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Teachers' interactions with children in micro-level transitions in Norwegian preschools

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we aimed to examine what characterizes teachers' interactions with children in micro-level transitions in Norwegian preschools. We used video and observed transitions at the micro level, such as between meal and sleeping time, and between playing and meals. The participants were 22 teachers from 22 classrooms in 17 preschools. We used a stepwise-deductive-inductive approach (SDI) in the analysis. Our results indicated that there were four dimensions in the teachers' interactions with the children: 1) verbally directed toward the children, 2) bodily directed toward the children, 3) verbally directed toward the practical, and 4) bodily directed toward the practical. Based on different variations in these four dimensions, we found four dynamic characteristics: informing, facilitating, exploring, and affirmative. These characteristics appeared to be connected to organizational factors, such as the number of children and adults present.

KEYWORDS

Micro-transitions; phenomenological field; intentionality; vitality form; video observations; SDI analysis

Introduction

In this article, we examined what characterizes preschool teachers' interactions with children in micro-level transitions in Norwegian preschools. Micro-level transitions are transitions between activities, such as the transition between play and circle time and between meal and rest time. These transitions occur every day and across the preschool day. Although these micro-level transitions are important for children's preschool experiences, they have received little attention (Ryan, Bailey, and Grace 2019). In this article, video-observations were used to examine transitions at the micro level in 22 Norwegian preschool classrooms. The observations were focused on the interaction between the teacher and three-year-old children (children born in 2015). In Norway, however, most preschool classrooms consist of children of various ages, therefore the observations included children aged one to six years.

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Micro-level transitions are periods when children are expected to end their current activity and shift their attention to a different activity at the teacher's request (Tullis, Cannella-Malone, and Payne 2015). A transition is the process of shifting from one setting to another. This could be, for instance, the changes between different age groups, activities, or classrooms. A characteristic of a transition is the unclearness of what is to happen next. Fabian (2006) conceptualized it as 'leaving the "comfort zone" and encountering the unknown' (7). In this study, the unknown was a new situation in which the rules were changed, and the children, preschool staff, and physical environment could be different. Such situations create the potential for anxiety, tiredness, discomfort, and bewilderment. These changes or transitions 'do not just happen by themselves,' they require an active effort from the child and the preschool teacher to facilitate the conditions (Juhl 2017). For example, strict logistics and time pressure can make it difficult for children to feel a sense of belonging (Eide, Winger, and Wolf 2019). In addition, the organizational format seems to have an impact on the quality of the interaction (Løkken et al. 2018; Løkken 2022, 81)

Older children and adults have experiences that help them imagine what is to happen next. For children of preschool age, especially children under the age of three, the ability to understand what is not in the present and in the room is limited. They need an adult who is affectively attuned and a well-organized transition to feel well and secure (Broberg 2018). In this case, transitions can open the opportunity for interactions and the possibility for both children and preschool staff to work together (Fabian 2006). It can be an exciting, positive, and expanding time for the children, and they can feel the emotional well-being that is essential for social relationships and participation (Hännikäinen 2015). The characteristics of the interactions between the preschool staff and the children seem to be crucial.

Interactions are connections between factors or phenomena that affect one another. In this article, these factors are the preschool teacher and one or several children. By the formulation, affect each other, we mean a connection between the two parts, during which they touch each other's perspectives in one way or another, either in a superficial way or in an intersubjective relation. Jernes (2013) found this touch of each other's perspectives essential for humans' learning and knowledge development. The interaction, expressed as verbal and non-verbal dialogues, is at the basis of the creation of cultural and social communities. It is in these interactions that children create an inner model of the outside world and of themselves (Drugli 2018). The quality of the interaction is connected to how the adult mirrors the child's experiences and reactions, and as such, how the adult and the child are affectively attuned to each other is crucial (Wolf 2021). As Kousholt (2011) highlighted, children and adults always constitute conditions for each other's opportunities, for better or worse.

Environmentally, micro-level transitions can exist in different places and situations in preschools. Merleau-Ponty (2012, 69) used the concept of *the phenomenological field* about the different places and situations in which we act. How preschool teachers interact during the transition probably depends on the habits they have created. Merleau-Ponty expressed this as the inner model. These inner models are decisive for how the teacher acts during transitions. Merleau-Ponty conceptualized these actions as the outer model. It is a self-reinforcing process, which means that we act in ways that reinforce our inner models. Merleau-Ponty (2012, 321) theorized it as intentionality.

