

Young children's perspectives of time: New directions for co-constructing understandings of quality in ECEC

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Abstract

Children's relationship with time in preschools is an under-researched area. Young children rarely know how to measure time using a clock, but their *experiences* of time may contribute to understanding children's well-being and debates about quality in preschools. This paper brings together two empirical exploratory studies conducted in preschools in Iceland and Croatia, respectively, and is based on participatory research methods that highlight young children's perspectives on their sense of time. First, the paper provides examples of young children's understanding of the sequence of events in preschools. Most days were marked by regular routines, such as mealtimes, circle time and outdoor activities. These stepping stones were seen as providing a rhythm for the day. Children's conversations and drawings indicated an embodied sense of time that is subjective, relational and situational. Second, questions have been raised about the impact of different time practices on young children's everyday lives in preschools. In some cases, the management of time appeared to have unintended consequences for factors relating to quality in preschools. Adherence to daily visual schedules could lead to fragmented days with fewer opportunities for uninterrupted play than time management based on 'flow'. The subjective nature of children's sense of time is complex, and shared understandings between adults and children are

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not guaranteed. Careful and imaginative listening is required in order to deepen understandings on this topic. This could, in turn, support teachers to further consider the impact on children's daily experiences of preschool when planning based solely on 'clock time'.

KEYWORDS

children's perspectives, preschool, sense of time, time management

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper explores young children's sense of time in preschools in order to contribute under-researched perspectives to questions about quality in Early Childhood Education and Care. How might different time management practices impact on young children's experiences of preschools?

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Young children have an embodied sense of time that is subjective, relational and situational. Different time practices in Early Childhood Education and Care appeared to have an impact on questions relating to quality, including the restriction or availability of time for extended play.

INTRODUCTION

Time is a favored topic of authority. Questions such as 'when are you scheduling...' and 'how much time will be used in...' often make time a commodity to be spent effectively and efficiently, something to be filled rather than experienced. (Cuffaro, 1995, p. 40)

The time children spend each day in preschool varies between and within countries. However, children's relationship with time in preschools is an under-researched area (Clark, 2020; Hreinsdóttir & Dýrfjörð, 2021; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Young children rarely know how to measure time using a clock, but their *experiences* of time may contribute to understanding children's well-being and debates about quality in preschools.

This paper sets out to explore this topic by bringing together two exploratory studies conducted in preschools in Iceland and Croatia, based on participatory research methods. The aim is to provide insights into young children's lived experiences of daily routines in preschools through a temporal lens. This includes their views and experiences of the length of their stay and what gives meaning to their day, both of which relate to perceptions of quality in preschools.

The results are divided into two parts. First, the paper provides examples of young children's understanding of sequences of events and their sense of time. Second, questions are raised about the impact of different practices on how time is managed.

THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Time

The idea of a 'sense of time' holds two meanings. On the one hand, it can refer to the ability to perceive a series of events, activities and experiences, and on the other hand, it can refer to an understanding of how time can be measured on a clockface (timekeeping). These basic dimensions include other concepts of time, such as before and after, during, now and soon. Children's first understanding of temporal relationships is essential, and children need to learn to transfer their knowledge of time and experience of activities to hours and other time units (Nelson, 1986; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). Piaget (1969), writing about children's knowledge of time, concluded that their sense of time follows their cognitive development. His work showed that children's first understanding of time contains only one component—the chronological—and that time does not exist in the minds of young children in the same way adults understand time; instead, children understand time as part of an activity or movement. It usually takes children a long time to transfer their experience and knowledge of time to standard clock measurements (Friedman, 1990; Harner, 1982; Levin, 1992; Pouthas, 1993). In Heidegger's (1962, 1992) view, time can be seen as a series of activities in our lives that can pass quickly or slowly, depending on our interpretation of the situation. This understanding of time is especially true for young children, who often do not know how to measure time by using a clock but instead by what they are doing (Hreinsdóttir, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Foucault (1977) considered time management to be a form of power and argued that school curricula and schedules could be viewed as tools of discipline. Bottrill (2018) believes that the structure of time is based on the needs of the staff, not the children. Furthermore, perceptions of time may differ depending on activities, not the clock (Heidegger, 1962, 1992). When engaging in something pleasurable or new, people may perceive time to fly by, but it might stand still when little is happening or when one is bored. Such a perception of time can be considered unreliable, or less reliable, than measuring time by the clock. There are times in between when one is fully engaged and, at the same time, perceives the organisation of the day. This feeling is related to the concept of 'flow', or being in a zone where people can forget both the time and the space in which an activity is taking place, resulting in a transformation in one's sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997).

This paper assumes that children measure the length of their own time spent in a place through a series of events, activities and experiences, rather than in hours on a clockface.

