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**Abstract:** This article employs a narrative approach to explore educators' moral functioning in Finnish preschools. Our study is theoretically inspired by notions drawn from feminist and socio-cultural studies, according to which education is understood as an entirely moral phenomenon. Within a holistic framework, moral functioning is understood as a concept that intertwines educators' moral thinking, their actions, the situation, and the cultural context. The study aims to answer the question: What kind of moral functioning emerges from educators' narratives in a Finnish preschool context? Research material was produced from four group interviews and interpreted through narrative analysis. Our findings reveal that four different moral layers evolved, overlapped, and intertwined in educators' narratives: what works in a preschool context; what provides good for people; what the rules say; and what is possible to achieve in an educator's position. We present these findings in detail and discuss their theoretical, methodological and pedagogical implications.

**Key words:** moral functioning, narrative, preschool, Finland

*Imagine a Monday morning in a preschool<sup>1</sup>. As a teacher, you have planned to organize drawing activities for a group of four-year-olds. You have an excellent idea and you have prepared the material. It is time to begin, but you notice that everything is not well with the children. Sami and Nina are quarrelling; Pete looks like tired as he always does after the weekend; and Elisa complains that she is hungry. What do you do? Do you stick with your original plan, or do you pay attention to what is the matter with the children and adjust your plan accordingly?*

In our study, we listened to educators' narratives about their everyday work in Finnish preschools. We noted that they frequently told us about situations in which they had to make decisions about their actions. Their daily work requires weighing diverse options and balancing different people's needs and interests. A growing body of research suggests that educators' decisions about their actions are neither technical nor neutral but are related to their values (Berkeley & Ludlow, 2008; Biesta, 2010; Hansen, 2004; Pardales, 2002; Pring, 2005). Biesta (2010), among others, argues that education is a teleological practice framed by a variety of purposes, implying that decisions made on educational actions are intertwined with assumptions about what is good and desirable for children. Hence, values are implicitly or explicitly present when educators make decisions about their everyday actions. As Hansen, Burdick-Shepherd, Cammarano, and Obelleiro (2009, p. 591) put it, "Education embodies and expresses values."

Though a crucial component of educators' work, values have remained an underrepresented area in educational research. There is a tendency to emphasize subject areas and academic learning at the expense of values (Hansen, 2004; Pring, 2005). This applies to early childhood education as well. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that early childhood education is dominated by a technical-instrumental discourse that underlines goals, quality assessments, standards, and outcomes. These researchers call for an approach to early childhood education that acknowledges it as a site for ethical and political practice. In our article, we explore educators' narratives with an intention to deepen our understanding of the values and morals embedded in their everyday work. Our interest is in educators' moral functioning, that is, how values are experienced, embodied, and lived in the course of daily situations in preschools. The central question driving our research is: What kind of moral functioning emerges from educators' narratives in a Finnish preschool context?

## **The Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

### **Moral Functioning: A Holistic Perspective on Values in Education**

Concepts of values and morals have different meanings depending on the theoretical framework and discipline. While psychologically oriented research has traditionally emphasized psychological processes such as individual's moral judgments or reasoning, the sociological studies have highlighted the important role played by values and morals in individuals' action, cultural communities, and societies (Fivush, Merrill, & Marin, 2014; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Turiel, 2014). Thus, a great deal of research on values has maintained dualistic assumptions, according to which mind and body, individual and context, and "inner" and "outer" realities of human beings are viewed as distinct entities. Values therefore tend to be associated with an inner state of mind or an action, separate from one another and independent of context. Recent research has called for bridging this ontological gap and for approaching values and morals from a holistic perspective (e.g., Williams & Gantt, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, preschool refers to educational settings where the age of children ranges between zero and seven years.

Approaches in educational research have ranged from considering values as a distinct part of the curriculum to understanding education as a moral practice. While traditional approaches to values education have highlighted adults' responsibilities to teach children the societal values, more holistic approaches have addressed daily educational practices as an arena for children and adults to make meanings on values and moral matters (Hansen, 2004; Pring, 2005; Thornberg 2008). In particular, studies drawing on feminist conceptions of caring ethics have highlighted education as a deeply moral phenomenon (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; also Campbell, 2008; Estola, 2003; Fivush et al., 2014).

In our article, the concept of *values* refers to conceptions, beliefs, and principles according to which people make decisions about rightness, wrongness, goodness, and badness in their lives (Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). For instance, values like caring, safety, democracy, human flourishing, and non-discrimination have been identified in early childhood contexts (Broström, 2006; Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Estola, 2003; Estola, Farquhar, & Puroila, 2014; Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2008; Hovdelien, 2013; Taggart, 2011; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013). In our study, we are interested in the realization of values in the daily lives of educators at a grass-root level rather than as abstract or formalized ethical codes prompted by curricula or other official statements. *Morals*, *morality*, and *moral functioning* refer to the educators' work with values in educational practice, that is, how values are embodied, lived, and experienced in the course of daily situations (see Campbell, 2008; Pring, 2001; Tappan, 2006).