Stern (2007, 236) connected intentionality to what emotions, affective attunement, and vitality forms are opened for us in a specific situation. These emotions, affective

attunements, and vitality forms become our feelings of vitality. The feelings of vitality are found inside us all the time, and they are awakened or affected by other people's behavior and by changes in motivation, desire, and excitement (Stern 2010, 88). Our feeling of vitality becomes the way we understand our bodies, others, and space. We express this understanding in interactions, with our bodies, and with words.

It is well documented that interactions can be complex and challenging but important for children's wellbeing and development. Less is known about interaction processes in micro-level transitions in preschool. The aim of this study was to investigate what characterizes teachers' interactions with children in micro-level transitions in Norwegian preschools.

Methods

This study was part of a larger longitudinal study of children's development in preschool, Språk, motorikk, numerisk og sosial utviklings-studien (The language, motor skills, numeric, and social development study [SMNS study]). The SMNS study consists of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, and we follow children born in 2015 from preschool to third grade. The data presented in this article was collected alongside the other empirical material. To gain insight into preschool teachers' interactions with children in micro-level transitions, we found video observations to be an appropriate method. In addition, we found it relevant to use a qualitative analysis approach.

Participants

A random selection of preschools in Western Norway was sent information and requested to participate in the study. The heads of the preschools decided if they wanted to participate and put the researchers in contact with the teachers. The data collection was conducted in May and June 2018. The video observations included 22 preschool teachers (21 females and 1 male) from 22 classrooms in 17 preschools in Western Norway. In qualitative research, it is essential to study phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 3). We therefore considered that observation of 22 teachers gave us both variation and the opportunity to analyze the observations in a deep and careful manner.

The preschools had 1–7 classrooms, but most of them had three classrooms. Three of the preschools were private, and 14 were municipal. Seventeen (77%) of the observed teachers worked with groups of children from 1 to 3 years of age. Two (9%) worked with children between the ages of 2 and 4, and three (14%) worked with children between 3 and 6 years. The average number of employees of the departments for children between the ages of 1–3 was 4.18 (SD: 1.01; range 3–7 persons), and in the departments for children aged 3–6, the average was 4 (SD: 1.23; range 3–6 persons). Preschool teachers in Norway undergo three years of university college education.

Data collection

In all classrooms, the researchers made observations by following the teacher with a video camera. The researcher used a handheld camera without optional equipment. In addition

to the transitions, the teacher was observed in two other situations: meals and free play for 10 min in each situation. 10 min of observation in each situation was done to ensure that the data collection in the 22 groups was consistent and of a scope that could be handled in the analysis. The teacher was filmed for 30 min, for a total of 11 h. In this article, we focused on the transitions, which were approximately 4 h of the empirical material. All observations were done inside the preschool and were conducted between 10 am and 13 pm.

Eight researchers conducted the video observations, and four researchers in addition to the authors. All the researchers are assistant or associated professors at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, and they had joint training sessions before the observations took place. These sessions focused on how the video observations were to be carried out. For example, that the observer should film the teacher and the children in regular situations, bring both the teacher and the child in the frame, and that the three situations (mealtime, play and transitions) should be filmed separately.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

The credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative studies can be enhanced by analytical, systematic, and transparent processes (Twining et al. 2017). To this end, we have transcribed our methodological reflections, decisions, and choices. In addition, eight researchers took part in the discussions of the data collection and methodological strategies, and four researchers participated in the analysis and writing process. We also involved several preschools ($n = 17$) and preschool teachers ($n = 22$).

Ethical considerations are crucial in research. The SMNS-study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (reference number 60456) and received written consent from preschool teachers and children's parents. The teachers informed the children about the project and both the teacher and the children were told that they could ask us to stop filming at any point. We were also prepared to stop filming if the children or the teachers during the observations seemed insecure or signaled bodily that they wanted us to leave the situation. We did not experience the children or the teachers telling us, either verbally or bodily, that they wanted us to stop filming. The preschools and children's names are fictitious. For the preschool teachers, we used the gender-neutral term *teacher* and the pronoun *they*.

Transcriptions and analysis

The video observations were transcribed and analyzed by the authors. We used NVivo qualitative analysis software in the coding process and based our coding on a detailed investigation of the empirical material. During the coding process, we closely watched the videos and read the transcripts, and we coded both. Thereafter, we used a step-wise-deductive-inductive approach (SDI) to analyze the empirical material (Tjora 2021). By using the SDI approach, our analysis was what Henriksen and Tjora (2018) conceptualized as being directed toward inductively developing themes across the empirical material.