Perspectives on quality at a national and local level

Quality in preschools depends on the social, cultural and economic context in which a preschool is based and is a meeting point of national and local considerations. The Croatian National Curriculum of Early Childhood Education (MSES, 2015) and the Icelandic National Curriculum (MESK, 2011) have adopted a rights-based approach that views children as capable, active participants in preschools who have opinions that can be communicated if listened to (UN, 1989). Preschools in Iceland and Croatia have much in common with preschools in other European countries. The emphasis is on children, especially those in vulnerable social positions, who have the right to attend high-quality preschools.

The Icelandic National Curriculum (MESK, 2011) is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and on the Nordic preschool tradition, which is reflected in the emphasis on play and democracy (Brostrøm et al., 2016; Einarsdóttir, 2020). The fundamental pillars of the curriculum are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. The concepts of upbringing, care and

education are at the core of preschool activities. Additionally, there is an emphasis on showing children respect and providing appropriate encouragement and challenges. Children are considered valid participants in the preschool community and should influence how the curriculum is planned and carried out.

The Croatian National Curriculum of Early Childhood Education (MSES, 2015) defines quality as being based on contextual conditions, specifically environment (social and spatial-material), organisational culture and the pedagogical competence of teachers. Contextual conditions must be determined based on the contemporary image of the child as an active, competent and creative individual, as well as based on the needs and interests of the individual child. The quality of the environment is defined by four foundational principles, including flexibility of the process. Among other issues, flexibility is related to the absence of strict schemes because they limit the individual rhythms of children. Although the National Curriculum (MSES, 2015) provides an overview of quality in preschools, it does not provide objective and measurable indicators of quality.

At a local level, the quality of preschool pedagogy can be understood as dependent on the values and attitudes of teachers, parents and children (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Everyday activities, when viewed in this way, can involve ongoing dialogue (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2016). Listening to children's perspectives is an important part of this dialogue at the local level. Engaging children in co-constructing and creating new knowledge of how children experience their daily lives within preschool is essential. This endeavour is perhaps the most challenging, where under-researched and complex topics are considered, such as children's experiences of time.

The research

Two exploratory studies were conducted in six preschools in Iceland and one preschool in Croatia, respectively. Both studies adopted participatory research methods based on informal interviews with children, opportunities to draw and participant observation to begin to engage with children's perspectives on time in preschools (see the Ethical Considerations section below). The methods were informed by an active view of the child and the view that young children are experts in their own lives (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2001). In the Icelandic study, the researchers worked directly with the children. This was also the intention in the Croatian study, but due to pandemic-related restrictions at the planned time for fieldwork, the teacher rather than the researcher carried out the fieldwork.

The aim of the research was to give preschool children the opportunity to express their views on their daily life within the preschools and experience how children spend their time in order to contribute to understandings about their well-being in preschool. The key research question was as follows:

- *How do children experience the length of time they spend at preschool?*

Cross-national preparation

The research team met on Zoom before the fieldwork began and discussed the methods and questions. For both countries, the research team agreed that children would be offered the opportunity to draw as part of the introduction to the study. This involvement of the children and researchers in a common activity was intended as an icebreaker. Drawings can be a helpful way for children to express themselves on a topic in question, and to make their ideas more visible (Clark & Moss, 2001; MacNaughton et al., 2010; Mauthner, 1997). Giving

children the opportunity to sit and draw during the interview made the atmosphere more relaxed and provided a platform for the discussion, but a detailed analysis of the contents of the drawings has not been undertaken.

The Icelandic study

The study was carried out with 4- and 5-year-olds in six preschools in the vicinity of Reykjavik. The participating preschools varied in size and ideology (further characteristics are not described here to preserve anonymity). In total, the researchers met and talked to between 160 and 180 children. The informal nature of these encounters with groups of children meant that an exact number was not possible. Preschool leaders and department heads were responsible for obtaining informed consent from parents, which in all cases was readily available.

Two researchers carried out the fieldwork, which consisted of at least two visits to every preschool. Preschools in Iceland are divided into departments, with about 15–23 children in each. A department head leads educational activities. During the first visit, the researchers familiarised themselves with the settings, talked to the preschool leaders and heads of departments, and obtained information about the preschools' policies and daily schedules. On the second visit, the researchers spent 2–3 h with the children, introduced themselves and explained the research to the children. The researchers used different materials to facilitate discussions with the children, including different types of paper and felt pens, which were a novelty for the children. There were long narrow rolls of paper, similar to those used in a shop till. Children could draw on these narrow strips of paper and unroll them to form a timeline for the day. Such paper rolls had proven helpful as a prompt in an earlier study (Clark, 2010) discussing understanding of time with young children. At the beginning, the researchers sat at a table and began drawing by themselves, and soon the children gathered and wanted to participate. The drawings provided further insight into their experiences.

