Children’s grief: repertoires of practices in institutional early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT
Although grief is common in children’s lives, it is under-researched and undertheorized. The aim of our study is to investigate children’s grief as a cultural activity that consists of repertoires of practices in institutional early childhood education and care (ECEC). ECEC is a central site where grief is learned and practiced. Taking a cultural-historical approach using ethnographically inspired research methods, we analyzed interaction in the contexts of separation, absence of a parent, and social exclusion. We focused on the moments of grief, demonstrating how children and adults organize their social encounters and interactional history, and engage in rich repertoires of practices. We discuss the conditions for recognizing grief in institutional ECEC.

Introduction

Understanding grief

Lauri hangs tightly onto the kindergarten’s iron fence with his small, mittened hands. His longing sobbing occasionally escalates into a full cry. The teacher stands next to Lauri and approaches by squatting down to his level. The teacher raises her hands toward Lauri, inviting Lauri to come into her lap, and says gently, “Please come now, come into my lap. It helps.” Lauri turns his gaze away, and in words mixed with crying, says: “I can’t, because I am not used to it.”

This moment during Lauri’s first weeks in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar faces emphasizes the heightened emotions children may experience in the everyday life of institutional early childhood education and care (ECEC). After three weeks’ attendance, Lauri orients to the absence of his parents – his loss is heartbreaking and tangible – with grief-filled emotion. Moments like this provide contexts in which to analyze cultural ways to practice and comfort grief in a public space. Which actions, emotions, and interpretations of grief are made available and allowed – and which might be restricted or even sanctioned?

Although grief is a common phenomenon in children’s lives, research has seldom focused on it and its manifestations. Especially many Western societies uphold the idea that childhood should be a time of happiness. The child must be happy, playful, and carefree—joy has become the normative trademark of childhood (Ennew & Milne, 1989; Lanas, 2019; Morrow, 2009; Stearns, 2019; Vintimilla, 2014). More generally, positivity and happiness appear to be a foundational moral duty in the West today (Brinkmann, 2017; Bruckner, 2011; Davies, 2015). When happiness becomes a goal, unhappiness is to be avoided, and we become increasingly reluctant to accept grief as part of our lives. As a consequence of the psychological management and pathologization of common human experiences, modes of human suffering, such as grief, have undergone diagnosis and medical treatment in many
Western societies (Bandini, 2015; Brinkmann, 2017; Lund, 2020). We appear increasingly reluctant to accept grief as part of our lives.

Yet grief is a universal, essential, and inevitable part of human life. Being human involves encountering things that cause grief. Humans grieve not only the loss of people, but also other things: jobs, relationships, or in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic (Berinato, 2020), collective safety. No one can escape it, not even children – grief is the price of affection and love (Lund, 2020; Pulkkinen, 2017). As argued by Lund (2020), because grief is universal, it underlies the very constitution of society. We are social and relational creatures, and since all our relations are temporary and bound to end, grief is always lurking in the background of the human condition (Brinkmann, 2019b).

Psychological and medical approaches have become standard and a source of vocabulary in research on grief (Bandini, 2015; Brinkmann, 2017; Pulkkinen, 2017). From these perspectives, grief is a psychological response to any significant loss or trauma and has been explored mainly in relation to the death of close relatives (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2013; Ener & Ray, 2017; Gross, 2016; Rando et al., 2012). Psychological and medical theories construct grief predominantly as an individual emotion and “problem” (Bandini, 2015; Lund, 2020), based on the assumption that there are “positive” and “negative” emotions, grief being the latter (“complicated grief disorder” and “persistent complex bereavement disorder” are included in DSM-5, the latest version).

Recent research has shown the individual and cultural variation in experiencing, expressing, and practicing grief; its intensity varies over time and place (Brinkmann, 2019b; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017; Pulkkinen, 2017). According to Pulkkinen (2017), grief does not make linear progress: a person does not have to follow a series of steps for it to heal (as is still and often incorrectly believed).

Despite the foundational role of grief in human life, it is under-researched and undertheorized from both societal perspectives (Brinkmann, 2019b), and children’s perspectives (Brinkmann, 2019a; Quinones Goytortua et al., 2021). First, little research has been done on children’s acquisition of emotional skills in general, and hardly any on the specific emotion of grief (Brinkmann, 2019a). The perspective of very young children, and their way of verbalizing and practicing grief in interaction, is almost completely absent from current studies into grief. In recent decades, childhood research has strongly emphasized the need to hear the child’s perspective on matters that concern them (Clark, 2005; James & Prout, 1990; Lipponen et al., 2016). Second, few researchers have examined how emotions (such as grief) are practiced and enacted, and the rules and norms that regulate their expression in institutional ECEC. At the level of everyday encounters, the meanings that emotions embody and portray are easily taken for granted, go unnoticed, and are undertheorized (Madrid et al., 2015; Micciche, 2007). Even within sociocultural approaches, affect and emotion have too often been set aside (Vea, 2020). In summary, we lack naturalistic studies of emotional processes such as grief in real-life settings (Brinkmann, 2019a).

We do not know how young children express and practice grief in institutional ECEC. To start to fill this research gap, we explored this in terms of cultural practices. We argue that grief is present in the minor losses of everyday life. Children may grieve when they experience loneliness, lack of friends, or life events such as transitions from home to institutional ECEC, or separation from parents or guardians. So, humans begin to experience grief as a cultural activity in early childhood. Studying cultural practices around grief in naturalistic interaction is likely to yield new information on how it emerges and is manifested in daily life, and how it is practiced as part of the local moral order of particular cultures and communities.

