ardeleanu 2020). Additionally, practitioners who suppress their emotions are less empathic with children and display more negative reactions to children's emotions (Byun & Jeon 2023). Hence, further investigations should be conducted into emotion work related to negative emotions in ECEC.

It is important to further examine and enhance the stability of ECEC teams. Creating structures for collaborative actions and space for sharing emotions, including scheduled interactions among ECEC practitioners, could also support professional development (see Ahrenkiel et al. 2013; Ranta & Uusiautti 2022). It is crucial to strengthen practitioners' opportunities to be heard and influence issues related to their work. Positive emotions broaden individuals' thinking and social resources, increase work engagement, and are important in the context of change, as they influence acceptance of and commitment to change (Burić & Macuka 2018; Fredrickson 1998, 2000; Huy et al. 2014). Therefore, it is important to consider how organizational practices could be structured to ensure working conditions that support





positive emotions and emotional sharing by ECEC practitioners and teams, thereby supporting well-being at work and the ability to embrace change, which is inevitable in today's working life.

In this study, emotions were examined based on language used in interview situations. Thus, it must be acknowledged that the way interviewees described emotions in interviews could have differed from how they felt in the actual situation. The interpretations of emotions and the situations associated with them may have changed over time (see, e.g., Barsade & Gibson 2007; Hochschild 1979). However, as Vähäsantanen, Paloniemi et al. (2022) suggest, interviews can also provide an opportunity for detailed and nuanced descriptions of emotions. Our theoretical contribution is linked to emotions at work. A narrative approach to the study of ECEC organizations allows us to understand emotions as cultural and discursive practices linked to power relations (see Benozzo & Colley 2012). In narrative research, interpretations of meanings emerge from the interaction between the researcher and the research data. In this study, this meant careful reflection of the interpretations by the researchers, which increases the reliability of the study. Additionally, video-cued interviews offered the possibility of multivoiced material and a dialogue between the interpretations (see Tobin 2019).

## Conclusion

Extending previous studies describing how the emotions related to teamwork are constructed based on the interactions among team members (Ranta et al. 2022) and on the interpretations of multiprofessionality in teamwork (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al. 2020), our study revealed how ECEC practitioners' emotions are constructed in relation to expectations about conditions of work that enable or challenge teamwork. This narrative research expanded our understanding of emotions in ECEC work, illustrating a social constructionist perspective on emotions in teamwork, and instead of seeing emotions only as an individual's personal internal experiences, our study showed what functions certain emotions have in teamwork. The narrative approach also demonstrated that emotions in ECEC work are social and dynamic processes that emerge within their particular contexts. This means that strategies to improve working conditions in ECEC must not only focus on individual development (i.e., emotional and teamwork skills) but also on organizational improvement to ensure sustainable teamwork and professional agency.

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