In the first part of the analysis, we generated a total of 15 code groups, named, for instance, questions with follow-up, questions without follow-up, information, telling the children what to do, humor, and fantasy. The next step in the coding process was to group the codes into patterns that illuminated what characterized the teacher's interactions with the children. We conceptualized the creation of code patterns as dimensions. In this part of the process, we connected a theoretical perspective to the analysis.

A dynamic variation between verbal and bodily expressions was identified as essential for the teacher's interactions. Stern's theory of forms of vitality, where the dynamical connection between the verbal and bodily interaction is decisive, was therefore found relevant. However, the organizational factors seemed crucial for the teachers' bodily and verbal expressions. Here we found Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the phenomenological field and intentionality useful. Using Stern and Merleau-Ponty's theories as a lens, we identified four dimensions: 1) *verbally directed toward the children*, 2) *bodily directed toward the children*, 3) *verbally directed toward the practical*, 4) and *bodily directed toward the practical*.

Results

The presentation of our findings begins with the four interaction dimensions, which are illustrated in the four-stage model in [Figure 1](#).

How the teachers directed their bodily and verbal language was the basis for how they interacted with the children. Overall, the interaction was aimed either toward practical tasks or toward the child. However, it is important to highlight that each teacher interacted in dynamic variations. We illustrated this dynamic variation with a line between the extreme points. How the language was aimed differed between the verbal and the bodily. For instance, the interaction could mainly be aimed at the practical verbally but bodily at the child.

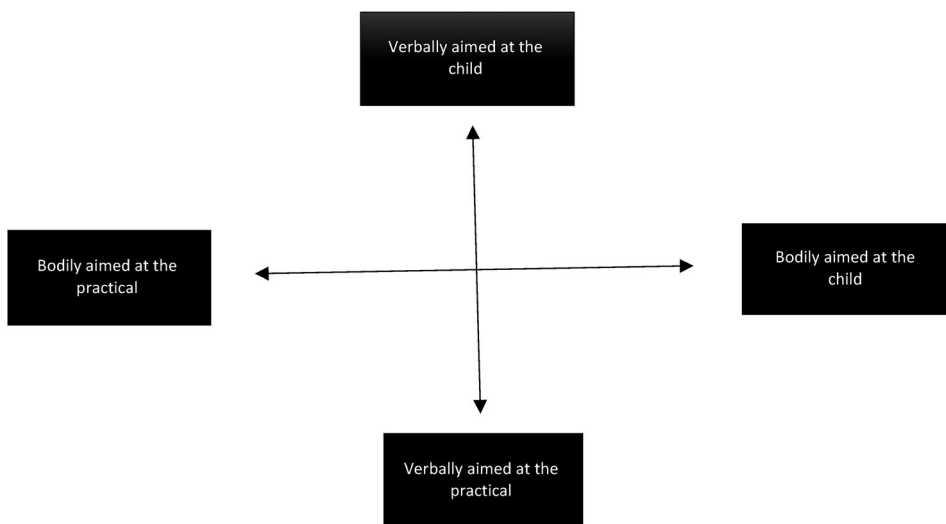


Figure 1. The four dimensions of preschool teachers' interactions with children in transitions.

The four interaction dimensions

Verbally aimed at the child

When the interactions were verbally aimed at the child, the teacher talked a lot, and their speech was directed toward the child. In this directness, they used the children's names, informed the children what was to happen next, and confirmed what the children said:

'Come, Edward and Dan, we are going outside, but first, we are going to the toilet to change diapers.' (Preschool 12)

When the teacher confirmed, they confirmed with an assessment of what the child had done:

'Sofie says, "The other train."'

The teacher leans toward the big plastic box and asks:

'Do we miss the train? Sofie says, "Yes."' (Preschool 16)

Or they repeated the word or sentence the child had said:

'Dry your hands, yes.' (Preschool 15)

Verbally aimed at the practical

When the interactions were verbally aimed at the practical, the teachers also used their verbal language actively. The difference between this way of interacting and verbally aiming at the child, first, was that the children's names were seldom used. Second, the talking was mainly directed toward all the children, the practical and the next to happen:

'You must sit here until you have said thank you for the food.' (Preschool 17)

Another characteristic of the practically aimed interactions was the number of questions that were asked without follow-up. The teacher asked a lot of questions but did not wait for the child to answer. Instead, another question was asked:

'Can you (one of the children) pick up the animals (plastic animals) with me?' The teacher walks away and says to another child, 'You can put the book on the shelf, then we can read it later, okay?' (Preschool 2)

When the teacher asked many questions without follow-up, this often happened in situations that included many children and tasks.

