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# Can I Kiss a Child? Balancing Between Different Views of Touch in Early Childhood Educators' Work

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that touch has an important role in preschools. However, less is known about early childhood educators' views on touch in their work. Hence, we ask what different views of touch early childhood educators narrate as a part of their work. The research material consists of three multiprofessional group discussions with educators working in Finnish preschools. The findings show how educators balanced between different views of touch. Occasionally they spoke from personal points of view: touch is intimate while an important part of their work. However, educators also spoke from professional and practical points of view: circumstances and practices influence touch, and they must tolerate touch because of the nature of their work. Additionally, educators spoke about how culture, rules, habits, and other people affect touch. The study suggests that practices of touch must be intertwined with tactful practice and treated as a multisided phenomenon in education.

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## 1. Introduction

In educational research, touch is often seen as a natural part of educators' work, especially in early childhood education, where children are taken care of and nurtured via touch (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Keränen et al., 2017). Manning (2007) points out that touch is appreciated as a way of creating relations and that touch touches deeper than just one's skin, which is why it should be done with thought and respect, also in the relations between children and adults. Simultaneously, prior research has described touch as a contested matter in education. Educators may decide to avoid touching children for fear of being misinterpreted (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). In addition, research has acknowledged various rules and guidelines about the "right kind" of touch or whether touch in certain educational contexts is appropriate (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Manos, 2007). For example, there seems to be an unwritten rule that kissing a child, as one form of touch, is forbidden in education (Piper & Smith, 2003). These practices, rules, and guidelines related to touch reveal its contradictory nature in educators' work: Touch is simultaneously something to value and something to avoid.

Touch in education has recently attracted greater research interest: Prior research has, for example, shown that touch has an important role in preschools (e.g., Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Hedlin et al., 2018; Svinth, 2018). However, less is known about educators' views on touch in their work. This study focuses on those views by studying multiprofessional group discussions of

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educators working in preschools. In this article, we ask what different views of touch early childhood educators narrate as a part of their work.

## 2. Touch in Educators' Work

Touch has been studied both in the context of schools (e.g., Heinonen et al., 2020) and preschools (e.g., Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018), from the viewpoint of children (Keränen et al., 2020), educators (e.g., Johansson et al., 2021) and student teachers (Johansson et al., 2018). Previous research has focused on touch in relations between educators and children in preschools: Respecting and loving touch has been recognized as advancing children's holistic development and well-being (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Svinth, 2018), and the diverse functions of touch in care for children have been emphasized, such as controlling, compassionate, comforting, and affectionate touch (Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). Previous research has illustrated tensions to exist between practices of touch and no-touch in educators' work: On one hand, educators see touch as a natural touch way to be with children (Keränen et al., 2017). On the other hand, according to prior research, touch can be a risky behavior in education, since educators' touch can be misinterpreted for example as a physical or sexual assault of children (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Johnson, 2000; Piper & Smith, 2003; Tobin, 1997). Additionally, prior research has brought up that touch is not discussed in teacher education and thus newly graduated teachers may not always know how to touch in preschools (Johansson et al., 2018; Johansson et al., 2021).

Touching is natural for all primate beings and the rules of touch are learned and shaped by culture (Classen, 2008; Howes, 2008). In the Finnish National Core Curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care (2018), touch is related to the tasks of educating and caring for children in preschools. Touch in this curriculum is stated as a part of interaction in which warm, respectful touch creates a basis of care. Caring for children in preschools entails keeping them physically and emotionally safe (Lupton, 2013). However, different preschools have different cultures of touch which are shaped by institutional norms regarding touch (Finnegan, 2005).