Typically, the researchers arrived at around 9 o'clock and engaged with the children until lunchtime. They used the opportunities provided during the ongoing play to talk to the children about their days at the preschools. The children could easily give their informed consent to participate in the conversation or refuse to participate by ending the conversation. The children were not asked for their names, and all the data were anonymised. The children were curious about the researchers and most children appeared to find it enjoyable to talk about their daily lives. The interview framework was based on questions related to the research question about the duration of their stay, their daily routines and the topics that the children found most enjoyable or boring, the most difficult and the best. Examples of questions asked included the following: Do you come to preschool early or late? How long is your day at preschool? When do you feel good at preschool? Can you tell me if you stay at preschool for a short or a long time? Do you sometimes have to wait at preschool? How do you feel about it?

The Croatian study

The researcher provided information about the purpose of the research and the research activities to the teacher. This direct involvement of the teacher, although not initially planned, could be seen as having several advantages and possible disadvantages. The teacher was someone the children trusted and with whom they were familiar, so the children might have felt able to express their perspectives openly. Furthermore, the teacher could engage in conversation with the children when they showed interest and in such a way as to build on their

earlier comments, resulting in a deeper understanding of the child's perspective. However, due to the power relationships between teachers and children, it could be harder for some children to express a wish not to take part (see below).

The study was conducted in a preschool in a rural area of the Republic of Croatia within a mixed-age-group department. Only children who were willing to participate and whose parents/guardians gave consent could participate in the research. Fourteen 5-year-old children in total participated in the research.

The children's perspectives were explored through their visual and verbal expressions. The data collection was carried out during their daily activities. Conversations with the children were conducted in situations where the children showed an interest in engaging in such conversations. A detailed description of the research was drawn up with an adapted vocabulary to communicate abstract concepts (time). In keeping with the research aim, the teacher discussed with children their perceptions of time, the ways in which they spent time in preschool and the concept of the length of time. The teacher asked the children to draw ideas highlighted in the conversations. After the drawing session, the teacher encouraged the children to make a timeline of the hours spent at preschool, and subsequently further conversations with the children were recorded based on their drawn stories. Conversations with the children were written with the permission of the children (e.g., the children were asked: *This conversation is very important, do you agree that I write it down?*). Since teachers often keep detailed notes about the learning process, the children were familiar with this method of documentation.

Ethical considerations

Research with children involves many ethical issues that are important to keep in mind (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2001; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Hreiðarsdóttir & Dýrfjörð, 2019; Hreinsdóttir, 2012). The researchers were aware of the power imbalance that exists between children and adults and sought to reduce it in the Icelandic study, such as by spending time with the children in the surroundings they knew well (e.g., their own preschool or where the children 'were at home') (Einarsdóttir, 2020; Graue & Walsh, 1998). The emphasis was placed on the researchers being curious and enthusiastic guests, and they obtained the children's diverse views about their time at preschool and their daily activities. At the same time, it must be noted that the method used did not involve deep conversations (Graue & Walsh, 1998), and therefore runs the risk of fragmented data.

Informed consent was given by the municipalities, the preschool leaders, classroom teachers, parents and the children themselves, as soon as they were spoken to (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). When the study was explained to the children, they were simply told what it was about and what their role was in the research. In addition, they were told that they could stop participating at any time (Alderson, 2014; Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2001).

In undertaking research that involves children, an analysis of the ethical justification for 'prying' into childhood, the high professionalism of those carrying out the research and a kind of methodological order is required (Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2020). This analysis must focus on understanding, not interpreting and/or generalising, children's perspectives. We acknowledge that the focus of the research was adult-led and can only be understood as participatory in a limited sense. We had a genuine interest in children's perceptions of time spent in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), but in carrying out this research, we acknowledge that this was an adult intervention that could be considered an invasion of their time. This concern led to careful considerations of how to carry out and communicate this research. Both studies were approved by the ethics committees of the universities involved.

The participating centres are not named or described, and pseudonyms are used instead of the actual names of the preschools and children.

RESULTS

There were several layers to the analysis. The children who participated in the study were involved in joint discussions about their views and experiences of time in preschool, as expressed verbally and visually, and were given the opportunity to return to the research material for ongoing discussion. This dialogue was facilitated by the researchers in the Icelandic study. The Croatian teacher documented the children's expressions and later, in collaboration with the researcher, analysed the documented materials.

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the conversations with the children. The Icelandic researchers first analysed the data individually and then together, with the aim of increasing the credibility of the study (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). After each preschool visit, the researchers met, discussed and analysed the visits and outlined the development of the research and the next steps to be taken. What stood out to each researcher was discussed, and the researchers tried to interpret their own experiences, in preparation for the next stage of the analysis. The data were transcribed, coded and categorised, and themes began to be identified that related to the daily schedule, clocks and time, the children's experience of their length of stay at preschool, the children's friendships and the activities in the preschool.

