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# “Creating security and a good relationship with the student” – Exploring ECEC teachers’ relational professionalism during mentor training

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**ABSTRACT:** Previous research on mentor training in early childhood education and care (ECEC) teacher education has shown that relationships are at the core of mentoring (Kupila et al., 2017; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2021). This article presents findings from a qualitative study that aims to explore ECEC teachers’ relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) during mentor training. Our research material consisted of essays (n = 77) from the final reflective essay of a mentor training course for ECEC teachers, which were analysed through narrative analysis (Clandinin et al., 2016). The results show that ECEC teachers’ relational professionalism is built in three types of entangled relationships: (1) relation to oneself, (2) relation to the student and (3) relation to colleagues. The results imply that relationally professional mentors are a key factor that contributes to students continuing in the profession after graduation. This requires that the university engages in cooperation and relationships with the ECEC centres that receive students in the practicum. The university needs to offer mentor training and develop rich opportunities for mentors, their colleagues, and leaders in ECEC to establish relationships with all parties involved on all levels.

**Keywords:** *mentor training, relational professionalism, practicum, teacher education*

## Introduction

The practicum is a central part of the studies for teachers in early childhood education (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Turtiainen, 2016). In the literature, there are different terms used to describe supervising teachers and practical training period in ECEC. In this article, we use the term *mentor* to describe the teacher in the ECEC centre who supervises students during the practicum, which is in line with Kupila et al. (2017). The term *practicum* refers to the time students spend at an ECEC centre and get supervision to help them develop professionalism during teacher education, which is in line with Matengu et al. (2020) and Mattsson et al. (2011).

As universities need to educate more teachers in early childhood education to meet the needs of the field (Laurent, 2020), universities need to deepen their collaboration with the field. This could be done by organising more practicum opportunities within ECEC centres during the student teachers' (hereafter students) practicum periods. Teachers in ECEC centres are responsible to act as mentors for students but do not always have the competencies needed (Kupila et al., 2017). Previous research (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009; Kupila et al., 2017; Liinamaa, 2014) recognises the importance of preparing ECEC teachers and their colleagues for the task of mentoring ECEC students. Kupila et al. (2017) state that training programmes provide mentors with an understanding of the complex nature of mentoring. Mentor training increases their confidence, which adds quality to ECEC and qualitative mentoring develops both early childhood teacher education and ECEC (Kupila et al., 2017).

Although the relational aspects of mentoring have been documented, there are few/no studies that focus on *relational professionalism* (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) in mentor training. In this article, we address the research gap regarding relationships in mentoring by exploring how teachers in mentor training describe relational professionalism.

Relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) is a core aspect of mentoring in early childhood teacher education (Bjerkholt & Gundenäs, 2019; Fowler et al., 2009; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2021). Liinamaa (2014) highlights the beginning of the practicum period as the core of developing meaningful relationships between the student and the mentor, but at the same time, the process of building a relationship is continuous and can be found in interactions and in pedagogical activities within the ECEC centre. Fowler et al. (2009) suggest developing trust at the beginning; they also say that successful mentoring is based on the key ethical principles of confidentiality, credibility and clarity of role. This puts the mentor in the middle of the relationship (Fowler et al., 2009). Liinamaa (2014) says that mentoring is demanding due to the different roles a mentor needs to have both as a teacher in ECEC, as a member of the working community and as a mentor. She emphasizes that mentors need support regarding this challenge. Børve et al. (2020) says that the ECEC

centre and mentoring during the practicum play a key role in students' learning process. They found that students perceive mentoring as a meaningful contribution to their learning process, but the large variation in the way things are organised and the roles between students and the mentor need to be better articulated between them. In the article mentoring was found important so that the teacher student can enrol a new path in becoming a teacher within early childhood education. Matengu et al. (2020) found in their semi-systematic literature review that students had been left alone with little guidance from the university and on the field. They highlighted studies that present results in difficulty forming relationships and communicating positively and constructively, especially with mentoring teachers. The studies made visible that students, instead of being treated as colleagues, were held back by a lack of respect and treated as an 'extra pair of hands'. These challenges led to difficulties in the practicum relationships, which affected how the students committed themselves to the field. Kupila et al. (2017) found that mentors who had taken a course in a mentor training programme interpreted that there is an essential mutuality of interaction in the mentor relationship and that the nature of the learning process was seen as interactive, with both the student and the mentor having an opportunity to learn.