Bodily aimed at the children

When the interactions were bodily aimed at the children, the teachers were enthusiastic and positive, and their bodily intentionality was directed toward the children. Bodily, they were in the here and now, and their bodies were mainly calm and focused on the children:

The teacher strokes the child's hair and lays their head next to his head. (Preschool 5)

The teacher was bodily present and connected to the children:

Four children stand close to each other. The teacher squats next to the children and holds her arm around one of the girls. (Preschool 3)

Even when the children had a disagreement, the teacher was enthusiastic, positive, and used humor, both verbally and bodily.

Lone says, ‘Theodor, I’ll take this home with me (shows a drawing); otherwise, you won’t be allowed to visit me.’ The teacher says to Lone, ‘Can Theodor not visit you? Are you angry?’ The teacher smiles, laughs, and tickles Lone on the tummy. Lone smiles and says, ‘No.’ (Preschool 18)

Bodily aimed at the practical

When the teacher was bodily focused on the practical, they walked a lot, and the focus seemed to be on what was to happen next. They wandered from place to place inside the room, as well as in and out of the room:

The teacher goes into a room with many big pillows. They tidy the pillows against the wall. They come out of the room, talk briefly to the children who are waiting in a couch, and go into another room. (Preschool 7)

Another characteristic was the rapid change in which of the children was focused on and in which room the preschool teacher was present:

The teacher stands at the toilet with a child. Then, they walk toward Joe, who is lying on the floor in the playroom. The teacher says to Joe, ‘It seems like you need to sleep.’ Then, they walk back to the toilet. (Preschool 2)

This way of interacting often occurred when many children were present, and the transitions consisted of many different tasks, also for the children. As in this teacher’s classroom, the children should tidy the playroom, go to the toilet, and wash their hands.

Characteristics of preschool teachers’ interactions

We found that the teachers connected how they interacted bodily and verbally in different variations. Based on these different variations, we found four interactional characteristics: *informing, facilitating, exploring, and affirmative*. In figure 2 this is

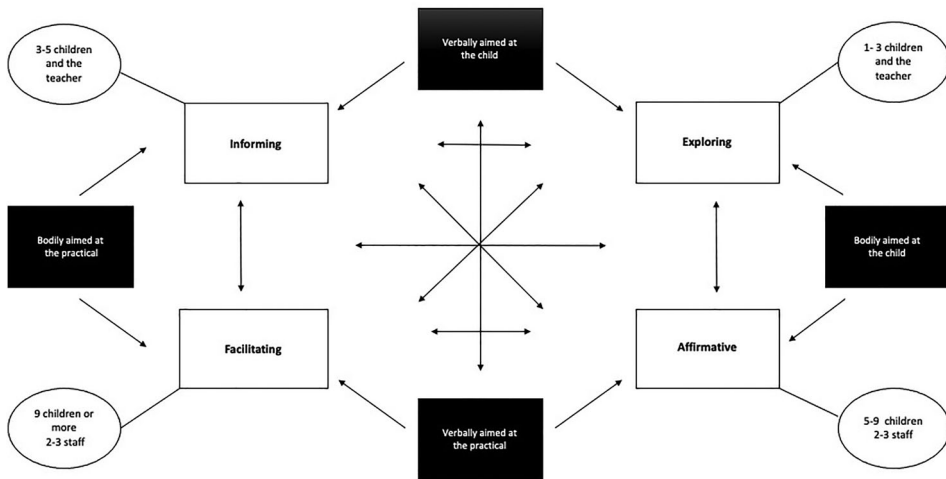


Figure 2. The four dimensions and the four interactional characteristics.

illustrated by the arrows between the dimensions in the black boxes, and the interaction characteristics in the white boxes.

Figure 2 shows the connection between the dimensions and the characteristics. The lines between the characteristics illustrate the dynamic variations in the interactions. The teacher interacted mainly in line with one of the characteristics but had elements of the others. For example, when the interaction was characterized by being exploring there could be elements of informing, facilitating and affirmative ways of interacting. The four characteristics were also linked to organizational factors, such as how many children and staff were present. This is illustrated in the circle boxes and will be explained when we present the four characteristics. The presentation starts with the informing.