After each fieldwork period, a further layer of analysis was added through cross-national discussions of the research materials with the research team. These discussions began with a presentation given by the Icelandic and Croatian teams. They shared their own data, similarities, methods and questions. For example, it was clear early on that children experienced time as 'long' when they were in the 'flow' of an activity, as well as when they were bored waiting. Selected extracts from interview transcripts, photographs taken by researchers of timetables and children's drawings were shared and discussed. An interactive online process was developed. This included discussing the relevance of pre-existing themes from the literature, including from the parallel research on slow pedagogies (Clark, 2023), together with the embodied knowledge of the research team, which is the result of working in and visiting ECEC settings over several decades.

As part of the analyses, a comparison of children's *sense of time* was conducted to discover both the similarities and differences across Icelandic and Croatian studies. The different *daily schedules* were examined, and consideration given to how these time management structures might affect children's sense of well-being within the preschool.

A sense of time

Icelandic study

The children's sense of the duration of time varied according to the activity. The children thought, for example, that they only spent a short amount of time playing outdoors (2 hours), but that mealtimes took a long time (half an hour). The children also said that what was enjoyable would take a short time, but boring things could take a long time. When asked about group time, specifically whether it took a long or a short time, the answer was 'long'. The meanings here are difficult to untangle. It has been suggested that there is a link between duration, type of activity and enjoyment.

The children were asked if it took them a long time to dress before going outside to play. Sigrún said that the children were 'quick' to dress: '*Some children are speedy to dress in their rain clothes*'.

In one preschool, the children discussed chess and whether it would take a long or a short time to play a chess game. Ægir replied that it sometimes takes a long time and sometimes a short time. For example, when he played against Garðar, it took a short time because Garðar did not know how the pieces move well enough.

In one preschool children go on field trips, which they said could take both a long and a short time. When they were asked to name an example, Árni said: '*Sometimes, we make just short trips, but sometimes, we go all day. We went to Videy [an island close to Reykjavík], and then we were only there about 5 hours*'.

At the same preschool, the researcher asked if the children sometimes had to wait.

Dagný: *Yes, for a quarter.*

Hrund: *For half an hour.*

Sigrún: *For an hour.*

Researcher: What were you waiting for, then?

Sigrún: *Yes, may be a bus.* Elfa drew a theatre stage located in one preschool and wrote at the top: *Welcome to the theatre.*

Researcher: Do you like going to the theatre?

Elfa: *No, because then I have to sit quietly for about an hour.*

This example may indicate that when there are strict rules about how they can move their body, children perceive time to go slowly. Additionally, waiting on the pavement near traffic for a bus can be stressful for children and teachers.

The children who commented on the length of their time at preschool had different opinions about how long their days felt. Some children thought that they spent long days at preschool, others felt that it was different between days and some thought that they spent short amounts of time at preschool.

Below are examples of the children's answers regarding the length of time they spend at preschool.

Dóra: *I arrive earlier than everyone to preschool, but sometimes, I leave early, but sometimes, not early.*

Ásta: *I feel like it takes time long to pass in preschool.*

Sigurður: *I have been at preschool for a long time when my dad picks me up.*

Kristín: *Sometimes, I have to wait a long time at preschool when it takes my mom a long time to arrive.*

Davíð: *I spend a long time at preschool, and it has been a very long time since I had a short day at preschool.*

Gyða: *Sometimes, you spend a short time at preschool; then, you usually have a quick lunch.*

The children seemed to understand time in relation to their parents' working hours. On a few occasions during the year, teachers have half days for professional development. On these days, children are picked up around lunchtime. The children remembered those days and waited for them. If there was a short day at preschool, Jóna said she would be picked up after she finished lunch. Some children had an explanation for why there were sometimes short days at preschool. Sometimes, they were picked up to go to birthdays, funerals or the shops. When asked what they liked to do when picked up early, Davíð said that he would go to the zoo and Sigrún said she would go to the party shop to buy a

costume for Ash Wednesday (the Christian festival at the beginning of Lent). Those children sensed that being picked up early was so special that it required doing something remarkable with their parents.