Like touch, also the bodies and embodiment of educators are significant in many ways in the field of education, as prior research has brought up: Working as an educator is an embodied labor, which means that educators' bodies and body positions are present in their work and are observed by the children all the time (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; Frankin, 2003). Also, emotions like love towards children are expressed through educators' bodies (Estola & Syrjälä, 2002). Research on students' memories of their teachers has also illustrated how teachers are recalled as bodily beings and how teachers' touches can leave memory marks in students' bodies (Uitto & Estola, 2009; Uitto & Syrjälä, 2008). In education, the bodies of children are also significant as educators for example control children's bodies in many ways, for example by having rules such as not to run, to sit still, etc. (Lupton, 2013; Valentine, 2009). Also, children show affection toward educators in embodied ways (Golden, 2004). Touch as a part of educators' and children's embodiment is present in these studies.

This study is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) philosophy of embodiment, which offers theoretical tools for studying touch. Merleau-Ponty paints a picture of touch as one way to make sense of the world, the self, and others in it. We understand this notion as a relation: Through touch, one is in relation with oneself as well as with others. Hence, experiences of oneself, others, and the world are embodied. Merleau-Ponty's writings point out that touch is a two-way road: One cannot touch without being touched at the same time (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This view echoes the notion of touch as the most social sense (Field, 2014) and the most private sense (Manning, 2007). In the words of Ahmed and Stacey (2001), skin is the surface covering the body, and in touch, this surface breaks. This means that touch touches deeper than mere skin, as it evokes different kinds of meanings and experiences in people. To understand touch in preschools, touch needs to be studied also from the viewpoint of educators, as in this study.

### 3. Methodological Starting Points and Implementation

We employ a narrative approach in this study. Stories enable us to understand human experience and actions (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005; Kim, 2016), including the phenomenon of touch and its multi-dimensional meaning in educators' work and in wider society. According to Ochs and Capps (2001), storytelling constructs common worlds, and through storytelling, personal experiences become socially shared. Storytelling is a personal, social, and cultural phenomenon (Riessman, 2008).

In this study, stories are understood as co-constructed in group discussions, which enables creating new meanings and understandings of touch (Elbaz-Luwisch et al., 2002; Uitto et al., 2016). In the process of meaning-making and understanding, the temporality of stories becomes meaningful: Stories move between the past, present, and future (Riessman, 2008). Hence, in educators' stories about touch, experiences intertwine with present work and personal life, and via shared meaning-making, they intertwine with the future as well.

When the body and experiences in it are at the core of research, as they are here, stories become more than just stories told verbally; they are stories told from and through the body (Heavey, 2015; Iisaluoma & Emerald, 2017). As the educators spoke about touch in group discussions, gestures and movements (e.g., caressing, hugging, and showing) were crucial parts of the storytelling, and through them, experiences of touch became visible to others (Heavey, 2015).

#### 3.1. The Finnish Context and Participants

In Finland, children can enter to preschools from as early as 9 months to 6 years old. In preschools, children are commonly divided into groups according to their ages: 0–3 years old, 3–5 years old, and 6 years old. Children who are 6 years old go to pre-primary school and start primary school at the age of 7.

Finnish preschools are multiprofessional work communities, which means that educators (leaders, early childhood education teachers, childcare workers and assistants) have different educational backgrounds and professional statuses. In this article, we use the concept of “educator,” which refers to all the professionals working in preschools. The participants in this article were early childhood educators ( $n = 27$ ) from three preschools in northern Finland (see Table 1). All of them were women since there were no men working in the preschools that participated in this research. All participants, except the leaders, who worked as administrative leaders, worked with children whose ages varied from 0–6 years old.

#### 3.2. Multiprofessional Group Discussions as Research Material

The research material consists of three group discussions with early childhood educators. The first author Virve first contacted leaders of three preschools via email to ask about their interest in participating in research on touch as part of everyday work. The leaders negotiated participation with the staff. All three preschools agreed to participate in the research, and one group discussion was organized in each. Participation in the group discussions was voluntary for all members of the

**Table 1.** Participants of the research.

Preschool	Leader of a preschool	Early childhood education teacher	Childcare worker	Assistant in a group	Participants in total
<b>Preschool 1</b>	1	3	5	–	9
<b>Preschool 2</b>	1	8	5	1	15
<b>Preschool 3</b>	–	2	1	–	3
<b>Participants in total</b>	2	13	11	1	27

staff. Consent forms were collected at the beginning of the group discussions, and ethical principles, such as the right to withdraw from the research at any stage, were emphasized. Pseudonyms are used for the educators and preschools in this article.