**Cultural historical approach to children’s grief**

Psychological and medical approaches to children’s grief focus mainly on loss due to death (of a parent, sibling, other relation, friend, or pet) or some other traumatic event such as serious illness, or war. Grief is understood as an individual emotion by its subjective phenomenal content (Bowman, 2018; Dyregrov, 2008; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2013; Lubetzky, 2018; Worden, 1996). These psychological and medical approaches commonly involve intervention programs to promote children self-
regulation strategies and resilience-building stress management skills (Bergman et al., 2017; Cohen & Mannarino, 2011), but say very little about the interactively constructed, and culturally mediated nature of grief. We argue that a complex phenomenon such as grief in institutional ECEC requires us to go beyond and expand these valuable perspectives. Unlike psychological and medical approaches, we consider grief to be neither negative nor positive. Its meaning only becomes understood through practices in social activity.

To deepen our understanding, we brought together a cultural-historical approach (Gutierrez, 2002; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003), and cultural psychology-based studies on grief (Brinkmann, 2017; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017). These approaches share the idea that emotions and acts are deeply entangled and situated within socio-material practices, constituted by people, artifacts, and other matters that make up cultures. These frameworks stress the connection between individual experiences and the cultural sphere.

The cultural-historical approach presumes that individual development and disposition must be understood in a cultural and historical context, not separate from them. Human beings do not live in a vacuum; our interactions and activities are mediated through historically developing cultural symbol systems, the artifacts we use, and social mediators, such as rules and divisions of labor. All human activity takes place in one or more characteristic spaces and timescales. Grieving, too, is not fixed, but constantly in formation, through which emotions shape practices, and practices shape emotions.

Cultural psychology-based studies on grief (Brinkmann, 2017; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017), hold that human agents actively respond to happenings in the world through emotions. Emotions (like grief) are not just mechanical reactions, but are ways in which humans try to understand significant situations in their lives through participating in the social practices of their cultures (Brinkmann, 2019a). People do not passively experience or encounter grief, but actively practice it, attempt to understand it, and even to change their social and material conditions; they write diaries about their experiences, engage in conversations with others, and create memorials and rituals (Brinkmann, 2018; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017; Pulkkinen, 2017). Sometimes grieving people find it hard to talk about and describe grief. They lack the words – the vocabulary and “grammar” of grief do not reflect their real-life experience (Pulkkinen, 2017).

Grief is also practiced and manifested non-verbally. As described by Brinkmann and Kofod (2018), in grief the body and movements can become “small,” “heavy,” and “slow”: grief may lower the shoulders, curl the body inwards, stiffen the muscles, and even trigger symptoms of panic disorder. Moreover, humans must learn to grieve properly knowing their local moral order, i.e., how, where, and how much one can grieve, who may participate, how, and when (Brinkmann, 2019a). Thus, practices of grief can always be evaluated morally within larger processes of (emotion) socializations. Moral norms and display rules concerning grief are dynamic, materialized in cultural practices, and subject to transformations.

Applying these two frameworks, we approach grief as a response to a variety of losses. These range from the “minor” social and emotional losses of everyday life, such as temporary separation from parents or guardians, to the more traumatic, such as final losses of loved ones. People respond to all these losses through a variety of cultural practices (Brinkmann, 2017; Gutierrez, 2002). Following Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), we call these dynamic sets of variations “repertoires of practices.” The losses can be painful and can only be understood in their cultural-historical context. By exploring the grief-related displays and responses and their variations in everyday interactions, we can begin to conceptualize how children learn to grieve.

Grief has different meanings in different cultures. For instance, the English words “grief,” “sorrow,” and “sadness,” which all mean slightly different things, can all be translated into Finnish with one word, “suru.” Here, therefore, we approach grief as an umbrella concept, which includes sorrow and sadness (Pulkkinen, 2017; Quinones Goytortua et al., 2021). Using this concept, is reasonable to describe the emotional performance displayed by the children in our study (see examples 1–9) as grieving.
Children’s grieving is a cultural activity that consists of repertoires of practices in institutional ECEC. Relatedly, grief is not occasional and isolated emotional distress, but the child returns to it over and over again: it has an interactional history in the child’s life. The children create rich repertoires of practices as they explore and make meaning of their grief in interactions with others, including the adults, and their material environment in ECEC. Analyzing interaction in the contexts of separation, absence of a parent, and social exclusion, we focused on the moments of grief and their interactional history. These contexts are an evident part of life in institutional ECEC, and evoke various emotions, but according to our observations, the most important is grief. Although our empirical examples at this stage are grounded mainly in passing moments of grief, we will provide some theoretical and empirical elaborations in line with the cultural-historical approach.

Materials and methods

Research design, method, and participants

Previous psychological and medical research into grief has drawn mainly on conceptual analysis, interviews and self-reports (Brinkmann, 2019b; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017; Pulkkinen, 2017). Naturalistic studies of emotional processes in real-life settings are also vital (Brinkmann, 2019a). We followed this suggestion to produce first-hand, micro-level information about children’s grief in institutional ECEC by applying methods of interactional research on emotions (Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012) among young children (Kidwell, 2013).

Video-recordings of everyday social interaction allowed us to ground our explorative understanding of the patterns of talk and interaction that give form and meaning to experience grief (Gutierrez, 2002). For this study, we used ethnomethodologically inspired video-observation methods (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and long-term fieldwork (5 months intensive video-observation) in four ECEC settings. We conducted full-day observations (6–9 hours per day, typically 8am–3pm) to examine how children’s grief emerges into the flow of interaction in the different situations during the day. While individual experiences of grief are impossible to observe directly, by focusing on children’s and adults’ embodied, social, and material practices, and how they talk about their experiences, we can access the texture of emotional worlds (Vea, 2020).