Our study is theoretically inspired by holistic notions, drawn from feminist and socio-cultural studies (e.g., Estola, 2003; Fivush et al., 2014; Hansen, 2004; Tappan, 2006). Rather than separating the moral domain from the socio-conventional or personal domains (cf. Turiel, 2014), education is understood as an entirely moral phenomenon. As Fivush et al. (2014) argue, all human activity is essentially moral in the sense that "every action has consequences for self and other" (p. 291). Furthermore, we draw on studies that highlight the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by educators in educational practice (see Berkeley & Ludlow, 2008; see also Campbell, 2008). As Campbell (2008) notes, there is a danger of straying into "optimism, if not even romanticism" when conceptualizing education as an inherently moral activity (p. 367).

We apply Tappan's (1991; 2006) idea of moral functioning that contributes to a holistic, dynamic, and contextually sensitive understanding of morality. Tappan (2006) views moral functioning as a process through which an individual searches for answers to the question: "What is the 'right' or 'moral' thing to do in this situation?" (p. 6). Moral functioning holistically entails *moral agents* and the various *cultural resources and tools* that they employ when responding to a *situation* that requires their *moral consideration, decisions, and actions*. When considering cultural resources and tools for moral functioning, Tappan (1991; 2006) refers to words, signs, languages, narratives, and discourses that are rooted in the socio-cultural context and that mediate and shape individuals' moral experiences and their moral lives. By applying this holistic perspective, our study focuses on educators' narratives about their moral functioning in preschools. Rather than searching for a simple or idealized view of morality, our interest is in the dynamics and complexities of educators' moral functioning; how they find their way amidst different morally defensible alternatives in complex daily situations.

### **Making Sense of Moral Functioning Through Narratives**

The methodological orientation of this study draws on a narrative approach, highlighting the crucial place of narratives in human existence and knowing (e.g., Chase, 2005; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Among the diverse definitions of and functions connected to narrative, we prefer to view it as a meaning-making activity: through narrating their life events, individuals make sense of themselves and the world and shape and order their experiences (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013; Fivush et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2015; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Thus, narratives can be seen as "a way of

understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (see Chase, 2005, p. 656). A growing body of literature relevant to our study pays attention to the moral qualities of narratives (e.g., Conle, 2007; Fivush et al., 2014; Rabin & Smith, 2013). Drawing from feminist and socio-cultural theories of knowing, Fivush et al. (2014) argue that narratives convey human beings' core sense of what it means to be moral.

In accordance with many narrative scholars, we assume that narratives intersect at multiple levels in human lives: there are, for example, individuals' life stories, life-tasting short stories about everyday events, collectively shared organizational narratives, and culturally biased meta-narratives (Chase, 2005; Gabriel, 2015; Tuval-Mashiach, 2014). These different levels are intertwined in individuals' narratives and provide the multilayered and multivoiced qualities of narratives. As Tuval-Mashiach (2014) argues, every narrative echoes not only the individual narrators' lives but also the contexts in which the narrative is told and the cultural meanings that underlie and give a sense of purpose to the narrative. Inspired by these perspectives, we do not consider educators' narratives in terms of their individual moral experiences, but rather as mediated by socially and culturally maintained views about what is understood as good, right, desirable, and appropriate in early childhood education contexts.

In this study, the promise of employing a narrative approach is two-fold. First, we assume that narrating provides a means for educators to make sense of their moral functioning. When narrating their everyday work, educators interpret, reflect on, and organize their experiences in ways that promote their understanding of morality (Fivush et al., 2014; see also Taylor, 2013). Second, the act of listening to the educators' narratives offers opportunities for us researchers to deepen our understanding of educators' moral functioning. We do not, however, understand ourselves as outsiders, nor do we understand educators' narratives as direct representations of their moralities; rather, we engage in a research relationship where we co-construct knowledge with the educators at different phases of the research process (Caine et al., 2013).

## **The Study**

### **Context and Participants**

This study is a part of a larger action research project focusing on values education in Nordic preschools. The educators from four Finnish preschools participated in the project (referred to as Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, and Group 4). When choosing participants, we emphasized the voluntariness of the commitment to a collaborative process with our research team. We also considered the diversity of the preschools; for instance, one of the preschools was located in a new residential area where many parents work in ICT firms, whereas another preschool was known to serve a socially disadvantaged population. In Finland, preschool personnel include directors, special kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers, trained nurses, and assistants. Kindergarten teachers complete a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (universities) or social sciences (universities of applied sciences); trained nurses have a secondary vocational training (OECD, 2006). All participants in the present study were female kindergarten teachers and trained nurses. Their age and working experience varied significantly: some educators were extremely experienced, while others had few years' experience of working in preschools.