Some children described how they sometimes felt that time moved slowly and other times quickly:

Unnar: *When I'm playing outside, I'm outside a long time, but when I'm playing indoors, I'm inside a short time.*

Sigrún: *Sometimes, you are at preschool for a long time, but not always.*

Einar: *But if you are playing with the Lego or some toys, you are usually there for very long.*

Halldór: *It is twelve o'clock when I come and a hundred when I am picked up or fifteen.*

When asked to elaborate on difficulties or activities that took a long time, some children found rest (the period set aside for children to sleep) boring, because they wanted to stay awake. Others mentioned that the whole-group gathering or 'circle time' took a long time. Some children mentioned playing with plastic beads as the duller. Some children said it was challenging to work on the projects. Others noted that they would be sad if someone hurt themselves or cried. In one preschool, two girls mentioned that they would rather be at home 'chilling' than at preschool, even if they were just hanging out in their beds and doing nothing. The children demonstrated a good grasp of what their preschool time is and what they prefer, although their definitions of 'long' and 'short' may differ from adult understandings.

Croatian study

There was similar variation in how children expressed their understanding of time in the Croatian study. Some children connected the length of activities to the type of activity (i.e., mealtime or sleeping time), while others related activities to social actors (doing things individually or in the peer group). A 'long time' can be perceived as 'waiting time' or 'boring time', but some children find the same activity to be 'playful time'.

Some children demonstrated an understanding of the broader consequences of how long a routine took, with two children connecting the need for time management to the requirements of others. For example, shoes must be changed quickly because, as Dario explained: '*Mom has to take Sister to preschool, and while Mom accompanies me to preschool, Sister is in the car alone*'. Borna stated that he should also be swift because '*Grandpa has a lot of work at home and doesn't have time to wait*'. While these examples show that children can perceive an objective length of time, more examples show their perceptions as subjective. For most children, a long time is seen as a time for sleeping at preschool—an unnecessary, long, boring time for some children. Lota said: '*Sleeping takes a long time. Sometimes, I get bored of sleeping, and I can't wait to go out to play again*'. In contrast, Dario is pleased with the long sleeping time because it allows him to '*dream*'.

The length of mealtimes was only sometimes expressed in terms of 'clock time'. Breakfast can take a long time to finish and take time away from play afterwards, while afternoon snack times might be perceived as taking a short time because a parent is waiting to collect their child(ren). This example underlines how the social context and actors influence children's perceptions of time. Activities with a friend, such as drawing and talking, may last a long time, or they may take little time if a child is playing. However, activities children did without friends were almost always described as too long. Below are examples of their perceptions:

Fran: *When I arrive at preschool, Mom changes my shoes for a very long time. All the other children are already eating breakfast, then we come.*

Karlo: *When I arrive at preschool, first, I eat, then I play with board games, then I play with trucks. It all takes a long time because I come first to preschool, and I don't have any other friends for a long time.*

Ana: *The longest time is when I have to wait for my friend to arrive at preschool. She sleeps for a very long time.*

In contrast to these accounts of the benefits of peer play, Sara saw being alone as an advantage so that she could play by her own rules. However, to do so, she had to be very quick:

Sara: *I like to go play with the farm the most. I quickly build my farm before a lot of other children come.*

Describing time within activities, the children often expressed concern about the length of activities they disliked:

Luka: *I don't like to draw because it takes a long time to draw, and I don't really like that.*

Dario: *I do not like it when we walk for a long time because my legs hurt.*

In contrast, children described how pleasant activities could take too little time. Lota expressed a desire to have more time outside because *'I never get to build everything I want in the sandbox because we are out for too short a time. I would prefer if we were out all day'*.

Due to the open and time-flexible curriculum in Croatia, the educational process can vary daily in terms of the duration of activities. Despite this, meals were often found to last for 20–40 min, while morning outdoor activities lasted about 90 min. Children have different perceptions about activities that might last for a similar amount of time (e.g., too long a walk and too little time to play in the sandbox). Their experiences change depending on the social environment. Playtime that, at a certain moment, seems too short (e.g., children being unable to carry out their plans) can feel like it lasts a very long time if there are no friends to play with.

Daily schedules

Daily schedules in the Icelandic study

Daily schedules in Icelandic preschools can be divided into two categories. In the first category, which we labelled 'traditional daily schedules', activities are organised visually and precisely in the order they are intended to be experienced (see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#)). The second category comprises 'flowing schedules', where there seems to be more freedom and fewer activities organised each day. Some preschools were in between, adopting a mixture of traditional and flowing schedules. The schedules covered significant activities, such as mealtimes, localisation time, group work and free play.



FIGURE 1 Daily schedule of the preschool, summer fieldwork, Icelandic study.



FIGURE 2 The daily schedule of the preschool, autumn fieldwork, Icelandic study.

Traditional schedules in the Icelandic study

The traditional schedule is characterised by many activities that are shown visually in a specific sequence. The number of visual items ranged from 13 to 19. In at least two preschools (Figures 1 and 2), examples of this can be seen.