Following a cultural-historical approach (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003), we grounded our observations across multiple communities. We collected data between 2016 and 2021 in four Finnish ECEC settings, i.e. four different classrooms in four different ECEC centers in an outer suburb of the Finnish capital, Helsinki. Two of the settings were for children under the age of three (toddlers, adult–child ratio 1:4); two were for children aged three to five (adult–child ratio 1:7). In all, 12 ECEC professionals, 23 toddlers, and 29 children aged three to five participated in the research. To gain coherence in the process, all the data were collected by the second author. During the data collection, the researcher observed as a bystander, intending to understand the everyday life of the group as little as possible. Interaction was recorded using a handheld camera, and video-elicited interviews were conducted with the ECEC professionals during the fieldwork.

The first fieldwork period (2016) lasted five months and consisted of 34 full-day observations (150 hours of video data) in one toddler group. At the time, the group had one qualified teacher, two qualified caregivers, and one personal assistant to a child with special needs. There were 13 children in the group, all under the age of three. All the practitioners and children had Finnish as their first language. The second fieldwork period (2018) lasted five months and consisted of four full-day and 15 half-day observations (21 hours of video data) in one multicultural toddler group. The setting was culturally and linguistically very diverse, with children from several ethnic groups. The group had one qualified teacher and two qualified caregivers. There were ten children in the group, all under the age of three.

The third and final fieldwork period (2021) lasted five months, included 31 full-day and four half-day observations (163 hours of video data) and was conducted in two ECEC groups for children aged
three to five (groups A and B). Group A had two qualified teachers, one qualified caregiver, and 21 children. The setting was culturally and linguistically diverse, with children from several ethnic groups. Group B had one qualified teacher, one qualified nursery nurse, and 12 children, of whom ten spoke Finnish as their first language.

In Finland, children start school at the age of seven, but before that, they have a subjective right to institutional ECEC. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019) mandates ECEC settings. The main aim of Finnish ECEC is to promote children’s well-being, growth, development, and learning, in collaboration with their guardians. Finnish ECEC can be characterized in terms of a holistic approach that encourages play, relationships, and curiosity. The learning community should create space for different opinions and emotions. Children have the right to express their opinions and are helped to acknowledge, express, name, and regulate their emotions. Staff are expected to observe and document children’s activities to understand their emotions and experiences, and to build a safe and caring atmosphere where different emotions can be shared. In the core curriculum, emotions are referred to in general and specifically: joy is referred to several times, but sadness and fear, both only once.

**Ethical considerations**

The teacher of each group informed all the families about the research and their right to choose whether to participate or not. In accordance with contemporary ethical guidelines at the University of Helsinki and Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, informed consent was sought from parents, ECEC practitioners, the directors of the ECEC settings, and the municipality officials. Children’s assent was evaluated by observing their orientation to video-observation practices.

Careful attention was paid to situated and relational ethics, taking an “ethics-in-action” approach (Hilppö et al., 2019; Rutanen et al., 2018, 2021). At the beginning of the data collection, some “critical incidents” related to ethics were recognized which led to changes in the researcher’s stance (Rutanen et al., 2021). Some of the very young children showed confusion and distress (withdrawing gaze, physical distance, safety-seeking behavior) in front of the neutral-faced, non-participant researcher. Also, some ECEC practitioners were looking for acceptance and assurance from the researcher with their gaze. To decrease this observed emotional distress the researcher took a more compassionate stance. With a compassionate bystander role, participating only with facial expressions, the researcher tried to signal responsiveness (e.g., warmth, caring, and alertness to what is happening), and build shared understanding with the participants, while at the same time, maintaining distance by systematically refraining from further non-verbal or verbal interaction with the participants. The goal was for the researcher to observe interaction in a naturalistic context without intervening.

In all phases of the research process the aim was to create an open dialogue with research participants, about the opportunities and constraints in the data use and in interpretation of the children’s lived experiences. During the data collection period, the parents, children, and ECEC practitioners had the opportunity to see and comment on parts of the video data. Moreover, ECEC practitioners’ interpretation of special moments of grief were checked in video-elicited interviews. After the data collection, parents and ECEC professionals provided written consent to the use of the video-recorded material for research and educational purposes. The use of videos and frame grabs was carefully negotiated with the parents, ECEC practitioners, and children over the age of three. The parents of the children who feature in frame grabs in this article gave their consent for their child’s image to be used in research publications, as have their teachers. All the participants have been anonymized using pseudonyms and by editing frame grabs to line drawings. Since the participants and ECEC settings could be identified, particularly locally, participants were provided an opportunity to evaluate the adequacy of their anonymity in this article.
Creation of data sources and data analysis

Our data consist of 334 hours of videotaped naturally occurring interactions produced in four Finnish ECEC settings. In each setting, we sought (dis)confirmation for our key observations about children’s grieving. Rather than aiming to formally define what grief is, or to specify its cultural regularities, we explored grief as a recognizable social practice in our data. For us, at this point, grief was “a vernacular category whose natural home is within the descriptive practices of everyday life” (Butler & Edwards, 2018, p. 65). We have used that vernacular sense in identifying rich instances of the phenomenon, which guided and deepened the analysis. The generalizability and specificity of the analytic claims is a task for further research. We offer neither an exhaustive nor definitive account of children’s grief but an explorative contribution.

Data sources were created in three steps. First, at the end of each fieldwork period, we reviewed the video data and made a content log (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). The log involved an overview of all the video episodes and a time-indexed list of candidate instances of grieving: strained, uneasy, unpleasant and distressing elements in interaction (e.g., whining, crying, sobbing, seeking closeness to others, and withdrawing from interaction); and a social, emotional, and/or material loss from the child(ren)’s point of view. We agree that the mere presence of a certain gesture is not evidence of a certain emotion and that there isn’t an automatic link between acts and emotions (Wootton, 2012).

In looking through the data and content logs, we first focused on instances in which adults (ECEC practitioners and parents) made explicit assessments of children’s grief, e.g., Nyt on vähän suru puserossa (Engl. Now there is a bit of grief in the sweater [a Finnish saying]), Minä hoitelen nää surut (Engl. I will take care of this grief) or otherwise verbalized children’s grief-filled emotions and practices. In addition to ECEC practitioners’ and parents’ explicit assessments, we paid careful attention to the ways children oriented to their own or their peers’ social, emotional or material losses.