### **Researchers**

The research project was implemented by a multidisciplinary research team consisting of researchers from early childhood education, psychology, sociology, and nursing sciences. The authors of this article contributed to the study through their different professional backgrounds: Author 1 was

familiar with the preschool context from her earlier experiences as a kindergarten teacher and researcher of early childhood education, while Author 2 brought to the collaboration her expertise on ethics of nursing and philosophy of caring.

## **Data Collection**

At the beginning of the project (2013), fourteen educators and five researchers participated in four group interviews. Author 2 was present for all interviews, and Author 1 participated in two group interviews. At the beginning of the group interviews, there was a “warm-up” round in which all participants introduced themselves and narrated their work history. Instead of employing predefined questions or themes, we relied upon open and non-directing questions — a typical strategy in narrative research (Spector-Mersel, 2010). As suggested by Van Manen (2000), we used experience-near language — language that is familiar to educators and is sensitive to the ways in which pedagogical relations are lived and experienced in educational work. We did not, therefore, address or define values or morals directly; rather, we encouraged the educators to talk about issues that they regarded as good, important, and valuable in their work. Throughout the group discussions, we promoted the flow of the educators’ narration by asking them to share concrete examples and incidents from their daily work situations. The group interviews, each of which lasted between one and two hours, were tape-recorded and transcribed (108 pages). This data set forms the research material analyzed for this article.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

Drawing on research that highlights the holistic and interpretive nature of *narrative analysis*, we view the collection of research material and its analysis and reporting as inseparable processes (e.g., Spector-Mersel, 2010; 2014). From this perspective, our fieldwork already contained preliminary analysis and interpretation. When narrating their everyday work, the educators interpreted their experiences and we listened to and interpreted their narrative accounts.

Following the field work, analysis and interpretation continued between the two authors and the transcribed research material (the texts). As typical for narrative analysis, we read and re-read the research material holistically rather than fragmenting texts into themes or smaller units (Chase, 2005; Spector-Mersel, 2014). Spector-Mersel (2014) notes that regardless of the types of analyses employed, narrative interpretation is a process that involves multiple readings of texts. She suggests that narrative researchers usually move between two levels: a close exploration of the narratives (*what* are the narratives about?) and a search for aspects surrounding the narratives (*why* just these narratives?). In the latter level, researchers search for perspectives that can help to understand the “what” aspects of the narratives, such as the motivations of the narrators, the various contexts of narrating, or the culture in which the narratives are embedded. (Spector-Mersel, 2014.)

Our interpretation process contained multiple phases and readings of the research material. Throughout the process, the two authors worked separately and then came together to discuss their interpretations. First, we worked with the research material inductively, drawing attention to aspects that the educators narrated as important, unimportant, desirable, undesirable, good, bad, right, or wrong. In this phase, we worked to form a big picture of values and morals emerging from the narratives (cf. Spector-Mersel, 2014). We found that educators’ narratives contained connections to a variety of values such as safety, professional competence, caring, indulgence, participation, good atmosphere, diversity, collectivity, equality, good manners, harmony, and control. An important feature of the narratives was that they often addressed dilemmas between two or more value fields. Thus, the first readings provided us with a big picture of educators’ everyday work as navigating a messy landscape of different values and moral dilemmas (see also Berkeley & Ludlow, 2008; Campbell, 2008).

In the second interpretive phase, we proceeded from what-questions to how- and why-questions (cf. Spector-Mersel, 2014). Drawing on Tappan's (1991; 2006) ideas concerning moral functioning, we paid special attention to narrated situations that seemed to require context-specific moral considerations, decisions, and actions on the part of the educators. Our questions about the narratives were: how do the educators act in these situations, and why do they act in these ways? Through re-interpreting the research material, we found that there was no single moral voice, but rather that different moral layers evolved, overlapped, and intertwined in a multivoiced way throughout the educators' narratives. We identified four layers of educators' moral functioning: what works in a preschool context; what provides good for people; what the rules say; and what is possible to achieve in an educator's position.

In the third phase of our analysis, we worked to deepen our understanding about the educators' moral functioning by reading the research material in parallel with previous research and in light of the four moral layers. We also offered the educators an opportunity to react to our interpretations. They received an abstract concerning our preliminary findings and were asked to reflect on our interpretations. It appears that they found the four moral layers to be an incisive and compelling description of their experience. For instance, Marja from Group 2 said, "*This went deep into my soul. It is, it appears in this way.*" In the following section, we will expand upon the four moral layers using illustrative examples from the educators' narratives.