As shown in Figure 1, on the day the researcher visited the preschool, 15 visual activities had been planned. The children started the day outside but soon went in for breakfast. After breakfast, it was time to play. Then it was circle time, where, among other things, the day's activities, the weather and suitable clothing for the outdoor activities and other things that were the highlight of the day were discussed. During circle time, the children received fruit snacks, and the teacher read to them, told stories and sang. After circle time, the children could choose a space and peers to play with until it was time for lunch. After lunch, the teachers read and the children went outside to play. After the outdoor activities, there was an afternoon refreshment, then free play inside and finally, outdoor activities until the parents came to pick up the children. Due to changes in the routines related to COVID-19, the beginning and end of the day's plans were, to some extent, changed, and children experienced more outdoor time than usual.

During the morning session, the children took turns telling each other about the day's arrangements. Sigrún shared that *'We go out for a while and then go in for breakfast. Then we go to free play, and it is short, then we go to circle time, and then we go out'*.

In another preschool, the daily schedule was similar. The teacher put 15 activities on the wall the day the researcher visited. It was Lóa's turn to tell the group of children about the day's events:

Lóa: *I don't see lunch.*

Teacher: *Lunch is missing. You are clear about this! I completely forgot. Lóa is going to go over the schedule with us.*

Lóa: *Breakfast, circle time, choices, theme group, going out, washing hands, going out, circle time, lunch, pals, playing and going out, refreshments, choices, going out and then going home.*

Lóa: *It's Thursday today, not Tuesday.*

Flowing schedule in the Icelandic study

The flowing schedules featured fewer activities planned for the day. In those preschools, the children had more freedom to choose activities and in what order they did things. There were examples of flowing mealtimes involving the children choosing when to eat during a particular hour. Children who were not having their meals could continue playing with their peers inside the classrooms.

The following conversation with Rúnar took place in a preschool where there was a flowing daily schedule:

Rúnar: *When I get to preschool, I start playing. Then I start eating. Then I start playing again, then 'circle time', and sometimes, we go out and then in and out again.*

Researcher: *What is the most fun to do?*

Rúnar: *The most fun is to play with these blocks [points to a corner with unit blocks].*

Researcher: *If you are playing with the unit blocks, is time going slow or fast?*

After some thought, Rúnar answered: ‘*Slow*’. In this preschool, the children could move around and play with whatever they liked during time dedicated to free play, for example, in the block area. Rúnar said: ‘*You can play at any time*’. He thought it was as fun to start playing alone as with his friends in the block area.

Rúnar moved away from the researcher to the block area and started playing and constructing various objects. After a while, more children gathered around him, and they all started playing and talking together. In another preschool with a flowing schedule, Halldór told the researcher about the day’s events: ‘*We have breakfast in the preschool, then we clean up and start playing, then there is circle time, then we play or we go outside. So, when we finish being outside, we have lunch, rest and play again*’.

The researcher asked, in one of the preschools that adopted the flowing schedule: ‘*What do you do at preschool?*’ The children responded in unison: ‘*Colour, play, play, play, play*’.

Daily schedules in the Croatian study

The national early childhood policy in Croatia does not prescribe a fixed schedule that must be followed within the organisation of work in a preschool. However, daily practice is characterised by relatively fixed mealtimes. The approximate schedule includes early morning play, breakfast, indoor/outdoor activities, lunch, time for sleep, afternoon snacks and more indoor/outdoor activities. The duration of each activity in the schedule is flexible and may be/is adapted to children’s needs and current interests. Discussing the preschool’s time schedule with the children, the teacher asked about all the things they did during their day at preschool. After discussing and drawing the most important things that occurred during the day, children were encouraged to make their schedule and then to talk about it.

The children’s drawings provided an individual visual timeline (see [Figures 3, 4 and 5](#)). Although all children were in the same educational group, their perceptions of daily activities differed.



FIGURE 3 A drawn timeline by Lota, Croatian study.

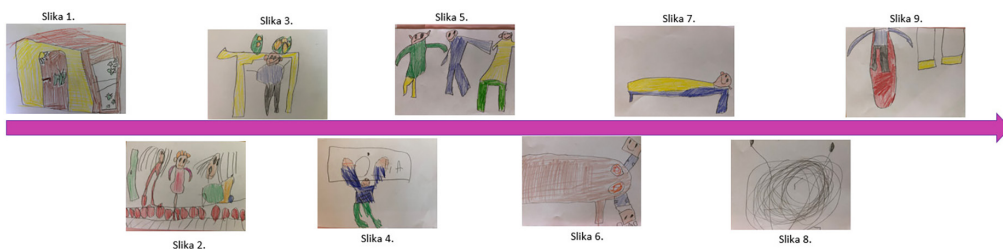


FIGURE 4 A drawn timeline by Dario, Croatian study.