Second, we selected the significant episodes in which evidence of children’s grief emerged. The episodes were selected in collaboration with the key informants (i.e. ECEC practitioners from all four settings) who helped us to identify what is typical but at the same time intensive, rich and interesting (typical and intensive case sampling, Patton, 1990). At this point, some patterns started to emerge. First, participants in all four settings were typically oriented to children’s grieving in three specific interactional contexts: 1) separation, 2) absence of a parent, or 3) social exclusion. Second, in all these interactional contexts a child was typically facing his/her grief either 1) alone, 2) with an adult, or 3) among peers. These patterns (i.e. interactional contexts and participation frameworks) helped us to collect the data. All in all, we included 27 rich cases (nine in each of the four ECEC settings, including instances of each specific interactional context and participation framework), and subjected this data to conversation analysis (Kidwell, 2013; Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012).

The detailed analysis unfolded as follows: (1) “generating collaboratively built observations” by viewing the raw visual data in several sessions (Sidnell, 2010, p. 29); (2) transcribing the data using conventions of conversation analysis (Jeerson, 2004); (3) representing embodied practices in narrative style with frame grabs (Kidwell, 2013); (4) identifying what sorts of social practices participants engaged in; (5) considering when and how grieving is produced, what practices (non-verbal and verbal) it is bound up with, and how other participants respond; (6) locating the evolution of children’s repertoires of practices by moving back and forth in the longitudinal data corpus, analyzing the “interactional history” of the selected significant interactions (Pakarek Doehler et al., 2018).

Results

In this section, we demonstrate how children and adults engage in rich repertoires of practices during the moments of social, emotional, and/or material loss. Taking a cultural-historical approach (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), we understand the local organization of how children’s grief is articulated, embodied, practiced, responded to, and shared in interaction as repertoires of practices. Following this
conceptualization (Rogoff et al., 2007), we considered repertoires primarily as analytic tools with which to describe often implicit patterns of cultural ways of doing things.

The first subsection focuses on children’s grieving during the early separations; in the second, grieving is related to the absence of a parent; in the third, grieving is located in the context of social exclusion. We structured our findings around nine data examples (figures and/or transcripts) that represent typical and intensive moments of children’s grief. In every subsection the first example represents a moment in which a child faces his/her grief alone. The second example represents a moment in which a child faces grief with an adult, and the third example represents situations among peers. All three participation frameworks (alone, with an adult, and among peers) are typical in institutional group care contexts.

**Separation as a moment to grieve**

Starting institutional ECEC may be a child’s first separation from their parents or guardians. These early separations, as illustrated in example 1 (Figure 1), can be socially tense, emotionally significant, and distressing.

In our first data example (Figure 1), Venla (aged 16 months) has to separate from her parent. We can see that the separation is a significant social and emotional loss for her. Whilst grieving, Venla cries intensely, and closes her eyes tightly. She is actively trying to change the social situation. She resists her parent’s leaving by reaching out toward them, and by trying to get out of the teacher’s lap. At the very moment of separation, neither the transitional object in Venla’s hand (i.e. the blanket she carries between ECEC setting and home) nor the embrace of the teacher, Kaisa, bring comfort to Venla’s grief. The parent, the object of Venla’s affection and love, will be lost and she will need to face her grief alone as the members of her new community (teachers and peers) aren’t yet close enough to bring comfort at the very moment of separation. Note that Venla’s grieving has an interactional history; escalated crying and resisting as repertoires of practices are part of Venla’s everyday transition to ECEC for about one and a half months.

In the institutional ECEC context, Venla’s separation from her parent is a public event. Thus, Venla’s grief is a shared phenomenon. It is not only her individual and private emotion: the situation

![Figure 1. Separation as an interactional phenomenon and a moment to grieve.](image)
calls for other children’s attention. By orienting to the separation, and to the heightened emotions involved, the children observe and appear to try to make sense of the situation. On the video recording, it is possible to detect children freezing their bodies, frowning, opening their mouths, raising their eyebrows, and looking more or less worried or confused. The entire group of children is aware of and attentive to Venla’s grieving. Hence, the way ECEC professionals respond to and engage in separations offers opportunities for collective learning of cultural meanings and local practices of grief.

Example 2 (Extract 1 and Figure 2) shows a moment in which grief is faced with an adult during separation. We focused on the practices teacher Kaisa (K) and caregiver Minka (M) applied during Venla’s (V) emotionally heightened separation. In line 1, right after separating from her parent, Venla is crying intensely. The response to Venla’s crying is constituted in cooperation by Minka (line 2: Minka distracts Venla’s attention from grieving to other matters) and Kaisa (lines 3–4; 6–10: Kaisa orients to Venla’s grieving and gives Venla an explicit right to grieve and display grief-filled emotions).

**Extract 1. Adults’ responses to Venla’s grieving during separation.**

| Line | Translation |
|------|-------------|
| 01 V: | 😢😢😢😢😢😢 (cries intensely) |
| 02 M: | [tietköl mitä ((holds V in her lap)) you know what] |
| 03 K: | [köylä jossaan kohtaa tarttee ottaa yes in some situations one needs to do] |
| 04 K: | pienet huudot eiks niin small cries isn’t that right |
| 05 V: | [calms down and stops crying] |
| 06 K: | nii tartteeksi yes one needs to do that |
| 07 K: | just sileen pitää tehdä that’s exactly what needs to be done |
| 08 K: | mm::: (. ) ja sit taas mennään eteenpäin mm (. ) and then again we go forward |
| 09 K: | sanotaan et :he:i kynnellet kuivataan ((Fig.2)) let’s say that hey let’s wipe away tears |
| 10 K: | ja koht juostaan ((strokes V’s belly)) and soon we’ll run |

**Figure 2.** Wiping away tears: orientation to the material products of grief.
In line 2, caregiver Minka holds Venla in her lap and begins to orient Venla’s attention from grieving toward other matters by saying “you know what” with a positive tone of voice. Distracting attention away from the “suffering” is Minka’s common practice to encounter children’s grief during separation situations (e.g., “you know what, we have time for breakfast soon”; “you know what, we have time to play together, you see, Daniela is with us here today and . . . ”). Deflecting the crying child’s attention from grieving toward playing, peers, and other institutional activities in the context of separation appears to be a general practice in institutional ECEC in different cultural communities (Jung, 2011; Klein et al., 2010; Moore, 2021).