## **Moral Functioning: Multiple Moral Layers in Educators' Narratives**

### **What Works in a Preschool Context**

The first moral layer, "what works in a preschool context," highlights the practical and institutional conditions where the educators' daily work takes place. As Kelchtermans (2009) notes, educators work under the pressures of day-to-day practices and have to maintain the smooth functioning of the setting. When narrating their everyday work, the educators often emphasized smooth running and avoiding chaos as their priority. Their narratives addressed the importance of maintaining daily schedules and routines of the preschools, as well as the organised use of spaces and other mutual resources.

For instance, the staff of Group 3 worked in a large preschool located in the same building with a primary school. Besides specific spaces for each group, there were lunch rooms and gym halls available for all participants. Institutional practices such as scheduled turns were developed to make the whole orchestra play smoothly together. Yet, the educators struggled between those institutional practices and their own goals to provide the children with a peaceful and unhurried environment.

*Maija: The schedules are compulsory for us. Our meals, our turns to use the gym hall, we must be strictly away when the next group is coming. How can we provide the children with a feeling that they have enough time to complete their activities? "Put on your slippers, hurry up! Can I help you?"*

In this excerpt, the preschool was narrated as a place with a clearly demarcated spatio-temporal order, framing the educators' decisions for their everyday actions (see Olwig, 2011). The participants' freedom to influence practices at the community level appeared limited. Nevertheless, the educators attempted to develop their group-level practices with the aim of finding a compromise between what works at the community level and the group level.

Our research material also contained narratives about giving up strict schedules and making room for flexibility. The educators in Group 2 narrated how they modified their practices in order to meet children's diverse needs. The neighbourhood of their preschool was known for its

disadvantaged population. There were many children with special needs including a need for child protection services. Due to the diversity of children and families, the educators' work required quick decisions and an understanding that everything would not always go as planned.

Marja: *Nearly every day, there are some children we are worried about. And we must discuss how to proceed.*

Riitta: *If we plan [children's activities], we need some structures. But plans may change. We observe the children's spirits, and if our plan is not working today with this particular child, we may try it tomorrow. [---] We don't have exact schedules. Of course, there are certain times for meals and naps.*

In this excerpt, the educators also related their functioning to the institutional order of the preschool. Though certain routines (meals and naps) structured their everyday work, they highlighted the need to be flexible. In this context, "what works" was not just following the institutional routines, but also adjusting the adults' activities and expectations to the children's situations.

These examples show how the institutional order of preschools shapes educators' moral functioning. Institutional practices involve beliefs about what is expected from "good" educators: instead of causing harmful and chaotic situations, they are presumed to relate their activities to the routines and schedules of the organization. MacLure, Jones, Holmes, and MacRae (2012) remind us, however, that the social order of educational settings is not an absolute set of constraints, but rather an outcome of educators' actions, "an ongoing accomplishment of members acting in concert" (p. 450). Thus, educators' moral functioning requires a continuous reciprocal process of adaptation between institutional conditions and individual educators.

## **What Provides Good for People**

Promoting people's well-being emerged as a crucial moral layer in educators' narratives. Educators showed a commitment to values that have been connected with caring in previous research (Broström, 2006; Estola, 2003; Taggart, 2011; Uitto & Syrjäla, 2008; Van Manen, 2000; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013). These caring values emphasise maintaining loving relationships in particular situations, rather than fulfilling objective-like, general ethical codes (Gilligan, 1982). Caring values are manifested when a carer maintains an attentive, receptive attitude, and the carer's motive energy flows towards the expressed needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 2008). Even though educators' narratives were multivoiced, we could hear a caring tone: they often justified their actions with motives such as fostering interpersonal relationships, meeting individual children's needs, empathy, respect, emotionality, bodily closeness, and listening.

The narratives provided insights into the highly social nature of educators' daily work. These educators were constantly face-to-face with other people — a condition that makes education a deeply moral endeavour (Hansen, 2004; Levinas, 1996; Noddings 2008). To paraphrase Levinas (1996), the face is vulnerable and requires ethical responsibility whenever a human being addresses oneself to another one. In particular, everyday encounters with children penetrated the narratives of our study. As the following excerpt from Group 2 illustrates, engaging in caring relationships with children appeared as an inclination to promote children's "good" on a situational basis.