Also Kochan and Trimble (2000) mention the opportunity for mutual growth and to learn together. Different understandings and knowledge among the staff in the ECEC centre can inhibit student learning. Further, Vala and Sell (2020) say that the mentor and colleagues at the ECEC centre must have the necessary knowledge and competence to support the student during the practicum, which is supported by Gasper & Walker (2020). This will also have consequences for the university's role towards the student and the ECEC centre (Vala & Sell, 2020).

Beutel and Spooner-Lane (2009) underline that mentoring relationships are most effective when the mentor has been trained for the role. Also Furu and Sandvik (2019) show that participation in a research circle can contribute to creating good collegial relationships, which in turn contribute to a good working climate and an operational culture that works well. Liinamaa (2014) highlight that professional mentoring can be rewarding for the entire college. When professional mentoring is seen as teamwork, an opportunity for collegial learning arises for the entire staff at the ECEC centre (Liinamaa, 2014). This study aims to explore ECEC teachers' relational professionalism during mentor training.

## Relational professionalism in mentoring

A relational perspective asserts that relationships are the foundation of education (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Noddings, 2012). Buber (1970) believes that humans are realised in genuine relationships according to him the teacher's mission is to confirm who the student is and who the student can become. This relational perspective can be adopted with respect to mentoring, which means that the mentor's mission is to confirm the student both as who he/she is in the moment and as who he/she can become in the future. In order to do this, the mentor's relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) is important.

Relational professionalism is also an aspect of teacher professionalism. It consists of relational competence (Aspelin, 2015; Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006) and is about building respectful and trusting relationships with students and others. Aspelin (2015) claims that the relationship between the teacher and student is important for the student's learning and development (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). Good-quality relationships can be described with words such as care, personal or interpersonal treatment, respect, participation, presence, recognition, trust and confidence. In a mentoring context, the mentor is expected to possess relational competence, leadership competence and didactic competence at the same time as being active, committed, structured, clear and someone who challenges (Aspelin, 2015). This is why the mentoring role is complex because the mentor needs to be comfortable both as a mentor and in his or her relationships since he or she cannot meet all expectations. Relationships largely consist of communication; therefore, great emphasis needs to be placed on communication and clarity in communication (Aspelin, 2015). Being an effective teacher does not necessarily make you an effective mentor, by mentoring training the mentor can develop relationship building skills (Ambrosetti, 2014). Through mentor training Kupila et al. (2017) found that participants understood the complexity of mentoring through three aspects (1) the challenging nature of mentorship, (2) the requirement for a mutual relationship and (3) that the learning process is interactive, i.e. both student teachers and mentors have an opportunity to learn.

Fowler et al. (2009) add to this by saying that we need to move forward from a hierarchical relationship to a more equal relationship based on trust, which Mauri et al. (2019) also support. Furu and Sandvik (2019) state that self-reflection is a valuable aspect of developing relational professionalism. Being capable of observing one's own behaviours, feelings or thoughts with respect to the professional domain serves as a foundation for developing authentic relationships with others. Self-reflection serves as a mirror and can contribute to professional self-esteem and self-understanding, as well as to the development of ways of acting in line with one's own values.

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Edwards (2010), Rantavuori (2019) and Rantavuori et al. (2017) argue that working relationally can be defined as bringing one's own expertise into collective use and recognising that of others. They also say that if professionals learn to work relationally and pay attention to what other professionals consider important, they can broaden their professions and construct their knowledge with others. Further, Edwards (2010) say that when professionals succeed in constructing knowledge together, they also create a supportive learning environment, and this leads to collaborative practices that are holistically beneficial to all.

Aspelin (2021) believes that there is a need for perspectives that focus on the teacher–student relationship. Studies show that this relationship is key for students' social development and academic achievements. Aspelin (2021) mentions that teaching from a relational perspective is a mutual process that we cannot understand without acknowledging both teachers' and students' positions. La Paro et al. (2018) state that the relationship between the mentoring teacher and the student can be viewed as a central element in the practicum experience; this relationship influences and is influenced by additional elements within the practicum experience, including communication, beliefs, knowledge and learning. Edwards (2010) and Rantavuori (2019) describe working relationally as cooperating and putting aside one's own thought of the power of their knowledge. When working relationally, one needs to create values with others, be interested in others and communicate with them about values. If one believes that they have the only truth, they are not working relationally. Relational expertise is to give others space for their knowledge and move forward together to solve problems. We need relational expertise in working life, which increasingly demands cooperation with different partners (Rantavuori, 2019).