As the interaction unfolds further (lines 3–10), Kaisa’s response differs from the logic of distraction. She engages in rich repertoires of practices, first by naming Venla’s emotional displays, and then by providing Venla with an explicit right to display her grief. Kaisa’s response also clarifies or breaks the ambivalent norms and display rules regarding the appropriate intensity and display of grief-filled emotions in public space. The message to Venla is clear: here, in this situation, it is OK to scream and shout.

Kaisa’s response to Venla’s grieving is multi-layered. First, she characterizes Venla’s grieving as “small cries,” which describes the intensity of the emotion (“cry”), but softens and minimizes it (“small”). Second, she justifies Venla’s grieving in the situation (“that’s exactly what needs to be done”) and constitutes a specific local moral order. Third, she tries to encourage Venla to overcome or be in formation with her grief without explicitly saying what would be appropriate next (“mm and then again we go forward”; “and soon we’ll run”; with running Kaisa refers to Venla’s typical enthusiasm in exploring things in the classroom by running toward other people, material objects and activities). Lastly, even tears, the material products of grief, become named (line 9), recognized, accepted as appropriate, and acted upon when Kaisa wipes them away from Venla’s cheek with a gentle, affectionate touch (Figure 2). Overall, in example 2 Minka’s and Kaisa’s cooperation, especially Kaisa’s rich repertoires of practices, open up new, interactionally grounded ways of recognizing and encountering children’s grief.

Our third and final example (Extract 2 and Figure 3) of separation is organized among peers. We join the interaction right after Matias (M, age 15 months) has separated from his parent during

![Figure 3](image-url). Comforting touch and calming words: a peer’s compassionate responses.
outdoor activity. He has been crying intensely for three minutes either alone (lying on the ground) or with an adult (in teacher Kaisa’s lap). Kaisa needs to orchestrate multiple concurrent activities outdoors at the same time (e.g., soothe Matias, guide and monitor other children). For a while Kaisa leaves Matias crying by himself so she can provide play equipment for the other children. This leads to a radical reorganization of the division of labor in the group. Selina (S, age 26 months) orients to Matias and takes responsibility for responding to his grief.

**Extract 2.** Peer’s responses to Matias’s grieving right after separation.

01 M: [...] A: [crying] [...]
02 S: ([orient to M])
03 S: [approaches M]
04 M: [...] A: [crying] [...]
05 M: : : : : : : : : : : [crying, ah ah][crying]
06 S: [enters, e.g., e]-[hatsa ‘there is nothing to worry about’]
07 M: [...] A: [crying]
08 M: : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : [...]
09 S: [(stroke M’s shoulder, lines 9–18, Fig.3)]
10 S: [enters, e.g., e]-[hatsa ‘there is nothing to worry about’]
11 M: [...] A: [...]
12 M: [...] A: [...]
13 S: [aiti tulee hakee ‘mama comes to pick you up’]
14 M: [...] A: [crying (looks at S)]
15 S: [aiti tulee hakee ‘mama comes to pick you up’]
16 S: [aiti tulee hakee ‘mama comes to pick you up’]
17 M: [...] A: [...] A: [...]
18 S: [aiti tulee hakee ‘mama comes to pick you up’]

Example 3 (Extract 2 and Figure 3) highlights the rich repertoires of practices that very young children have learned in their community to take responsibility for the (emotional) needs of others (Rogoff et al., 2007). Selina responds to Matias’ grief just like ECEC professionals in the group do. She first approaches by engaging in comforting talk (line 3), then encloses this talk with comforting touch (line 9–10) and eventually creates a link between Matias’ emotional loss (separation from a parent) and the forthcoming reunion (lines 13, 15, 16 and 18). Moreover, she skillfully manages to build a dialogue with Matias’ crying by anticipating inhalations between his cries and providing her verbal responses during those moments of silence (see, e.g., Berducci, 2016). At the end of the dialogue (lines 14–17), Matias becomes more sensitive to Selina’s turns. His crying no longer overlaps with Selina’s talk (cf. lines 3–11).

Overall, examples 1–3 show that separation as a moment to grieve provides one important and rich interactional context to deepen our understanding of children’s grief and local repertoires of practices around it in institutional ECEC. Starting institutional ECEC is a transition from one cultural community (home and family) to another very different one (an ECEC institution). We may assume that these two cultural communities have at least partly different repertoires of practices which children come to know in both formal and informal spaces (Gutierrez, 2002; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Giving children a right to grieve (Example 2) and providing them with opportunities to take responsibility for others’ (emotional) needs (Example 3) may communicate the institutionally appropriate repertoires to practice grief in a public space. These rights and opportunities illustrate a unique local moral order in an institutional ECEC setting: how, where, and how much one can grieve; which actions, emotions, and interpretations of grief are made available and allowed; and who may participate, how, and when. Grieving is normative (subject to dominant cultural practices, routines, and display rules) bound to cultural and historical context and can be done in more or less adequate ways according to local moral worlds. These moral worlds are not fixed but change over time.
Parents’ absence as a moment to grieve

Absence of parents or guardians is an evident part of life in institutional ECEC, and often accompanied with emotions of longing. Orientation to the absence of a parent brings grief to many young children’s lives, especially – but not only – during transition from home to institutional ECEC (Holm, 1999; Holm et al., 2000). Next, in examples 4–5 we highlight the lived experiences of one child Lily (aged 25 months) who clearly and keenly expresses the absence of her parents (mainly her mother) as a significant social, emotional, and material loss. Lily’s grieving has an interactional history: rich repertoires of practices around grief are part of her everyday life in ECEC six months after her transition. She grieves over the absence of her mother 10–15 times per day.