Marja: *We seldom plan anything for Mondays. It's just to be present for the children.*

Researcher: *Why is it just Mondays?*

Marja: *It's because the children have been at home at the weekend. I'm not quite sure if this is badly said, but for some children it's a challenging issue. After weekends, some children are restless and tearful. There are hungry children and a restless atmosphere.*

Riitta: *They need the adults to calm them down and they latch on to our feet and hands. They aren't quite sure what they want. If we read, they come very close. They don't know who their friends are, and it begins once more, they fight using their hands and feet. Our Mondays are often like this and therefore we'll not plan anything for Mondays.*

Marja: *The smallest ones cry more and they need to be cuddled, they need their safety rags and toys more. We must not generalize, but this applies with particular children and adults. It requires us adults to observe their faces on Monday morning. Are their clothes clean and have they been cared for?*

This excerpt provides a counter-narrative for the idea that institutional routines shape the educators' moral functioning. Rather than resting on pre-planned activities and fixed schedules, Marja and Riitta highlighted the need to be responsive to individual children's situations. The moral horizon embedded in this narrative was more about *what do these children need* than *what do I want to teach the children*. Interpreting children's faces, recognizing their need for emotional and physical security, touching, and being available for the children, emerged as significant goals for the educators' moral functioning.

Though the educators showed volition for caring, they struggled under the cross-pressures of their work: How could they pay attention to individuals within big groups of children? How could they find balance between their direct work with children and the increasing amount of other tasks, such as documenting, planning, completing paperwork, and meeting with colleagues and parents? The following excerpt from Group 4 demonstrates these tensions.

Minna: *When the group sizes are growing, there is a risk that after the day I have to think whether I've had time to talk individually with the children at all. I experience this as a problem or a challenge of our work. Some [children] need attention more than others. Some demand attention while others stand back and you need to pull the child close to you. [---] I've noticed that when coming early to the morning shift, there may be just two children. It would be a good time to do paperwork. But often these children are my "own" children. I've put other tasks off and played with the children. I know that when the other children come they will draw the attention. At least I've had those moments in the morning.*

In this excerpt, Minna described paying individual attention to children both as a desire and a challenge. Moreover, she provided a concrete example about a choice between two different courses of action. She acknowledged that early mornings would offer a potential opportunity to complete preparatory tasks on the one hand and to work individually with children on the other. Her choice to prioritize the children's needs echoed a concern about maintaining relationships that has been regarded as the core of caring values (e.g., Estola, 2003; Taggart, 2011).

Being a professional educator means engaging in relationships not only with children, but also with parents and colleagues. There are normative expectations that educators should engage in equal partnership with parents and should work as collaborative members of a multi-professional team (Thomas, 2012). The narratives shed light on these adult-to-adult relationships. Though the educators' sometimes experienced relationships with parents and colleagues as challenging, the desire to maintain good relationships was emphasized. As the following excerpt from Group 2 illustrates, the educators paid attention to communicating with parents in a positive spirit.



Marja: *I think that the co-operation [with parents] goes well. [---] If we have some worries about the child and we have something negative to tell, of course, we don't say it insensitively to the parent's face. We carefully consider in our team how to talk.*

Interestingly, this excerpt reflects a collective orientation to early childhood work when Marja shifts her position from “I” to “we”. It was “we” who were worried, who communicated with parents, who considered how to talk to parents, and who the parents trust. Hence, in this example Marja depicted a professional team that shares the challenges of their work.

The examples in this section represent narratives that value the uniqueness of human relationships. Within these narratives, being a “good” educator means enacting caring values situation by situation, in the relational context between an educator’s self and the other (see Thomas, 2012). Accordingly, moral functioning is shaped by situation- and child-specific knowledge rather than by general ethical codes. Understanding human beings and encounters as unique requires the educators to accept messiness and uncertainty as a crucial condition of their morality. To quote Tzuo’s (2007, p. 38) phrase, moral functioning is “like an impressionist’s way of painting, rather than like that of a trained technical painter.”

### **What the Rules Say**

The participants’ narratives drew our attention to how rules and regulations were present in their moral functioning. On the one hand, the educators themselves created rules in order to manage the complexities of their work within preschool communities. For instance, the educators described rules designed to prevent children from bullying one another. Thus, enacting and invoking rules emerged as a means by which the educators tried to maintain order and foster children’s morality. As Thornberg (2008) argues, educators uphold different kinds of rules that mediate the moral construction of good and well-behaved children.

On the other hand, the narratives offered insights into how the educators were required to comply with rules, regulations, and guidelines set outside the preschool community. Being a professional meant adhering to general ethical codes articulated in legislation, policy documents, and curricula (see Fenech et al., 2008; Thomas, 2012). In Group 2, we were told about situations in which the rules provided the educators with much-needed support for their decisions.

Marja: *One day we got worried about one child who had not been in the preschool for some days. We called the child's home and finally the child came. There are some alcohol problems in the family, that's why we had to be on guard if the father happens to come to the preschool drunk. We had to change our plans and prioritise children's safety at the expense of our own plans and planned activities.*

Researcher: *What do you do if a drunk parent comes to pick up her/his child?*

Marja: *We have exact safety rules we must follow, how to act in such situations. We are not allowed to give a child to a drunk parent. These rules are common for all of us in this preschool and even broader, there are certain laws.*

This extract illuminates a situation in which a parent appeared to threaten a child’s well-being. Although parents usually have the right to make decisions concerning their child, safety rules provide educators momentary power over parents. By invoking these rules, educators can refuse to release a child to a drunk parent.