### **Aim and research question**

The aim of this study is to explore ECEC teachers' relational professionalism during mentor training. We study the aim through the following research question: How do the teachers of a mentor training express their developed relational professionalism?

## Empirical study

The empirical study explores ECEC teachers' relational professionalism during mentor training offered by Åbo Akademi University in 2021 and 2022. The course 'Counselling of Practice within Early Childhood Education' (5 ECTS) was given to support mentors in receiving students from the Bachelor of Education programme within early childhood education on their practicum to the ECEC centre. A total of 117 ECEC teachers took the course. One of the aims of the course was to realise a relational-based mentorship (*Study Guide 2022–2024*). The course was offered online, with monthly sessions and self-study in between. It consisted of five thematic modules, each containing either recorded or live lectures, group discussions, related literature and written assignments. The ECEC teachers as students participated in local study groups with opportunities for collegial discussion. One of the thematic modules dealt specifically with mentoring from a relational perspective, but the relational perspective was implemented in all parts of the course as a key factor in mentoring. One of the authors of this article (Anna Buss) was involved as a teacher on the course in both 2021 and 2022, while one (Linda Eriksson) was a student, and one (Ann-Christin Furu) was a teacher in the 2021 course. Methodologically, being teachers and student, is considered a strength, since all three authors have a rich understanding of the form and core content of the course. As Linda Eriksson was a student, her examination was not a part of this study.

### Collection and analysis of research material

The study was conducted within a qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, we adopted a narrative approach in our study (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin et al., 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative approaches strive to study human experience through stories (i.e., narrative phenomena). These stories can be oral or written, and they can be of various lengths. Thus, in our study, written accounts by teachers in mentor training were considered as stories containing their perspectives on relational professionalism. Telling a story is one way to reflect upon lived experiences within a narrative approach (Misher, 2009).

The research material consists of written reflective essays from ECEC teachers (n = 77) who gave consent for this study within the mentor training course. Most of the participants were teachers in early childhood education, who aimed on becoming a mentor for student teacher in the ECEC centre where they work. Few of the participating ECEC teachers had experience of being a mentor for student teachers. The research material was collected during Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. The reflective essay was the final part of the course, in which the ECEC teachers were asked to reflect on their own learning process. The reflective essay was guided by the following questions: My journey = from where to where? Where was I when the course started? Where do I stand now?

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What does my development depend on? What do I have left to learn? The research material consisted of 233 pages of written text, which were submitted to an online learning platform. On average, each ECEC teacher submitted three pages of text. All texts were anonymised, and any information that could reveal sensitive information on the ECEC teacher or make her working environment identifiable was omitted.

To explore ECEC teachers' relational professionalism during the mentor training, we (three researchers) examined the texts. While examining the texts we let narratives and ideas emerge with and in the research material (Odegard, 2021). During the analysis we used general theoretical knowledge of the topic and did not follow any specific criteria for relational professionalism. After the initial reading of the entire research material, seven passages were organised according to N'Vivo (Zamawe, 2015), in order to identify the passages where ECEC teachers referred to relational aspects of mentoring. These seven passages were then re-read with the goal of identifying relational professionalism. We first read the passages by ourselves and then met to collegially discuss our findings in the light of relevant theoretical perspectives. Clandinin et al. (2016) explain the re-reading phase as a way of framing the research puzzle and searching again around a particular wonder. The analysis was guided by the following overarching research question: How do the teachers of a mentor training express their developed relational professionalism? Thus, a reflexive hermeneutical element was also included in the narrative approach. In the following stage, recurring patterns were made visible and ECEC teachers' expressions were put in the midst of their lives (Clandinin et al., 2016). We identified three dimensions of relational professionalism that reflected the patterns in the written accounts. These three dimensions constitute the three narratives of relational professionalism that answer our research question. Each is then an overarching narrative that contains a set of stories that show different aspects of the same dimension of relational professionalism. Clandinin et al. (2016) state that texts are embedded within research relationships in the three-dimensional narrative space, which we have worked with in our analysis.