The number of participants in the group discussions varied, and the discussions were organized during the workday on the premises of each preschool. The group discussions were recorded, and discussions lasted ca. one hour (the transcriptions were about 60 pages in total, Calibri, 11 pt.). Virve's background as a former early childhood education teacher helped her to understand and identify with the participants' stories. In the words of Connelly and Clandinin (2006), Virve invested herself and her experience in the research.

The groups consisted of people working in the same preschools, so the participants knew each other beforehand, which enabled them to share experiences and thoughts and even challenge each other (Bloor et al., 2000). This could also be a reason Virve felt that the atmosphere in all three groups was warm and welcoming.

Given that touch can be such a natural part of everyday life that it can be difficult to notice (Johnson, 2000), Virve requested that the participants keep a touch diary for one week. In their diaries, the participants were requested to write about moments of touch in everyday life in preschools and about the feelings that those moments evoked. The diary was meant to help the participants become aware of touch as part of their work and to precipitate storytelling during the discussions.

All three discussions started the same way. First, Virve briefly explained her background as an early childhood education teacher and shared how her experiences as a teacher had inspired her interest in studying touch. Second, she asked about the touch diaries and the feelings related to writing them. After these "warm-up" questions, discussions started easily and were vivid. Hence, the group discussions were not structured, but the stories followed one another, and stories evoked new stories (Uitto et al., 2016). The participants sometimes continued what another was saying. The participants were not obliged to speak in the group discussions, but still overall, they had much to say about touch. Some educators were more talkative whereas some were quite silent during the discussions, and some only whispered to each other. This may be due to some groups being quite big. This means that not all participants necessarily had the opportunity to say or did not dare to say what they would have liked (see also Estola & Syrjäälä, 2002). In the group discussions, Virve had a research diary where she briefly wrote about the atmosphere of the group discussions and made observations, such as how the educators used their bodies while telling (Heavey, 2015).

### **3.3. Analysis**

The analysis of the research material was inductive. The phases of the analysis did not follow each other chronologically but rather partially overlapped (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). First, Virve transcribed the group discussions. She had the research diary beside her during this phase, which helped her recall the discussions and the atmosphere. When transcribing, Virve marked the parts that were narratively thick and seemed meaningful from the storyteller's viewpoint (Lieblich et al., 1998; Uitto, 2012), such as the parts that visibly evoked emotions in the storytellers and vivid discussion and opinions in the other participants.

Second, Virve thematically analyzed the transcriptions of the group discussions focusing on content regarding touch but also paying attention to the forms of telling (Riessman, 2008). In this phase, Virve noticed that when the educators talked about touch, they talked about how touch appears in different situations and circumstances in the daily lives of preschools and about the rules and practices related to touch. After this phase, Minna, second author, joined the analysis and writing process. We continued together the analysis by further reading the transcriptions and discussing our notions and interpretations (Puroila & Haho, 2017). At this point, we noticed how the educators' stories included different views of touch in their work.

Third, we focused on interpreting the different views of touch in educators' stories (Freeman, 1994). We identified three views in educators' stories: (1) Balancing between touch as a personal and professional matter, (2) Balancing between touch as a tool in the daily lives of preschools and as a thoughtful act, and (3) Balancing between cultural norms and the preschool practices of touch. Although these views were sometimes mixed and overlapping, we present them one by one in the next section.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. *Balancing Between Touch as a Personal and Professional Matter*

First, the educators' stories revealed how they balance between touch as a personal and professional matter in their work. In the vignette below Riina and Kirsi discuss the importance of touch in educators' work – as previous research has also pointed out (e.g., Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Owen & Gillentine, 2011) – but also about the balancing:

Riina (teacher):	I think that if you cannot stand touch, it would be difficult somehow. You could not do this work. I mean, “don't touch me, I don't touch you.” It would not work, or it would be difficult.
Kirsi (teacher):	I think I can speak for many of us when I say that you permit more touches here [at work] than you would in some other places. I mean that probably the boundary of what we tolerate here is higher.
Riina:	When we are at work—but when we go somewhere else . . .
Kirsi:	The boundary is different.
(Group discussion in Preschool 2)	

In Kirsi's narration, the preschool appears to be a place where the boundaries of personal touch broaden and being a professional educator means that touch needs to be accepted as a part of everyday work. Prior research has discussed how also schoolteachers need to consider carefully about how to approach their students emotionally and physically (Uitto, 2012), including in terms of touch. Here, the vignette illustrates how educators can view touch as so important in their work that they feel they must tolerate more and different kinds of touches than they would elsewhere.

When educators narrated about touch as a personal and professional matter, their stories were strong and full of emotion. This idea echoes Manning's (2007) understanding about touch going deeper than just skin and how educators “feel their work in their bodies,” as Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003, p. 706) put it. In the next vignette, Hilikka continues to describe the educators' work from the viewpoint of touch:

Hilikka (teacher):	When I come from work after those days, when children have been on my skin the whole day, I say to my own children: Don't come yet. Don't come into my lap. Somehow, I don't want to be touched. I just want to be me for a while. Touch is wonderful when it is warm, but sometimes even that can be too much. It is like the child is inside your boundaries for the whole day.
Riina:	It is kind of a shame that, even in good touches, there is a limit to touch, and mostly the limits are fulfilled here. Unfortunately.
(Group discussion in Preschool 2)	

Ahmed and Stacey (2001) cited Merleau-Ponty (1962) when writing that the body is always in relation with other bodies and this means that one cannot say that the body belongs only to oneself. In Hilikka's storytelling, the notion of a shared body can be heard. Even when children's touches are good and warm, they fill the body of an educator. The above vignette illustrates how also particular places echo in storytelling as previous research has discussed (Mazzei & Jackson, 2017) – Hilikka narrates herself both as an educator and a mother, as she describes that when going home, she needs to have her body to herself for a while before she can let her own children touch her. According to Manning (2007), in touch, bodies can become categorized into preordained categories; in the

above vignette, for example, into those of an educator and a mother. Hence, it seems that for Hilikka, there is a space between these categories where there are no touches and where the body is not categorized but belongs to Hilikka herself. This notion reveals how powerful touch can be and how, by touch, bodies become to exist as belonging to certain categories (Springgay, 2008).

Even though the educators described tolerating more touch as part of their work than they would elsewhere, educators can drift into situations in which they must balance between their personal feelings and professional knowledge of touch, as in the next vignette:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Ira (leader):              | It is a challenge [to touch] children who are really dirty and stinky with dirty hair with lice in their hair. You are like, “I would like to [hold you], but I don’t know how because I feel sick.” |
| Leena (teacher):           | Exactly. And those are the children that want to come into your lap. And they need it as well.   |
| Ira:                       | Yes, they need it. Then you wonder whether the child feels that I am not so into the situation.  |
| Anneli (childcare worker): | You become stiff.  |
| Miina (teacher):           | At least [you do] not [want to touch] the hair.  |
| Ira:                       | You look at the child’s hair—what is running around there.   |
- (Group discussion Preschool 1)

In the vignette, the educators describe how a dirty child can be unpleasant to touch. Children who are clean and healthy are easy to love and touch; their bodies can be seen as an achievement of parents and educators (Christensen, 2000), whereas as in the vignette, a dirty child seems to evoke the opposite feelings.

The balancing between touch as a personal and professional matter is present in the vignette: how letting the child inside the skin is part of the educators’ professional work in the preschool and how educators cannot draw boundaries on touch based on their personal preferences. This notion emphasizes the educator’s work as physically and emotionally embodied as previous research has shown (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; Golden, 2004). Educators’ embodied work relates to, for example, moving around, lifting and holding children in one’s lap, and emotionally intertwining with feelings that children’s embodiment, arouses such as love, fear, disgust, and admiration as Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) write.