The educators also narrated the rules within a critical frame. They disapproved the tendencies to emphasize risks and narrow children's agency with an increasing amount of rules. The narratives reflected a risk-avoidant culture, where risks are managed by rules and regulations (also Fenech et al., 2008). For example, in Group 1, the educators struggled between encouraging children to exercise their motor skills and ensuring their safety.

*Anna: I think that nowadays children aren't allowed to do anything because there is always a risk that they may somehow hurt themselves. So what, I've also some signs in my face (referring to scars). [---]*

*Kaisa: Yeah, it's true that sometimes children are unnecessarily prohibited and over-protected. There are worries that children don't exercise enough and still we're making them passive. "Do not do that, it's dangerous!" For instance, our pre-schoolers are capable of many kinds of activities in the yard. In the winter before last, they discovered how to test snowboarding with the sledges. They had great fun. And then some younger children, two- or three-year-olds, joined in. They practiced their balance, sliding down the hill standing on the sledge. But someone came to prohibit, "Don't do that, it's dangerous!"*

In this narrated episode, more permissive and controlling practices clashed as the adults held different ideas about what activities were too dangerous for the children. Though this episode ended in restricting the children's agency, we also heard narratives where the educators took risks and permitted children to exercise their motor skills. A day for riding scooters, organized in Group 3, provides an example.

*Maija: The children had talked about it for a long time. They repeatedly asked: when can we bring our scooters to the preschool? Then we decided, yes, we'll have a day for scooters.*

*Kerttu: It was such a hassle when they all rode with their scooters in the yard! Of course, all the adults were there to maintain safety as well as possible. Many educators wouldn't dare to organize such activities. They avoid risks because they are afraid of accidents.*

*Niina: We did and the children were happy.*

These examples shed light on the multiple meanings of rules and regulations in educators' moral functioning: the rules are assumed to promote children's security and well-being, to support educators in risk management, and to serve in disciplinary and regulatory purposes. In accordance with Thornberg's (2008) study, we suggest that rules and regulations convey values and hence represent a significant part of values education in educational communities. Yet, the idea of "what the rules say" as a frame for moral functioning raises critical questions. Some previous studies argue that governing educational practices by rules and regulations depicts an instrumental, technical, and de-contextualized perspective on morality (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Fenech et al., 2008; Osgood, 2006). At worst, reducing morality to a set of rules may undermine the professional wisdom and autonomy of educators (Fenech, et al., 2008). In our study, however, the educators did not narrate themselves as passive, obedient subjects with blind faith in rules, but as active participants in the process of negotiating, reproducing, and transforming rules.

## What is Possible to Achieve in an Educator's Position

The participants also narrated situations in which they were unable to enact their values and priorities. For instance, the educators sometimes worried about how political decisions or families' practices influenced the children's well-being. However, they did not interfere in the sphere of private family life, nor did they have the power to influence political decisions. This limited agency highlights the fact that the educators work in a social, political, and cultural context in which they are not able to fully control their conditions. As Kelchtermans (2009) notes, educators' circumstances are to a large extent imposed on them. They work within a particular political framework and social community, which raises an important question concerning power: who gets to decide what is good for the children?

An example from Group 4 illuminates the educators' position in the context of the broader organization. The educators were accustomed to working in a special group in which approximately half of the children needed support in language development. For years, the staff had developed practices to communicate with children through pictures, sign language, and other means. At the time of our study, they had been informed of political decisions that would shut down all such special educational groups in the city.

*Minna: Our group will change radically. From next fall onwards, we'll work according to the new guidelines of the city. The special groups will be closed down and the children with special needs will be integrated into normal groups. [---] It will be a challenge. We'll work in small groups and go along with a primary caregiver approach. But I'm wondering how to provide enough support to promote every child's well-being.*

*Researcher: This will surely be a change.*

*Silja: Yes, it is. But I don't think negatively, it is a change. I think we must think positively. It doesn't help us to [ponder, complain], it doesn't help anyone.*

In this excerpt, the educators narrated themselves as confronting change. Political decisions launched at the municipal level would require the educators to respond to changing working conditions and ideologies. In their narratives, the educators struggled between continuity and change, the current situation and the future. They were not seemingly convinced of the need for a change or of the way the reform was being implemented. Though the educators expressed concern that the changes would not be good for children, they saw themselves as being powerless to influence those decisions. In line with Osgood's (2006) study, the educators showed passive resistance; they were opposed to the reform, yet they did not feel able to resist it. Their response was to try to adapt to the situation.

Another example of passive resistance and silent criticism was related to cooperation between the educators and parents. In the following excerpt from Group 3, one educator noted that the values of educators and parents may differ substantially.