These three narratives and each of the stories in the results section of this article represent all 77 ECEC teachers' stories in the 233 pages of written text of the final reflective essay. Each narrative and story are representations that contain elements from multiple ECEC teachers and reflect their experiences. The three narratives and each story are written in the third person and include citations in the first person (translated from Swedish by the authors) that make visible how teachers express the dimensions of relational professionalism in specific ways.



## Research reliability and ethical principles

The study follows the guidelines of the Finnish Editorial Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). The research material was analysed by three researchers who met and discussed the findings together during the analysis process consistently. The fact that two of the researchers acted as teachers in the course and one of the researchers as a student means that the researchers had a prior understanding of the study. Direct citations from the ECEC teachers' written accounts in the results chapter have been chosen to describe and confirm the analysis of the entire material (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

The ECEC teachers were informed about the study and were able to give consent through a digital survey conducted in Webropol. The ethical requirements were fulfilled by ensuring the anonymity and obtaining informed consent (TENK, 2019).

The research material was processed and stored so that the ECEC teachers who gave consent could not be recognised (NN01–NN86). The research material also contained other examinations of the participating ECEC teachers; for the final reflective essay on which this study is based, 77 participating ECEC teachers had submitted the examination and had given consent. The research material was stored in a secure service, according to Åbo Akademi University's policy for research material management. The quotations presented in the results are anonymous (NN01–NN86).

## Results

The results show that ECEC teachers express their developed relational professionalism during a mentor training course as evolving through three types of entangled relationships, shown as dimensions of relational professionalism in mentoring (Figure 1). The results are structured into three narratives. The first narrative shows how relational professionalism is described as a relation to oneself. The second narrative reflects how the ECEC teachers express relational professionalism by highlighting the relationship between the student and the mentor. In the third narrative, relational professionalism is expressed as dependent on good relationships in the teams that the student is part of during the practicum. Each narrative consists of stories that deepen various aspects of how ECEC teachers express relational professionalism.

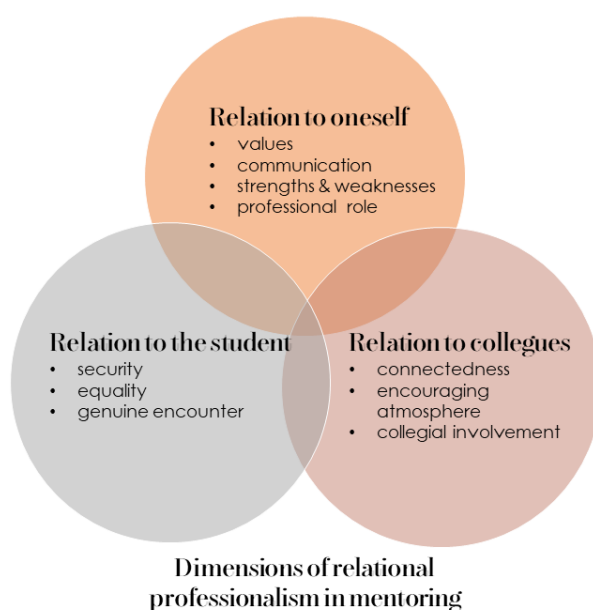


FIGURE 1 Dimensions of relational professionalism in mentoring

## **Narrative 1: Relation to oneself**

The first narrative makes visible various aspects of what mentoring requires from the mentor, both on a personal and professional level. ECEC teachers mentioned how they develop insights concerning their values, communication styles, strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, they discussed the importance of knowing one's role in the mentoring process. More specifically, this narrative points towards the importance of self-awareness in these dimensions.

### ***Story 1: Know your values***

The ECEC teachers visualised that it is important that you, as a mentor, know your own foundational pedagogical values and can describe them for yourself and for the student. You need to be secure in your own values to be able to communicate them with the student.

*I have learned how important it is to be able to go inside yourself to really get an idea of what your own values are.*

(NN04)

### ***Story 2: Know your communication***

The ECEC teachers emphasised the meaning of dialogue and communication in mentoring. Further, they mentioned that it is important to act in ways that promote relationships of mutual trust and openness. This includes both non-verbal and verbal communication. The following quote makes visible that the mentor's communication affects those of the student and how they act in relation to children and adults in the setting, both during the practicum and in their future profession as teachers.