Lily’s case displays how grief is practiced in many ways, both verbally and with a living human body. Lily’s common ways to verbalize her grief-filled emotions are requests like “I want to get into my mommy’s lap” and “I want to go home,” reassurances such as “Mommy is coming to pick me up” and questions like “Where is my mommy?.” Her grieving appears to go beyond words. She grieves by crying, sobbing, and whining, but also more silently by withdrawing from interaction. While absent from the current situation, Lily has a preoccupied, faraway look in her eyes or she engages in gaze aversion, but also in different (self-soothing) side involvements (e.g., putting finger in her mouth, playing with her hair), or talking to herself under her breath (i.e., repetitive grief monologues such as “mommy’s coming, mommy’s coming, mommy’s coming”). She is also wayfaring around the space aimlessly and alone, making her way through grief in formation.

Example 4 (Figure 4) provides a visual representation of Lily’s “being away” and alone with her grief. This visualization resonates with the description provided by Brinkmann and Kofod (2018), pp. – grief lowers the shoulders and gaze, it makes the movements slow and heavy, and the body curl inwards.

It seems that Lily’s “silent” repertoires of practices are not the object of collective attention – no one appears to notice or to be interested in Lily’s doings (Figure 4). Nevertheless, Lily’s rich verbal repertoires provide interactional resources for her to connect with others to maintain family relationships and a sense of belonging to both family and ECEC community during her days in daycare.

Example 5 (Extract 3 and Figure 5) demonstrates aspects of Lily’s grief with an adult. Teachers and caregivers in Lily’s ECEC group engage in a variety of practices related to Lily’s grieving over the

Figure 4. Absence of a parent as an interactional phenomenon and a moment to grieve.
absence of her mother. These include (1) giving Lily embodied intimacy and comfort (Figure 5); (2) naming the emotions and verbalizing Lily’s grieving; and (3) telling particular personal stories through which Lily can understand grief in her life, and build a connection to her mother and to the future (e.g., to the forthcoming reunion).

**Extract 3.** Adult’s responses to Lily’s grieving during the daycare day.

01 L: "(haluun äitit sylleen)"
02 K: haluat äitin sylleen
03 K: arvaan varmaan et haluatkin äitin sylleen
i’m guessing that sure you want to get into mommy’s lap

04 K: siinä kohtaa ku äiti iltaapäivällä tulee
at that time when mommy comes in the afternoon
05 K: ni muistappa juosta sinne äidin sylleen
so remember to run there into your mommy’s arms
06 K: ku joskus meille käy niin pain et sit sinä
since sometimes it happens for us that then you
07 K: [lähdet juoksemaan toiseen suu:nntaan ((Fig. 5))
begin to run to the opposite direction
08 L: [((responds by binding her fingers around K’s hand))
09 K: mm:

10 K: ja pidetään kaikki ne ikäväät mielessä
and let’s keep all those longings in our minds
11 K: ja siltä kii äiti tulee
and then when mommy comes
12 K: ni juokset äidin sylleen ja sanot et
so you run into mommy’s lap and say that
13 K: rii äiti tulee äiti tulee
oh mommy’s coming mommy’s coming
14 K: muistatko
will you remember
15 K: mm: sit näytetään kaikki semmossen "ikävät"
mm: then we show all such emotions of longing
16 K: kerrotaan äidille et me ollaan paljon äitiä mietitty
let’s tell mommy that we have thought about her a lot
In line 1, Lily orient to the absence of her mother, and makes a request that cannot be granted here and now (“I want to get into my mommy’s lap”). Teacher Kaisa responds by soothing and comforting. Kaisa lifts Lily onto her knee and embraces her. With these embodied practices Kaisa frames her own lap as a substitute for Lily’s mother’s lap and builds a response to Lily’s social, emotional, and material loss. Figure 5 demonstrates embodied formation of Kaisa’s soothing and Lily’s response. Lily receives Kaisa’s embrace by binding her fingers around Kaisa’s hand. These finely attuned repertoires of practices indicate that Kaisa has thoughtfully chosen her response which Lily in turn has accepted. In addition to embodied intimacy and comfort, Kaisa delivers personal stories and future-oriented speech. In her future-oriented soothing talk Kaisa describes how mother is coming in the afternoon, and how Lily will then have a chance to run into her mother’s arms (lines 4–5). Kaisa also gives names to Lily’s emotions and encourages Lily to keep in mind her emotions and to show them to her mother in the afternoon (lines 10–16).

Our last example in which participants orient to the absence of a parent is organized among peers. In example 6 (Extract 4 and Figure 6) children sit at a table and wait for their lunch. While waiting, Tobias (T, aged four) expresses his emotional distress by frowning and withdrawing from the interaction. The example shows how Tobias’ emotional distress during everyday practices in a peer group is faced by Sara (S, aged four) and Ilmari (I, aged five) and eventually interpreted as something that is related to the absence of a parent.