The vignette illustrates how the preschools became outlined as places where educators’ bodies were exposed to touch; according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 100), “[M]y body appears to me an attitude directed toward a certain existing or possible task.” In other words, the task of educators’ bodies is to be available for children’s touches. This idea about educators’ bodies as available for touch seems to vanish in the vignette when a child considered as dirty and stinky approaches the educator. By keeping a distance from dirty children, educators may want to secure their own bodies against filth (see also Twigg, 2000). It is also worth thinking what a dirty child represents: The body easily described as “normal” is smooth and clean. This so-called normal body is: “then an achievement, a model of proper in which everything is in its place and the chaotic aspect of the natural are banished” (Shildrick, 2001, p. 163). Therefore, a dirty child’s body can be seen as something other than normal. The dirty body of a child could represent the chaotic aspects of the natural, which could underline the achievements that the child’s parents or educators failed to reach. Here, touch as a personal and professional matter echoes how this elusiveness makes touch difficult.

#### **4.2. Balancing Between Touch as a Tool in the Daily Lives of Preschools and as a Thoughtful Act**

Second, the educators’ stories revealed how they balance between touch as a tool in the daily lives of preschools and as a thoughtful act. In these stories, the practices, certain times, and places of the everyday lives of preschools affect how educators touch children. The preschools’ everyday practices

shape touch. These embodied practices, such as dressings, naptimes, and washings, as well as controlling children's bodies aim to keep children physically and emotionally safe as brought up by previous research (Lupton, 2013; Tobin, 1997). In the following vignette, the educators describe situations in preschools' everyday lives from the viewpoint of touch:

Riina (teacher):	Waking the children from the nap, the touch is not necessarily gentle there.
Niina (childcare worker):	Blanket off and get up (laughs).
Pirjo (leader):	Yes, sometimes the everyday life can be too hectic.
Riina:	It is like how the environment around changes the touch. Like hurry. Hurry changes the touch into something different.
Pirjo:	It does.
Riina:	Even if you have a good will in what you do, you just don't have many options. Touch can be totally different from what you have wanted it to be.
Hilkka (teacher):	Or the times when you are putting the clothes on. You all know the situations! So, it isn't the children's fault, but the moment there is so annoying that irritation must come through your hands. I would like to be the first child, not the fifth.
Riina:	And in a hurry, you don't mean anything bad, you just push the children to move on and guide them by grabbing their hands. The child must think, what on earth!
Kaisa (assistant): (Group discussion Preschool 2)	And the children are just living their lives.

Here, the educators describe how the hectic situations in the preschool change touch. Touch appears as a tool that educators use to accomplish tasks, such as waking a child from a nap or dressing the child. In the hectic daily lives of preschools, it is almost like the educators are not the ones who touch but it is the hurry that touches, as Riina describes. It seems that in the situations like these the educators touch in ways that are not necessarily gentle or warm. Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) point out how embodiment is part of every act and how embodiment involves feelings that are shaped and formed in the cultural context and by former experiences. Here, the preschool as a cultural context exists as a place where certain moments and spaces define how educators touch children.

In the vignette, Riina raises the children's views on educators' touch in hectic situations. Riina narrates how touch in a hurry can be pushing and grabbing children by the hand. In the practices of preschools, touch can be considered an aspect of "pedagogical tact": pedagogical touch could be defined simply as touching children thoughtfully (Van Manen, 1991). To touch children thoughtfully would then mean that also in the hectic situations, it is the educator who touches, not the hurry.

It seems that in the daily lives of preschools children are touched differently depending on their age. In the group discussions the educators narrated how the youngest children in preschool need the educators' touch in basic care, touch thus becoming a natural way to be with young children. This is contrary to Svinth (2018), who argues that touch does not always fit in the preschools' cultural repertoires, even with the youngest children. In the following vignette, Anja and Ingrid describe touch with the youngest children in preschool:

Anja (childcare worker):	When you work with the young children, there are a lot of touches.
Ingrid (teacher):	All the time. Actually, that is all you do, touch the youngest ones. [...]
	Well, there is touch also with the older children, but it isn't the same kind of nursery situations like with the younger [ones].