*It has become clearer to me how important the assignment is, considering that I should guide a student towards her/his profession as a teacher. I am aware that with my manner, my body language, my actions, my teaching assignment and my behaviour, I will influence the student, who in turn will influence the children she/he will have in the future. It is an important task to fill.*

(NN12)

### ***Story 3: Know your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and as a mentor***

The ECEC teachers express that they will never be fully educated as a mentor, but they do not need to be a 'super' teacher to be a good mentor. Mentors need to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as teachers and be secure as teachers. They can learn as mentors and, together with the teacher, develop each other's skills.

*But during the course, I have realised that I don't need to be fully skilled to be a mentor. In fact, you never become that, and this can also be to a certain advantage when I receive a student. I have my practicum/studies so close in my memory. I have realised that it is a lot about the fact that I need to know what my strengths/challenges in mentoring are.*

(NN52)

#### **Story 4: Know your task as a mentor**

During the course, ECEC teachers realised that a good mentor sometimes takes a step back and leaves room for the student to discover and create his/her own ways of teaching. Being a partner for discussion is more important than being the one who knows the 'right' answers.

*Before the course, I thought that my task as a mentor was more to give feedback to the students and to tell them about how I do and how I think. Now I think that my task is more to function as a sounding board that asks the questions that help students to reflect on their own values, pedagogical thinking, their own actions; help the student become aware of what they themselves value.*

(NN28)

The first narrative reflects the importance of offering mentors the opportunity to engage in self-reflection on a variety of themes that enhance their understanding of themselves as mentors. Understanding oneself from a relational perspective can be seen as relational competence, which Aspelin (2015) underlines as an aspect of teacher professionalism. The ECEC teachers expressed relational professionalism as grounded in multidimensional ways of knowing themselves in the domain of interpersonal relationships. Self-reflection is a valuable part of relational professionalism, as it involves being capable of observing one's behaviours, feelings or thoughts with respect to others as entering authentic relationships (Furu & Sandvik, 2019). Rantavuori (2019) points out that learning to work relationally is to pay attention to what others consider important, which is expressed by the ECEC teachers as knowing one's strengths and weaknesses as a mentor. The following narrative is about the ECEC teachers' view of the relation with the student.

#### **Narrative 2: Relation to the student**

The second narrative makes visible the sense of psychological security and safety in the relationship between the student and the mentor. Other factors are the importance of feeling welcome in the environment, among the group of children and with colleagues. Furthermore, the ECEC teachers mentioned equality in relations and communication as a core aspect of the relationship between the students and the mentor. A third important theme that is mentioned is creating opportunities for genuine encounters during practicums.

### ***Story 1: The importance of security***

ECEC teachers express the importance of security in multifaceted ways, mentioning a correlation between how security is created with a new child in the group and welcoming students to the environment. ECEC teachers mean that this is a core factor for learning for both children and adults; ECEC teachers also mean that security is central for the staff.

Connectedness or a feeling of belonging to a group is also highlighted as central to learning.

*The importance of security is something that I have realised the importance of during this course. I have always been scrupulous with that the child needs to feel safe for learning to take place, so we need to start with the feeling of safety when a child comes to the ECEC centre. The same applies to the student; she/he also needs to feel safe in the group of children she/he is in. Security and connectedness create a prerequisite for learning for the student. The same applies to the staff, they also need to be secure in the role of as supervisor. Security is the cornerstone of this entire network.*

(NN13)

In addition to security, a good relationship and seeing the person and her unique nature is a foundation for successful mentoring, giving direction to the learning process during the practicum.

*Creating security and a good relationship with the student feels like the most important thing to focus on. Also, seeing everyone for who they are and then build the mentoring and the practicum period based on that is central.*

(NN20)

### ***Story 2: The importance of equality in relations and communication***

ECEC teachers see that both students and mentors are responsible for taking an active part in the relationship to be equal. They expressed that communication is the heart of making the relationship possible and highlighted the student's opportunity to develop their profession in early childhood education and care. Mentors' capabilities to challenge and confirm students during the practicum are important for the process. This is possible in the ECEC teachers' views by making time for mutual reflective dialogues.

*Now I think that the relationship is based on active cooperation from both parties. Both are equal in the relationship and in the communication. Communication must give the student the opportunity to develop (i.e., through reflection, professional language, through the mentor both challenging and confirming).*

(NN09)

### ***Story 3: The importance of the genuine encounter***

Being present with the student is a challenge due to the hectic environment in ECEC centres, but the ECEC teachers mean that it is necessary to take time and create space for genuine encounters. Due to the genuine encounter, the students can reflect with the mentor and move forward in their learning process during the practicum.