*Maija: One example which nagged at me very much is media education. We have a four-year-old who watches Star Wars during the weekends. It's said that it's not for children of that age. And we have younger and older children who won't listen to such matters. But how can we discuss with parents in a positive way what is good for your child? We can't say you must stop watching.*

This example leads to profound questions about professionalism in early childhood education. There is sometimes a dilemma between the educators' professional knowledge and the parents' legal rights to make decisions about their child's education (Thomas, 2012). Doubtless, most educators view their

relationships with children as a priority and are committed to promoting the children's "good" in the preschool context. But to what extent are they responsible for what happens to children in the home context?

In the excerpt above, Maija was concerned about particular programs that were not suitable for young children and criticized the families' unrestrained use of media. Yet, the parents' choices seemed to be out of her control. Our research material suggests that there is a culturally held assumption that interfering in a family's private matters is inappropriate unless a child's well-being is severely threatened. The educators' narratives contained two different strategies for coping with this dilemma between professionalism and parental rights: the educators either expressed their opinion to the parents in the spirit of partnership, or they withdrew in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the family unit.

The narratives regarding "what is possible in an educator's position" draw attention to the politics and power relationships shaping educators' moral functioning. In line with previous studies, we maintain that educational institutions serve as a site for political practice where power relationships are negotiated and reproduced (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Kelchtermans, 2009; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013). On the one hand, political decisions made at local, regional, and national levels are localized in preschools. It is educators who are expected to embody these new policies, even though they sometimes do not believe in the political reforms and decisions (Osgood, 2006). On the other hand, the everyday life of preschools per se opens an arena for "minor political" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) or "micropolitical" (Kelchtermans, 2009) contests. It is an arena where people with different values, interests, ages, genders, and positions confront each other and where the workings of power take place. Power plays a significant role in relationships between children and adults, different professional groups, leaders and educators, and parents and educators. Just as with other educational institutions, preschools hold sets of norms and discourses that produce relations of domination and shape the social space of normality (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). These normative, social, and political circumstances frame educators' moral functioning.

## **Discussion**

At the beginning of this article, we challenged readers to imagine an educator weighing and balancing different options and different people's needs in a preschool context. Our preliminary observation was that educators often found themselves in such situations. Inspired by the notions of education as an entirely moral endeavour (Estola, 203; Fisvush et al., 2014; Hansen, 2004; Pring, 2005; Tappan, 2006), we assumed that educators' decisions about their everyday actions involve values, and that values are embodied and lived out as moral functioning. With the aim of deepening our understanding of educators' moral functioning, we approached their everyday work from a narrative viewpoint. By interpreting their narratives, we identified four layers intertwined in educators' moral functioning: what works in a preschool context, what provides good for people, what the rules say, and what is possible to achieve in an educators' position. In doing so, this study contributes to early childhood education research theoretically, methodologically, and pedagogically.

### **Toward a Complex, Dynamic, and Relationally Grounded View of Morality**

At the theoretical level, this study both aligns with and challenges previous research on values and moralities in education. As noted by several scholars, a great deal of research has approached values and moralities in terms of individuals' psychological processes and moral development (e.g., Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Pring, 2005; Turill, 2014; Williams & Gantt, 2012). Drawing from feminist and socio-cultural approaches (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Tappan, 2006), this study suggests a more holistic, dynamic, contextually sensitive, and relationally grounded view of educators' moral functioning. Rather than focusing on values as abstract conceptions or ideals, we have approached

educators' moral functioning as a phenomenon that intertwines their moral thinking and actions with the situation and cultural context. Depending on the situation, educators may utilize different cultural resources in their moral functioning; to avoid chaos, show caring, follow the rules, and embody (or resist) policy intentions. Furthermore, the four moral layers that emerged from the educators' narratives are not exclusive but rather are evolving and overlapping in complex and multivoiced ways. As attentive readers may have noticed, many examples highlighted in this article reflect two or more moral layers. The excerpts about safety rules, for instance, echo both concern about "what the rules say" and about "what provides good for children."

This study offers a view into the morality of educators' work constructed through a set of relationships in early childhood education. At the core of educators' moral functioning are *intrapersonal relationships*. In the course of their daily work, educators constantly face the questions, "What is a 'good' or 'right' way to act in this situation? What is expected of me as a 'good' educator?" Through their moral functioning, educators search for answers to these questions and construct their professional identities. As many of our examples show, another crucial part of educators' moral functioning involves *interpersonal relationships*. Early childhood education takes place in a highly social environment that requires educators to consider "good" ways of encountering children, parents, and colleagues. In particular, perspectives on what provides good for children penetrated the educators' narratives in this study. Moreover, this study draws attention to the significance of educators' *relationships with cultural contexts*. In accordance with Tappan (2006), we maintain that moral functioning is not an individual project, but rather that it is rooted in and mediated by social, cultural, and political contexts. In sum, educators' moral functioning occurs in the midst of multiple and evolving relationships, a practical reality that makes for an ambiguous and messy field of early childhood education.