(Group discussion Preschool 3)

From Anja's and Ingrid's narration can be heard that educators do not seem to question touch with the youngest children in preschool. When working with the youngest children, touch is spoken about as a self-evident part of daily life. Also, certain moments in preschools can create spaces



for children to touch educators. In the next vignette, Maria and Riina tell about how children come close in the morning:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Maria (childcare worker):                           | And then the mornings, when there are only a few children and they are still drowsy, then [these mornings] are those moments when they come so close. |
| Riina: (teacher):<br>(Group discussion Preschool 2) | Sticky children in the mornings.  |

While the previous vignettes describe touch through hecticness and routine-like acts and tools, in the above vignette, touch does not appear as either. Instead, the “stickiness” of children, as Riina describes, creates possibilities to touch thoughtfully as part of the morning practices. The sleepy, calm, peaceful moments in the mornings with only a few children present also enable children to approach the educator, which contrasts with the moments of waking children or dressing them up. Touch in the pedagogical moments such as morning practices, can become situations where closeness is valuable and therefore, meaningful both for the educators and children (Van Manen, 1991).

Educators’ views on touch as a tool in the daily lives of the preschools express hectic situations in everyday life and how they alter the educators’ touch in undesirable ways. In these views, touch is given an instrumental value and children’s feelings are forgotten (see also Leavitt & Power, 1997). In contrast, peaceful moments create an atmosphere in which closeness and touch are valued. In preschool, certain activities happen at certain times (e.g., naptime, outdoor activities, eating, etc.), and in the group discussions, touch appeared to be a way for educators to manage the children from one activity to another.

#### **4.3. Balancing Between Cultural Norms and the Preschool Practices of Touch**

Third, educators’ stories revealed how they balance between cultural norms of touch, as well as the rules and practices of the preschool and other people (such as children’s parents and colleagues) in general. This balancing is related to educators’ views of what is considered proper touch in preschools. This notion echoes Gudmundsdóttir’s (2001) argument that when teachers talk about their work, they speak as individuals but also from a tradition’s point of view. In the group discussions, kissing appeared as a strong example of educators balancing between cultural norms and the preschool practices of touch in their work. In every group discussion with educators, the narration turned at some point into discussion about kisses and kissing:

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Ingrid (teacher):        | For example, I wouldn’t kiss a child, although in some situations it might even be natural, but I still feel that it would not be appropriate. |
| Hedda (teacher):         | I do not kiss in preschool. [...]  |
| Anja (childcare worker): | With younger ones, there is a lot of [kissing]. That is what I have seen, and sometimes I am like (making kissing sounds).                     |
| Hedda:                   | Maybe it is with younger ones.   |
| Anja:                    | But still [...] you are at work. The child is not yours.   |
| Hedda:                   | That is what I think too, that good heavens, you can’t!  |
| Ingrid:                  | You can kiss your own children and maybe relatives’ children who are very close to you.  |

(Group discussion Preschool 3)

Here, Ingrid and Hedda make the rather strong statement that kissing a child is not appropriate for an educator to do. They argue for the no-kissing policy by explaining that the children are not the educators’ own and that kissing is not proper for educators. Anja admits that sometimes she might kiss a child but emphasizes that educators should not kiss children. Whereas earlier we discussed how educators highlighted touch as an inevitable part of their work, here, kiss as a form of touch is narrated differently: One can only kiss a child that is one’s own, and hence, kissing is not acceptable in preschool. According to previous research, seeing kissing as unacceptable

might be related to the fear of touching inappropriately (Piper, 2014; Piper & Stronach, 2008), or for educators having a restrictive attitude towards kissing in preschool (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020; Johansson et al., 2021).