*When I think about what has given me the most during the course, it is the importance of the dialogues between student and mentor during the practicum. I think that I have been a present mentor who gives time to my students. However, I still have a lot to learn in terms of the relationship with the student; I am working on that part.*

(NN17)

*Because everyday life in early childhood education and preschool is very busy, there is a lot going on all the time, and the pace can be high most days. Therefore, it is important that the student feels that the mentor has time for her/him and that time has been set aside for reflection and discussion because it is crucial for the student's learning process.*

(NN74)

The second narrative reflects on welcoming the student in the practicum to the ECEC centre (see Liinamaa, 2014), and the value in feeling security and safety between the student and the mentor, in the group of children and in the whole college. La Paro et al. (2018) argues that the relationship between the mentoring teacher and the student is a central element in the practicum experience, which includes communication. ECEC teachers found equality in relation and communication to be a core aspect of relational professionalism and to create opportunities for genuine encounter during the practicum. Brownlee and Berthelsen (2006) support this interpretation by saying that building respectful and trusting relationships with students is a part of relational competence that is included in relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019). In narrative three, we express the ECEC teachers' views on their relation to colleagues.

### **Narrative 3: Relation to colleagues**

The third narrative explores the importance of collegial relations in the ECEC centres where the students do their practicums. ECEC teachers expressed three aspects of collegial relations that promote students' learning in the practicum. These aspects involve connectedness, an encouraging atmosphere and collegial involvement. We will explore these aspects in the future.

### ***Story 1: Creating connectedness***

ECEC teachers relate to their own experiences of feeling connected in the work team during their own practicums. They want to offer this feeling to the students, as they involve themselves in the mentoring of students. They underline that connectedness is

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created through the ways one communicates and mentors, as well as by finding one's own role in the group of children and in the working team.

*During this course, I have many times been able to relate to what I myself went through as a student during [the] practicum. The importance of getting a sense of belonging in the staff group. Finding your place in the children's group as a 'leader' and giving the children security is important. What comes across in all lectures and in all literature is precisely the way to supervise and communicate with the student.*

(NN11)

### ***Story 2: Creating an encouraging atmosphere***

An encouraging atmosphere is often mentioned as a contributing factor for students' learning process in the practicum. They refer to a team that communicates and involves everyone's strengths and weaknesses as they develop together. This kind of atmosphere welcomes students to contribute to the activities in the ECEC centre. ECEC teachers highlighted the importance of continuous development of the ECEC centres' pedagogical values, which they mean reflects on the encouraging atmosphere. ECEC teachers expressed that an encouraging atmosphere does not always exist and highlights problems in communication between the different professionals that can be found in ECEC centres.

*In a team that I worked in for some time ago, we had an incredibly positive and encouraging atmosphere. We were all incredibly different but grew as a team by seeing each other's strengths and developed [ourselves] based on them. Students who came to us quickly joined the team, and I got the understanding from students that it was easy to 'get in'. We were happy in the team, encouraging everyone who came onto the team to bring their own ideas and thoughts. We evaluated ourselves openly and constructively. However, not all teams work the same way. But I believe that in order to contribute to the atmosphere, you should also trust yourself. That's where personal development and professionalism in values becomes visible. But also how important it is that the team constantly reflects together on these (values) so that children, parents, colleagues and students notice the pedagogical value base in our work.*

(NN04)

*I have known that the relationship is important, but during the course and experience with a student, I have understood that it is Alpha and Omega. My colleague, a child carer, was a mentor and could not create a trusting relationship with students. The student was left hanging loose many times and did not know what she would do, or there was no time for discussion. My role as a colleague was also unclear. I felt that I saw the students' needs, but at the same time I did not want to take over the role of mentoring (i.e., step on the child carer's toes). I realise now that I could have been more present for the student. The social pedagogue had a completely wrong attitude and scolded the student for wanting to change group for the following practicum. Students told the child carer and me that it is because of social pedagogue treatment. (Some are suitable for mentoring.) What I think would be important is to give a clear role so that the colleagues know what their task and focus is.*

(NN62)

### **Story 3: Creating collegial involvement**

For students to develop their own way of being a teacher, ECEC teachers carefully described the role of collegial involvement. They underlined that students need to observe and make relations to several professional examples of teaching that feel right for them, instead of just being a copy of the mentors' way of teaching.