**Extract 4.** Peer’s responses to Tobias’ grieving during lunch.

| 01 T: | ((frowns and pushes his drinking glass aside)) |
| 02 I: | (moves the glass back in front of Tobias) |
| 03 T: | en halu ((frowns, pushes his glass aside again)) |
| 04 S: | (strokes T’s arm, Fig.6) |
| 05 I: | (moves the glass back in front of Tobias) |
| 07 S: | silitetään tobiasta ((looks at I and strokes T’s arm)) |
| 09 S: | let’s stroke tobias |
| 10 S: | annetaan tobiaksen lasin olla siinä |
| 11 S: | let’s keep tobias’ glass there where it is |
| 12 T: | ((frowns and presses his head and gaze)) |
| 13 S: | haluuk su san aitin luokse |
| 14 T: | do you want to be with your mom |
| 15 S: | joo yes |
| 15 S: | aa tobias haluu sen aitin luokse ((looks at the peers)) |
| 16 S: | aa Tobias wants to be with his mom |

In example 6 (Extract 4 and Figure 6) Tobias’ everyday emotional distress is interpreted as a phenomenon related to parental absence. Sara does a lot of emotional work, not only to comfort Tobias herself (line 4) but to recruit other children for joint comforting and to recognize Tobias' emotional situation. Sara’s actions show a rich repertoire of practices to encounter and comfort grief. First, Sara comforts with affectionate touch (Figure 6, line 4); she then invites others to join the comforting (lines 7, 10 and 11). When the interaction unfolds further, Sara begins to make assumptions about the reasons behind Tobias’ emotional distress by asking questions (line 13), and eventually informs others about Tobias’ emotional situation when she receives confirmation for her assumptions (line 15).

All in all, examples 4–6 demonstrate how children grieve over the absence of their parents and how these moments involve rich repertoires of practices organized in different participation frameworks in institutional communities.
Social exclusion as a moment to grieve

In ECEC settings exclusion from the peer group can be socially and emotionally complex, uneasy, and distressing for children (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). Conflicts over inclusion in play are addressed and managed in diverse culturally-preferred ways in different institutional communities. In this section, we examine children’s and adults’ repertoires of practices in the
context of social exclusion when children face their grief alone (example 7), among peers (example 8), and with an adult (example 9).

Example 7 (Figure 7) illustrates Sara’s (aged four) embodied grieving practices.Repeatedly excluded by her peers, Sara eventually withdraws from the interaction, lowers her head and gaze, covers her face with her hand, and swallows sobs. She is alone with her grief.

Example 8 (Extract 5) demonstrates more closely the organization of peer interaction which led to Sara’s (S) grieving. In the process of social exclusion, Aurora (A, aged five) and Pinja (P, aged five) draw upon past joint experiences in the playground to exclude Sara, who does not share these playground experiences with the other girls. Aurora and Pinja return to the same past experiences over and over again. We join the interaction when Sara begins to resist the exclusion by asking Aurora to give a reason why she is behaving like that toward her.

Extract 5. Social exclusion and ignorance of Sara’s grieving.

Example 8 shows that Sara has rich verbal repertoires to resist the exclusion, explain the local moral order and make the other girls morally accountable for their actions. Sara’s turns in lines 1, 4, 16 are designed as overt complaining or sanctioning (“why are you behaving like that to me?”; “one shouldn’t
always be like that to other friends”; “but really smaller ones shouldn’t be left to play alone”). Her word choice “always” in line 4 indicates that in her experience the social exclusion has an interactional history: a more or less long-lasting process of her being excluded from or ignored during joint play by Aurora. Our observations confirm this; the exclusion is recurring but very subtle and difficult to detect, and there are also moments of joint play between the girls (see, Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006).

As the interaction unfolds further, Aurora and Pinja ignore Sara’s complaints and repeat their talk about the playground experiences. Sara becomes discouraged, lowers her head and gaze, and swallows sobs. While withdrawing from the interaction Sara produces her last words by whispering (line 19), giving the impression of self-talk (i.e. a grief monologue, see Lily’s practices in examples 4–5). She is turning inward with her grief-filled emotions and curls up. Overall, Sara’s grief is ignored by her peers and remains unnoticed and unaddressed by the adults.

Example 9 (Extract 6 and Figure 8) addresses the verbal and embodied practices employed by one teacher in response to continued social exclusion and prolonged conflict over inclusion in play. We join the interaction when the teacher Kirsi (K) opens the conversation with Amanda (A, aged five) who has repeatedly excluded Sahra (S, aged four) from joint play. Our focus is on Kirsi’s orientation to Sahra’s grief-filled emotions and on how the local moral order is communicated to the children in the situation.

Figure 8. Feelings talk: orientation to the grieving face and grief-filled emotions.
Extract 6. An adult’s responses to Sahra’s grieving in the context of social exclusion

1 K: kyllä sahra saa tulla teldän kanssa mukaan leikkiin

2 K: mennään yhdessä eikä niin

3 K: let’s go together right

4 K: amanda

5 K: ei oo reilua että yksi jätetään yksin (Fig. 8)

6 K: sahralla on paha mieli

7 K: sahra is feeling sad

8 K: miltä sinustaa itetä tuntuis ku sinulle sanottais

9 K: how would you feel if it was said to you

10 K: että amanda ei saa tulla mukaan leikkiin

11 K: that amanda cannot join the game

12 K: että amandan pitää olla yksin

13 K: that amanda has to be alone

14 K: tuntuisko hyvältä vai pahalta

15 K: does it feel good or bad

16 K: kumpi

17 K: which one

18 K: kyllä sää tiedät vastauksen

19 K: you know the answer

20 K: ei tunnu kivalta

21 K: it doesn’t feel nice

Example 9 highlights the rich repertoires of practices around grief related to social exclusion. First, Kirsi squats down at the level of the children (Figure 8; Amanda is in front of Kirsi and Sahra is on her right). She then draws the children’s attention to emotions (both present and imagined) and norms for the behaviors of individuals as members of a social group. She is explicitly linking the situation to emotions, and socializing the children into the importance of being fair to all group members. Kirsi’s emotional and moral stance is highlighted in her use of facial expressions, especially the position of her eyebrows. In her face we can see more empathetic grieving over the social exclusion than anger or punishment (Figure 8). With her grief-filled face she manages to be affectionate toward both children in the situation. Furthermore, Kirsi and the grieving child Sahra work closely together; Kirsi uses Sahra’s grieving face as an interactional resource, and Sahra practices grief with her body by sustaining the grieving face and lowered shoulders and gaze during the whole conversation. Furthermore, Kirsi’s questions encourage Amanda to develop a narrative account of the possible emotions related to social exclusion. However, Amanda doesn’t answer the teacher and refuses to respond in any way. Eventually, Kirsi produces both questions and answers in order to finish the conversation. Kirsi needs to explain the local moral order, although Amanda does not actively participate in the conversation.