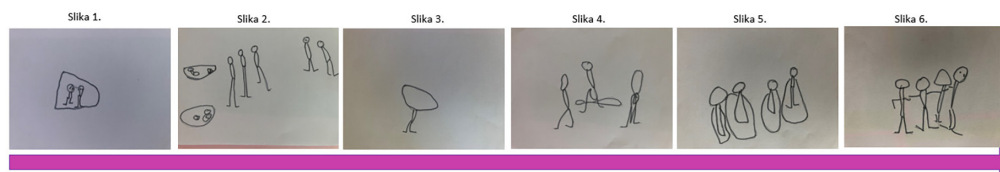


FIGURE 5 A drawn timeline by Erin, Croatian study.

Lota's (age 6) schedule contained nine important activities:

First, when I get to preschool, I wash my hands and eat muffins and biscuits (1). Then Gita and I put together big forts from the biggest wooden blocks (2), and while we put together the forts, we play with dolls inside the forts (3). I like it best when the sun is shining, when we are out for a long walk (4) and when we are playing in the sandbox (5). (...) When we get to the preschool after playing outside, then I have to wipe all the tables before lunch (6) so that it is clean for us while we eat. Most of all, I like to talk for a long time at lunch with my friends Gita and Sara (7). After lunch, we go to sleep (8). Sleep lasts a long time (...), and I can't wait to go out to play again (9).

We might understand from this that Lota had described one of her favourite days at preschool. In her schedule, she touched on the activities (mealtime and sleeping time), which consequently provided a timeframe for playing and learning activities. The social aspects of mealtimes were important to Lota. Furthermore, she saw sleep time as a fixed period of time for every child, rather than one in which children can rejoin play when they feel ready (Figure 3).

Dario (age 6) drew nine activities. He described the schedule similarly without highlighting meals and instead focusing on arrival and leaving preschool as an important part of his day (Figure 4):

The first picture I drew was our yellow preschool, where my mother takes me in the morning (1). Then the second picture is Mom, me and you, teacher. When you come to the dressing room, I put on my slippers very quickly (2). I have to hurry to eat (3). After I eat, I go to play; I like to draw with chalk (...) (4). In this picture (5), we are going for a walk; you can see how we stand behind each other on the train. (...) This is my best friend, and I [am] eating lunch (6). (...) Then I go to sleep with my yellow blanket (7). I sleep and dream for a long time; you see, I dream from the moment I fall asleep (8). When I'm the last one at preschool and I have to wait a long time for my mother, the best thing for me is to go to the playground and slide and then my mother comes quickly (9).

Erin (age 5) described her day as comprising six activities:

I am coming to preschool (1). (...). All the other children are already eating breakfast, and then we come. Then, I go to play with lots of friends and toys on the carpet, where we build all kinds of things (2). We play for a very long time. Then the chef comes with a big pot of soup (3) and then we all go to eat (4). After that, we go to sleep (5). After sleeping, we all play until Mom comes to pick us up to go home (6).

Unlike Lota and Dario, Erin emphasised only one playing and learning situation (playing/building blocks) in her schedule. As she is still in the adaptation period, the activities that frame her day (meal and sleeping time) may be the ones that give her confidence in estimating the remaining time that she needs to be at preschool before going home (Figure 5).

Most of the children in the Croatian study focused on playing and learning. The children gave prominence to self-organised and self-initiated activities. Only two children portrayed an adult (teacher) as someone who initiates activities, and in these instances the activity the teacher initiated was storytelling.

DISCUSSION

Listening to children's subjective sense of time

This research aimed to increase understanding of how children experience their time spent at preschools, including the duration of each activity and of preschool itself. The findings from both studies underline how young children measure time as a series of events, activities and experiences, and the sense of the duration of time passing is dependent on context rather than hours on a clockface. Such movement can be multifaceted. For example, time can be perceived through the movement of the body throughout the day, through movement within a space according to pedagogical time or through movement based on emotions, both pleasurable and uncomfortable in some sense. The results of our study revealed examples of children's experiences of time in this multifaceted way.

Children's sense of time, in the studies in this paper, appeared to be rooted in the present, and their perception of time differed depending on the activities they were involved in and whether such activities were considered pleasurable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Heidegger, 1962, 1992). This did not mean that a pleasurable activity took a short time; they could take a long time, and that was a good thing, but something boring could also be experienced as taking a long time (e.g., waiting for a bus).

The findings also draw attention to how children's sense of time and well-being can be affected by how pedagogical time is organised and, as a result, by what children are able or unable to do. This often included discussions about the social aspects of the day, including who the children were able to play with and when they would see their parents. Time passing appeared to be closely tied to key relationships, and the quality of such time was experienced according to who the children were with or wanted to be with. Previous research has shown that what is most important to children at preschool is playing with friends, deciding where to play, with what materials and which play theme, and sharing ideas and things with peers (Corsaro, 2003, 2005). Thus, the findings of this research are in line with earlier research. For example, Einar, in the Icelandic study, said that playing with his friend with Lego took a long time and was a good thing. Ana, in the Croatian study, showed a different sense of time when she said it took a long time to wait for her friend to arrive at preschool. Both examples are also connected to children's emotions at the time, which affect their well-being.