*Balancing your role as mentor and being able to challenge and support the student will be a fun challenge. It will also be fun to learn new things yourself and develop together with the student. I will also involve the entire work team in the department and encourage students to observe how we all act as educators to get multiple models. The student should not become a copy of me as an educator but find her/his own pedagogical way of working that she/he thinks feels right.*

(NN15)

The third narrative reflects on collegial relationships within the ECEC centres, which Vala and Sell (2020) implicate as being necessary to support students' learning within ECEC centres during the practicum. Lack of knowledge and competence to support students during practicums may inhibit the student's learning (Vala & Sell, 2020). ECEC teachers highlight aspects of connectedness, an encouraging atmosphere and collegial involvement as important in relational professionalism. Liinamaa (2014) is careful to point out that professional mentoring should be seen at teamwork and can be rewarding for the entire college, which Edwards (2010) and Rantavuori (2019) define as working relationally and moving forward together as a team.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we explored ECEC teachers' narratives of relational professionalism during mentor training. We were interested in how the ECEC teachers' stories express their developed relational professionalism. The results show three significant perspectives on relational professionalism: the relation to oneself, the relation to the student and the relation to colleagues. We approach these three types of entangled relationships as dimensions of relational professionalism in mentoring (Figure 1). As follows, we will discuss perspectives on relationships in mentoring and methodological reflection. Finally, we will discuss implications.

### **Perspectives on relationships in mentoring**

In this study, ECEC teachers expressed insights concerning the importance of self-awareness and knowing one's own foundational pedagogical values as a mentor; it makes one more secure in the communication with the student. Communication is essential to establishing relationships of mutual trust (see Aspelin, 2015; La Paro et al., 2018) and

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openness, as is an awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher found in this study. This opens the possibility to learn as a mentor and, together with the student, to develop each other's skills. ECEC teachers understood the mentor's role as being capable of observing the students' feelings or thoughts with respect and paying attention to what the student considers important (see Furu & Sandvik, 2019; Rantavuori, 2019); in other words, to let the student discover and create his/her own ways of teaching and, as a mentor, to not always be seen as the one with the 'right' answer.

The results indicate that ECEC teachers, as a mentor, want to build a relationship between them and the student that gives that sense of psychological security and safety. This resonates with Aspelin (2015) and Brownlee and Berthelsen (2006), who underline the importance of relational competence through building respectful and trusting relationships with students and others. Aspelin (2015) claims that genuine relationships are important for the student's learning and development (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). ECEC teachers see relations as a key for the students' learning process to make them feel welcome in the environment at the ECEC centre. From the beginning of practicum, they will then gain connectedness at the ECEC centre, as Fowler et al. (2009) and Liinamaa (2014) highlighted. Equality in the relationship and communication is a core aspect in the relation, where both the mentor and the student need to be active in the relationship; still, the mentor needs to challenge and confirm the student. In the ECEC centre environment, it is highly important to create space for genuine encounters, which enable the student to reflect together with the mentor and move forward in their learning process. If this is considered, the ECEC teachers feel that the students will have a good learning process during the practicum, which was also interpreted (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009) by seeing the mentor relationship as an essential mutuality of interaction, with both the student and the mentor having an opportunity to learn (Kochan & Trimble, 2000) together.

Further, the results show that ECEC teachers relate to their own experiences of feeling connected in the work team during their own practicums. They want to offer this feeling to the students they mentor. They underline that connectedness is created through the ways one communicates and mentors, as well as by finding one's own role in the group of children and in the working team. The connection with the student can be seen as natural part of mentoring, but the involvement of the whole team and the student as an equal is a new factor in this study. Indirectly we can understand that mentors' own experiences as students and good models affect how mentors want to connect with students, which means that mentors' professional development starts already during teacher education.

Further, Liinamaa (2014) highlighted that professional mentoring can be rewarding for the entire college. An encouraging atmosphere is often mentioned as a contributing factor to students' learning process in the practicum. They refer to a team that communicates

and involves everyone's strengths and weaknesses as they develop together, as well as the importance of continuous development of the ECEC centres' pedagogical values, which reflects on the encouraging atmosphere. ECEC teachers described that an encouraging atmosphere does not always exist and highlighted problems in communication between the different professionals that can be found in ECEC centres. As making awareness of collegial involvement, ECEC teachers underlined the importance of students' opportunity during the practicum to observe and make relations to several professional examples of teaching and in this way develop their own way of teaching.