However, kissing as one way of touching, is described by educators as natural in some situations with the youngest children but challenging with older children, as Marja points out:

Marja (teacher): When children are two-year-olds, [kissing] is cute and when they are five-year-olds, you think [about] whether it is allowed.  
(Group discussion Preschool 1)

The group discussions indicate that a key point seems to be where to kiss. The educators discuss how kissing a child on the lips is not appropriate because it seems to break unwritten rules. The next vignette illustrates how educators justify this unwritten, no-kissing-on-the-lips rule with Finnish cultural habits and by trying to prevent children from passing diseases:

Riina (teacher): A child just gave me a kiss. Of course, I thought whether I should accept this or not and whether the parent accepts this or not. It was a spontaneous situation in the middle of gymnastics. Can we kiss? (laughs). I thought, why not, as long as not on the lips. Primarily the rule is that no kissing in the preschool, but then, like with this child, it is the moment that counts. If it were a child who constantly wanted to kiss, then it would be no. But situations like this comes every now and then. It is in some cultures that you kiss on the cheek when you leave, and that is OK.  
Virve: What is the reason for not kissing in preschool?  
Someone whispers: Bacterium passes on. [...]  
Maria (childcare worker): At least not on the lips.  
Riina: It is not conventional. Maybe. It is not. At least in our group in preschool, it is clear that if they lick each other all day, it is not accepted. All the diseases pass on and it is not culturally conventional either, that you lick others.  
(Group discussion Preschool 2)

Riina starts by describing child-educator relations. Here, children's parents are narrated to be on the background, but yet influencing on educators' views on touch. Later, in the vignette, Riina changes the perspective from kissing in child-educator relations to children's peer relations. At the same time, she changes the expression of kissing to licking, which transmits bacteria. Prior research has described educators' similar concerns about kissing (Piper & Stronach, 2008). It seems that since the educators' task is to keep children (and themselves) physically and emotionally safe (Lupton, 2013), forbidding kissing between children is a form of care.

This vignette also shows how not kissing can be a rule, which illustrates the no-touch practices discussed in the educational field (Johnson, 2000). Riina describes how kissing, especially kissing on the lips, is not conventional in Finland, although she quickly clarifies that at least it is not conventional in the group in which she works. The following vignette further demonstrates children's parents influencing on educators' views on touch:

Marja (teacher): I am guilty of kissing on the cheek. Can I do that? Once I confessed that to a mother and she was like go ahead! But still, I don't think that on a stranger's lips. I don't think that mothers and fathers would like that. But on the cheek.  
Hanna (teacher): I might [kiss], when little one comes to my lap (makes kissing sounds). I don't see why I couldn't kiss, if the child likes it.  
Anneli (childcare worker): Children like it. Especially the little ones. I just wonder if parents like it.  
Birgit (childcare worker): And if someone from the outside finds out, it would be a big thing.  
(Group discussion Preschool 1)

The contradictory nature of kissing is illustrated in this vignette as kissing is narrated as something forbidden in educators' stories. For example, Marja uses expressions such as "guilty" and "confessing" to parents that she kissed a child. Although the mother to whom Marja confessed encouraged her, she still narrates feeling that parents would not accept kissing. Nevertheless, prior research has

pointed out that most parents want educators to have loving relationships with their children, and touch is a natural part of loving relationships (Aslanian, 2018; Page, 2011).

The vignette above describes the child as a stranger and how kissing a stranger on the lips is not suitable. Positioning the child as a stranger, echoes the findings of prior research about educators needing to maintain distance from children because of their professional roles (Uitto, 2012). In the vignette, Birgit is also worried about how kissing a child would appear to outsiders. The narration of educators reveals that educators are willing to forbid kissing for the sake of parents and outsiders even though children might like to be kissed. This idea reminds about educators not wanting to take risks with touch in the fear of being misinterpreted (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). This also links touch to the moral values of preschool: what is good and right for a child. Also Merleau-Ponty (2010) proposes that values should be situation-dependent: “We cannot accept any preestablished values before knowing the child’s real situation” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 68; see also Welsh, 2013).