Informing: what is happening next

When the teachers interacted in an informing way, their interactions seemed to be focused on what was to come. Three to five children and one teacher were in attendance. The teacher moved around, and the attention was mostly on the next task. Verbally, the teacher aimed at the children. In the verbal interaction, the teacher used the children's names and connected the practical tasks to each child. Their verbal interaction was characterized as being messages to one or two specific children, but the teacher went further before the child had given their response:

The teacher asks Per to put the toy fox in a box. Per holds the toy fox in his hand. He goes toward the part of the room where the teacher points. The teacher points and says to Per, 'Per, you can put the fox in this box.' While informing Per about what to do, the teacher goes the opposite way of where they have pointed and informs some other kids about what to do. Then, they turn around and end up where they want the boy to put the toy fox... The teacher says to Per: 'Per, do you want to help John with the animals?' The teacher picks up two toy animals and says, 'Yes,' and they go for a walk. (Preschool 2)

Facilitating: to control the situation

In the facilitating way of interacting, the teacher's verbal and bodily directedness is focused on activities and the organization of the day. In these situations, there were nine children or more and two to three staff members. The teacher was bodily restless and walked back and forth a lot. What separated the facilitating interaction from the informing interaction was that the teacher did not see the children to the same extent. The focus seemed to be on the practical next thing to happen, more than on information given to guide one specific child. Children's names are rarely used, and the teacher's focus was sometimes more directed toward other staff than it was directed toward the children:

One of the boys' rises and puts an orange plate on the table. The teacher picks up the orange plate, turns it around, and places it in the middle of the table. They walk toward a trolley table. Another staff member: 'Shall I find the rest of the food?' 'Yes' says the teacher and goes on: 'We need a ...' Another staff member: 'I don't know about these bananas. Do you want them now or at the fruit meal?' One of the girls at the table starts to cry, and she screams, 'Noooo.' The teacher holds a plastic bag in her hand and says to the other staff member, 'We'll take them (the bananas) to the fruit meal. But can you bring three knives?' 'Three knives?' asks the other staff member. 'Yes,' says the teacher and turns their head toward the girl who is crying. The teacher turns their head back to the trolley table and takes bread out of a plastic bag. (Preschool 4)

Affirmative: what is happening

In the affirmative way of interacting, the teacher was bodily aimed at the child and verbally aimed at the practical. Five to nine children and two to three staff members were present in these situations. The teacher seemed engaged and positive and saw the children in a bodily manner. Bodily, the teacher looked calmer than in the informative and facilitating interactions. Verbally, there was little dialogue between the teacher and the children, but the teacher put into words what was happening. The questions the teacher asked seemed to close more than they opened for the children's participation. A transition from mealtime to sleeping time in Preschool 6 was illustrative of the affirmative interaction:

The teacher turns their head toward Alice (one of the children) and says, 'Alice, you must eat a bit, so you don't get so hungry.' Alice takes food with her spoon and puts the spoon in her mouth. David has finished his meal and wants to leave the table. The teacher looks toward David and says, 'We're going to sit here and wait, all of us.'

Exploring: to expand the moment

The main characteristic of the exploring interaction is that the teacher is both verbally and bodily aimed at the child. It is a dialogue between the teacher and the child, and the teacher uses the children's names and clearly formulates their expectations. In these situations, one to three children and the teacher were present. The child talked or moved, and the teacher followed the words and movements in an adapted way:

Andy walks toward the window and looks out onto the playground. The teacher follows Andy and says, 'Look, the other teachers are making a swimming pool so we can play with water.' Andy walks to the window next to the other window. The teacher follows Andy and says, 'So, when you have slept, you can join in the water splashing. Can you see that Kirsti has made a swimming pool?' The teacher whispers, 'You can use a bucket and a shovel and splash. But first, you must sleep.' Fiona (child) walks toward Andy and the teacher. The teacher turns their body and glances toward Fiona and says, 'Look, they made a swimming pool outside; after you have slept, you can play with the water.' (Preschool 5)

Discussion

The aim of this article was to investigate how preschool teachers interact with children in micro-level transitions. We found four characteristics of the interactions: *informing*, *affirmative*, *facilitating*, and *exploring*. These characteristics were dynamic in the sense that they illustrated different ways of interacting, and the teachers used them to varying degrees. In the following section, we used Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Stern's (2007; 2010) concepts of phenomenological field, intentionality, and vitality forms to discuss our findings.