These studies aimed to contribute to understanding what affects children's well-being at preschool and the effect time has on understandings of quality. Given the improved understanding of the complex ways in which children experience the passing of time, it is important to revisit daily schedules as part of the ongoing dialogue between parents, teachers and children (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for further research in this area that focuses specifically on listening to children's perspectives. Different approaches were adopted in the studies discussed in this paper. The Icelandic study chose to explore informal ways to be with children in preschool settings, such as by sitting with them and drawing and playing, while giving full attention to trying to understand what children are

expressing about what is important to them (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2001; MacNaughton et al., 2010; Mauthner, 1997). This approach proved helpful and gave insights that may not have surfaced through a more formal interview or focus group approach. However, when reviewing the research material from the Icelandic and Croatian studies, the material in the latter study provided richer descriptions. Nevertheless, despite the different approaches, it is interesting that there were more similarities than differences between the findings from the two countries.

Managing time in preschools or being managed by time?

The clock is fundamental to understanding preschool pedagogy and structure (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Pedagogical time is one of the essential concepts in preschools, but it is not necessarily sensitive to children's rhythms, emotions and perceptions of time. The pedagogical structure of time needs to reflect a preschool's goals, diverse subjects and groups of children. According to Jenks (2005), preschool time can become dependent on the clock rather than on the individual rhythm of the child. The clock affects the children, teachers and daily routines, and can prevent both the flow and depth of children's play (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019). It also affects the experiences of teachers and everyone involved in an ECEC community. The structure of the daily schedule in preschools may be perceived as a particular way of control (Foucault, 1977; James et al., 1998; Nilsson, 2009). Therefore, the timing of children's events and activities can result in power imbalances, and sometimes schedules are more related to the needs of teachers than children. As Nilsson (2009) commented: 'As an institution that can be tightly controlled by schedules, children are subject to adult order, which is there to "protect children from what adults consider chaos, anarchy, lack of goal directedness, and unpredictability"' (p. 17).

As revealed by some of the Icelandic preschools, schedules were tight and in danger of becoming too fragmented. As a consequence, possibly unintended, children's playtime was impacted. This leads to the question: Is there a real emphasis on play as children's primary means of learning, as emphasised in the Icelandic National Curriculum (MESC, 2011), if play is not prioritised and given uninterrupted periods? Davies et al. (2013) argued that the preschool environment needs to be flexible and that children should have the opportunity to immerse themselves in play and creative work without time pressure and to experience time for ideas to grow. Cuffaro (1995) identified the importance of 'unfragmented time' for young children, as it allows them to explore ideas in depth and to ask their own questions. Such an approach might be described as a 'slow pedagogy' (Clark, 2020, 2023), where the relationship with time is made explicit and priority is given to enable slow practices to develop. Such experiences might include working with materials, full engagement in the outdoors, or the ability to return time and time again to a favourite book. Slow knowledge has been linked to learning in situations where time is not measured in hours but in the time and speed children need. By adjusting to children's perceptions of time, teachers become sensitive to the speed of their learning process and can better support and encourage them in their search for solutions. This pace may at times be fast or slow, but is seldom uniform across any group of children.

CONCLUSION

Time in preschool can be viewed as a commodity, as something to be filled and divided into small fragments, as Cuffaro (1995) commented at the beginning of this paper. These Icelandic and Croatian studies set out to explore young children's experiences of time

and, in so doing, contributed to this under-researched area. The subjective nature of children's sense of time is complex, and shared understandings between adults and children cannot be taken for granted when considering the relationship between quality and how time is managed in ECEC. The children in the studies demonstrated their ability to enter into discussions about these aspects of their everyday lives and emphasised, in particular, the relational components of how time is spent according to who is present or absent.

Enhancing knowledge in this area will require careful and imaginative listening, as well as supporting teachers in their consideration of what happens when planning based on clock time and children's fluid understanding of time in the classroom coincide. There could be different components to this process. Children could experience a range of rhythms throughout the day and be given more control over how time is managed. This flexible approach could provide the opportunities for more extended periods of play. This, in turn, might open up the chance for teachers to experience 'being with' children in a deeper way through a less clock-driven relationship with time.

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No conflict of interest has been identified in connection with these studies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was undertaken with the approval of the Ethical Committee of the University of Zagreb Faculty of Teacher Education (Croatia) and the Ethical Committee of the Icelandic Universities (Iceland).

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