To conclude, examples 7–9 show that peer exclusion is a conflict over interpersonal relationships. It might be a significant social and emotional loss for the excluded child but also for the ECEC professionals (see Kirsi’s grief-filled face in Figure 8). Therefore, social exclusion as a moment to grieve provides yet another important and rich interactional context to deepen our understanding of children’s grief in ECEC and the local moral order around emotions.

Discussion

In this article, we expanded the dominant psychological and medical approaches, and explored children’s grief in institutional ECEC as a lived experience of everyday social, emotional, and/or material loss. Analyzing interaction in the contexts of separation, absence of a parent, and social exclusion, we showed that grief is an evident part of children’s life in institutional ECEC. Our study opens up new, culturally, interactionally and historically grounded ways to recognize and encounter
children’s grief and to understand grieving as a cultural activity that consists of rich repertoires of practices.

Our examples demonstrate how grief as a public phenomenon becomes named, recognized, and acted upon through a variety of linguistic and embodied practices of intimacy and comfort. This “visibility” of grief offers participants opportunities for sense-making, giving grief a social meaning. Making things visible is not always self-evident: “the practices and routines in which children participate and the ways their participation is supported are often ‘invisible,’ and are seldom made explicit by or for community members” (Rogoff et al., 2007, p. 3). While children’s grief was visible, it was not always fully recognized.

Whilst children grieve, adults and other children have to judge whether the situation is significant and how they should respond – to ignore the grief (and suffering) or take action to alleviate it (Lipponen et al., 2018). Our cases demonstrate that it is a common practice to respond to grief with compassion. Practices of grief and care are configured in multiple dimensions: grief shapes the practices, and practices shape the grief.

The culturally appropriate and normative ways (constituted of normative routines and display rules) to grieve are not taught to children directly. As our examples demonstrate, they are learned and guided in the process of culturally valued activities in which participants communicate and coordinate their actions (Rogoff, 1995). In a sense, grief becomes the implicit goal of learning. Grieving can be understood as a way of being in the world, a kind of a condition for activities. This notion of emotion as a condition, and as a goal of learning, was recently conceptualized by Vea (2020) as the dual nature of emotions. Based on our analysis, we want to stress that emotion, such as grief, is not a static entity bound only in the mind but is continuously formed in the flux of activities.

ECEC is a central site where children learn to grieve, and where teachers and caregivers play a key role in creating and maintaining the local moral order: how, where, and how much one can grieve; who may participate, how, and when. Encountering grief, and emotions in general, is part of the very nature of ECEC practitioners’ work, so understanding the role of adults in moments of grief is important. We need a substantive professional and pedagogical discussion about the rich repertoires of practices for encountering, comforting, and justifying children’s grief.

To explore and open up debate on these issues, we have provided thought-provoking and rich cases from naturalistic settings. Exploring repertoires of practices around grief from various perspectives can elicit deeper discussion about the normative nature of emotional socialization. The Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019) emphasizes children’s rights to express their opinions, thoughts, and emotions. Many countries that have a formal curriculum, framework, or set of learning goals for young children include similar statements about children’s rights and emotional worlds. An interactionally grounded approach is globally very much needed for these abstract ideologies to find their ways into tangible practices.

From the theoretical and methodological perspective, our study raises questions for further research. We know that repertoires of practices vary in different cultural communities: expressions of and responses to grief are dependent on sociocultural preferences, situational contexts, and individual lived experiences. A deeper and richer understanding of grief in institutional ECEC (international and national level), in its organizations (local/community level), and in the paths of children experiencing grief (family and individual level) could be reached through focusing on children’s and adults’ “histories of engagement in cultural practices” (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). This approach can overcome the emphasis on isolated moments from the microanalytical perspective. In the future, broader longitudinal data should be used in qualitative analysis of everyday interaction with the same participants at different times, demonstrating change in engagement in cultural practices around grief.

To make meaning, people draw on experiences across multiple communities and time scales (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Currently, we can say little about the possible mismatches and cultural variations between practices in the children’s homes and their institutional ECEC settings. In future,
this requires exploring to understand the historical development of these institutions, their practices, and children’s “grief trajectories” between the communities.

From a wider societal perspective, do children have a right to grieve, and to express it in their own words and ways? Adults have more freedom and space to express and practice grief without preformulated explanations and arguments than children do (Pulkkinen, 2017). We often estimate that children’s grief is less than that of adults, and children’s grief is more easily silenced. We must examine more carefully who has the right to grieve in our society, and whose voice in grief should be heard. Exploring children’s grief constitutes one potential response to the polarization in contemporary society by increasing the opportunities for children to do, to be in formation with emotions and relationships.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) recently codified the length of time that constitutes “normal” grieving, and set the point at which grieving becomes a “pathology.” The APA’s decision shows that we are increasingly unwilling to accept common human experiences, such as grief, as part of our lives. It is important that we offer an alternative socio-cultural perspective to counter this individualized and medicalized understanding of grieving. Grief affects children going through all kinds of loss and separation due to war, migration and illness. While it is beyond the scope of our paper to address these global issues, our study gives a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of grief.

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