According to the educators, kissing does not belong to preschools. In the vignettes, kissing is described as something that belongs to relations between parents and children, which is in line with Page’s (2011) research. However, the educators tell about kissing the youngest children in the preschool as suitable, just not on the lips. Kissing on the lips is defined as something that belongs to one’s own children. Kissing in preschool is not culturally conventional, either.

## 5. Conclusions

This article explored the views on touch that early childhood educators narrated in group discussions. Johnson (2000) claims that educators know how to speak about touch in the right way; however, our findings illustrate that touch in educators’ work is a more complex phenomenon full of tension and emotion. We identified how educators balance between overlapping views in their work: between touch as a personal and professional matter, between touch as a tool in the daily lives of preschools and as a thoughtful act as well as between cultural norms and the preschool practices of touch.

The narrated stories echoed educators occasionally speaking from personal points of view: how touch is intimate while an important part of educators’ work. However, they also spoke from professional and practical points of view: how circumstances and practices influence touch and how they as educators must tolerate touch because of the nature of their work. Additionally, educators spoke about how culture, rules, habits, and other people affect their touch.

Educators’ bodies, embodiment, and touch are not just private, personal phenomena but socially shared and constructed (Manning, 2007; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Based on our findings, situations, conditions, children’s age, and environments affect the ways children are touched. Educators balance between the external demands, expectations, rules, and habits for how to touch appropriately. However, educators also touch children in ways that situations require or even demand. Van Manen (1991) wrote that teachers should place students first when thinking about the moral aspect of their work. Touch is to be seen as a moral act in educators’ work, since touch, as well as not touching, can be good, loving acts as well as harmful, violent ones. Placing the child first means that the educators aim to feel how children experience the touch (Van Manen & Levering, 1996).

In the group discussions, children’s views seemed mostly absent in educators’ stories about touch. To Merleau-Ponty (1962), sensing touch happens chiefly in one’s own body, which could imply why the children’s views were mostly missing. Another potential suggestion for the lack of educators’ reflections on children’s views on touch could be that the educators balance between matters that are primarily related to their work and own perspectives, instead of children’s views.

Based on the findings, touch is a situation-based act and can be an act of care and love, such as kissing a child, which is emotional and personal. Kelchtermans (2009, p. 258) states that “teaching is done by somebody”, meaning that teachers’ work is always done by a feeling and sensing person. Educators’ views on touch concur with this statement, and we emphasize the role of *body* in

*somebody*. Touch is an act through which educators not only touch children but themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), meaning that touch truly touches educators' bodies from the inside and outside.

The stories of educators echoed how different phases in one's life are present in touch; for example, when educators discussed touch, they balanced between various positions, such as being a mother and an educator. Touch leaves a memory (Uitto & Syrjälä, 2008). We stress the importance of becoming aware of the meaning of one's personal history as well as the values, emotions, and environment from which one views touch when considering and developing oneself as an educator (Rom & Eysel, 2019).

Touch is not adequately treated in the educational field. This lack may be due to touch being seen as too self-evident and/or as full of tension and therefore a difficult subject to handle (Johansson et al., 2018). For touch to be tactful, it must be discussed as part of educators' work in training future educators, such as leaders, teachers, childcare workers and assistants. We agree with Johansson et al. (2018) that places are needed for (future) educators to reflect and share their experiences about touch. We emphasize that (future) educators should understand touch as a multisided phenomenon, and that touch in educators' work is not just about setting rules of what is and what is not a proper touch.

While we were writing this article, the world changed dramatically due to COVID-19, which forced people to maintain physical distance, including in the educational field. Touch is currently an even more topical issue due to COVID-19, as educators are continually balancing between the recommended physical distance and touch as a natural part of their work. The current situation stresses how merely acknowledging touch as an important part of educators' work is not enough; practices of touch must be intertwined with tactful practice and treated as an increasingly multi-sided phenomenon.

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