Organization and forms of vitality

In our analysis, we discovered a connection between the interaction characteristics that the preschool teacher used and the organizational factors. The organizational factors that seemed decisive were how many children and staff members were present in the situation. When, for example, the teachers' interaction was characterized as facilitating and

aimed at practical tasks and what was to come next, there were more than nine children and two to three staff present. On the other hand, when the teachers interacted in an exploratory way, and were directed toward the current and the children, there were groups of one to three children present with the teacher. Organizational factors therefore seemed crucial for how the teacher interacted. This was in line with the findings of Løkken (2022) and Løkken et al. (2018). They found that a higher staff-child ratio (one staff member to three or fewer children) resulted in higher quality staff-child interaction.

The actions that can be created in the phenomenological field do not exclusively depend on organizational factors (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 168). Most likely, it also depends on which experiences, habits, and inner models, bodily and verbally, the teacher and the children have had the opportunity to create, both in relation to each other, to the physical environment, and the material. Which inner models can be reinforced is decisive for intentionality (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 321) and vitality forms (Stern 2007, 236).

If we follow Stern's concept of the feelings of vitality, the inner models, and intentionality that are opened in the transition are the core elements according to which emotions, affective attunements, and vitality forms are awakened in the situation (Stern 2007, 236). As Stern highlights, these feelings of vitality are awakened or affected by other people's behaviors. As such, the feelings of vitality that children can experience and create with the teacher and other children most likely depend on the preschool teacher's vitality form. For instance, an interaction characterized by being exploring will most probably foster more open dialogues, calm bodies, and affective attunements, while an interaction that is facilitating will most probably foster little dialogue, more restless bodies, and less affective attunements. On the other hand, what vitality form the teacher can create most likely depends on the children's vitality forms. If there are many children in the room and one of them, for example, starts crying and says 'Noooo' loudly, like the girl in Preschool 4, this most probably will affect how the teacher uses their body and what words they use.

It does not 'Just Happen by Itself'

The four interaction characteristics we found indicated that the teacher, verbally and bodily, met the children's emotions and perspectives in varying degrees. For instance, when the teacher interacted in a facilitating way, they were both bodily and verbally aimed at the practical and what was to happen next. Unlike when they interacted in an exploring way. Then, they were in the present, affectively attuned to the child, using the children's names, and connecting the children to each other. In the situation with Andy and Fiona in Preschool 5, the teacher interacted in a way that connected the two children and gave them insight into what was to happen next. A child who meets an exploring interaction and a teacher who puts her or his perspectives into words and connects the child to other children most probably has the possibility to feel well and secure (Broberg 2018). This way of interacting can open the child's opportunities to be what Fabian (2006) conceptualized as autonomous. It might give the child an occasion to participate, to cooperate with other children, and to experience and expand their own and other children's perspectives. These are aspects that Hännikäinen (2015) emphasized as important for children's emotional well-being. As such, the interaction characteristics we found created different emotional, participation, and cooperating chances for the children. Therefore, it may be crucial for teachers to be aware of how they interact during transitions.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The use of video observation is one of the strengths of this study. This allowed us to observe the teacher's interactions in everyday situations, and we could watch the observations several times. In addition, there were several researchers in the analysis process, and we presented and received feedbacks on our analysis from other researchers at, for example, conferences.

Conducting interviews and including the teachers in the analysis could have expanded our perspectives. Having several researchers do the video observations could increase the possibility of different focuses in the observations.

Conclusion

The four characteristics highlighted that how teachers use their bodies and words in transitions is decisive for what interactions can be created. This is most probably essential for what emotions and opportunities can be created, both for the teacher and for the children. In transitions, children and teachers constitute what Kousholt (2011) called conditions for each other's opportunities, for better or for worse. However, our findings indicated that the interactions that can be created do not only depend on the teachers' choices in the situation, but also on organizational factors. As such, the contextual opportunities that the transition represents seem important. An implication of this study should therefore be that the teachers examine how their micro-level transitions are organized and what opportunities for interaction this gives the children and themselves. There is also a need for more research that investigates which transitions occur during the preschool day and how the children and teachers experience them.

This article can hopefully inspire preschool teachers to organize and act in transitions in a way that Fabian (2006) perceived as an exciting, positive, and expanding situation in which children and preschool staff can work together. However, it is important to highlight that the organizational factors do not only depend on the preschool teachers' choices. Organizational characteristics may also depend on political choices linked to, for example, staffing standards in preschools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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