As a closing quote for the process, one ECEC teacher said,

*I know that I have significantly better conditions to be a good mentor after having this mentor training. Both my professional competence and my professional identity have been strengthened during this course. Now I'm just waiting to accept students and use what I've learned. I approach my task as a mentor with enthusiasm, curiosity and openness. I look forward to continuing my journey (developing in my relational professionalism) together with students.*

(NN39)

### **Methodological reflection**

This study's methodology gave the ECEC teachers an opportunity to express their developed relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) during a mentor training course. We consider the choice of a qualitative narrative approach (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin et al., 2016) suitable, since the approach made a closeness possible to the ECEC teachers' voices. The written reflective essay, which was the material for this study, made it possible to study many experiences/descriptions. The essay was part of getting a mark for the course and could be a limitation in that some of the ECEC teachers were encouraged by their employers to take the course. This might have affected their motivation, and their answers may have been instrumental to obtain a degree, rather than reflective of personal engagement in these issues. We can also assume that ECEC teachers' wanted to express a positive attitude towards the course and their own learning. We still argue that the material is large (77 ECEC teachers) and rich, which gives an opportunity for a variety of opinions, and the study therefore reflects how ECEC teachers express their developed relational professionalism well. ECEC teachers were motivated to become mentors, and there were no negative expressions concerning relational professionalism in the material. In addition, the instructions for the reflective essay did not include specific instructions on relational aspects. Further, the analysis has been a collegial discussion to gain a holistic view of the ECEC teachers' stories and identify narratives that generate knowledge.

## Implications

Mentor training is significant for early childhood education and care, says Kupila et al. (2017); as the mentor gains an understanding of the mentor relationship, it creates opportunities for a good relationship between the mentor and the student. We see this as three entangled relationships (Figure 1) of relational professionalism in mentoring: relation to oneself, relation to the student and relation to colleagues. This study shows that ECEC teachers become well prepared for meeting students during mentor training and giving students valuable learning time in the practicum. Kupila et al. (2017) say that students who get good support during practicums are likelier to stay in the profession. In our opinion, relationally professional mentors are a key factor that contributes to students continuing in the profession after graduation. The three entangled relationships (Figure 1) are all needed to become relationally working professional mentors. When professional mentoring is seen as teamwork, an opportunity for collegial learning arises for the entire staff at the ECEC centre. Liinamaa (2014) says that mentoring needs to be conceptualised as multi-occupational and highlights the opportunities for collaboration in the whole community during the practicum. Liinamaa wants to challenge ECEC to develop and see themselves as learning environments for all parties.

In this study, working collegially from a relational perspective to contribute to a good learning process for the student was made visible. As well as it was an acknowledgement that more competence is needed within the collegium. ECEC centres need to see their importance as co-educators for students in early childhood education, as practicums are a central part of the studies for teachers in early childhood education (see Ukkonen-Mikkola & Turtiainen, 2016). This requires that the university engage in cooperation and relationships with the ECEC centres that receive students in the practicum. The university needs to offer mentor training and develop rich opportunities for mentors, colleagues, and leaders in ECEC to establish relationships with all parties involved. As relational professionalism (Furu & Sandvik, 2019) is a core aspect of mentoring in early childhood teacher education (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2021), it is valuable to find that mentor training has given the ECEC teachers knowledge of relational professionalism and how they, as mentors, can include it in the student–mentor relationship.

Furthermore, it is central that students during teacher education are given the opportunity to reflect upon their relation to themselves, as this is highlighted in the study as a part of their future professionalism. In future studies, it would be interesting to examine how mentors express their relational professionalism while mentoring students in the practicums. As well as the effect on students' learning process during practicums where an interesting perspective could be the role of nonverbal communication. In the long term, we might see a development towards a longer commitment to the field (see Matengu et al., 2020). Based on the descriptions that an encouraging atmosphere does not

always exist and problems in communication between the different professionals within ECEC centres, it would be relevant in the future to study possible barriers to effective communication and equal relationships between students and mentors in ECEC centres.

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