### **The Strengths and Challenges of a Narrative Approach**

This study underscores the potential strengths and challenges of a narrative approach when exploring values and morals from a holistic perspective. Educators' narratives emerge as a fruitful means of exploring their moral thinking, action, situation, and culture as intertwined rather than separate entities. These narratives cover a wide range of different elements of human life, including short stories about incidents, recollections of encounters with people, worries, reflections on life, dreams, and emotions. Especially relevant to this study, these narratives involve moral questions about how to work as a good educator in the cultural context of early childhood education. As Johnson (1993) points out, both narrators and listeners become imaginatively engaged in narrated everyday life situations and find themselves judging the narrated people's actions. For instance, the examples of a drunk father and safety rules raise mental images that challenge us to think about appropriate actions in such situations. According to Conle (2007), the ethical power of narratives derives from this momentary, virtual world that is co-created by narrators and listeners.

The group discussion method used in this study offered a fertile forum for the educators to share experiences of moral matters and thus co-construct the common moral basis for their everyday work. The personal values of the educators, however, were not much on view, even though they are also influential in individuals' moral functioning. It is also worth noting that the narratives recounted here were not composed solely by the educators. The researchers played an active role as listeners, co-narrators, and re-tellers of the narratives (see Chase, 2005). As Caine et al. (2013) highlight, narrative research involves a negotiated research orientation that grows out of being in relationships: "Through attending to the relational in-between space in narrative inquiry, possibilities arise to discover new ways of knowing and understanding" (p. 580). Accordingly, this study offered a space for the educators and researchers to meet, share experiences, learn from each other, and co-construct knowledge. This relationally grounded epistemological view requires understanding narratives as unique and context-specific. Rather than generalizing the findings beyond the research

context, we suggest that the narratives contribute to the field of early childhood education through their life-likeness. The narratives may resonate in readers' minds; that is, they may evoke memories, images, and feelings about familiarity (Conle, 2007). This evocative nature has been regarded as one aspect of the scientific quality of narrative research (Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjälä, 2007).

The relational viewpoint also challenges the traditional notions of research ethics based on general ethical codes. Though important, we cannot reduce research ethics to written consents or formal protocols; rather, we are responsible for treating participants in an ethically sensitive way throughout the research process (Hyry-Beihammer, Estola, & Syrjälä, 2012). During the research process, we faced several ethical questions, such as how to approach different persons, how to listen to emotionally sensitive stories, and how to position ourselves in relation to ethical dilemmas narrated by the educators. These ethical issues arose throughout the process and required us to resolve them on a case-by-case basis.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

This study addressed educators' moral functioning in their daily work — an important, though underrepresented, area of early childhood education. The narratives outlined a picture of a messy landscape in which the educators' moral functioning consisted of navigating through changing situations, diverse values, and moral dilemmas. As multiple moral layers were present in almost every narrative, there was no doubt about the crucial role played by moral functioning in the educators' daily work.

In line with Thornberg's (2008) study in a school context, it is the most probable that educators of preschools are only vaguely aware of the values and morals embedded in their daily work. In our study, the educators were more used to discussing their work in terms of pedagogy rather than in terms of values and morals, though these perspectives are not exclusive of one another. This does not mean, however, that the educators' daily actions were in any way unethical; they showed commitment to values often highlighted in preschool contexts, such as caring, democracy, non-discrimination, and safety (e.g., Broström, 2006; Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Estola, 2003; Fenech et al., 2008; Taggart, 2011; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2013). This finding resonates with holistic perspectives that criticize the predominant view of morality as a fundamentally psychological phenomenon (see Tappan, 2006). As Williams and Gantt (2012) emphasize, morality is not a mechanistic process in which moral thinking reliably produces moral action.

This study raises values and morals as a crucial part of educators' daily work and provides one potential way to clarify the moral nature of early childhood education. Supporting the work of educators with the diversity of values and in complex and rapidly-changing situations requires the development of tools that are in line with the holistic nature of morality — tools that enable educators to explore their moral thinking and moral actions in particular situations. In accordance with the ideas of several scholars, we suggest that educators would benefit from forums in which they can narrate their everyday work experiences (e.g., Conle, 2007; Rabin & Smith, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Van Manen, 2000). Narratives enable educators to share their moral experiences and to reflect on their professionalism from the viewpoint of values and morals. As Rabin and Smith (2013, p. 170) note, narrating provides great tools to "think with" and to better understand how values are embodied and lived in education. Thus, narratives put a human face on the values and morals embedded in the daily lives of preschool educators.

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