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Encounters with social class in class-evasive ECEC: Staff´s and children´s experiences

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we examine if and how social class influences children's interactions and experiences in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting. By examining these dynamics and using Bourdieu´s theory of capital and habitus, we can better understand the impact of social class on children's development and the critical role ECEC plays in reproducing or reducing social inequalities. The data include observations from 18 ECEC centres and interviews with 74 staff members in Swedish-speaking ECEC in Finland. The observations included informal discussions with the children during organised activities and free play for one month at each ECEC centre. The data were analysed with critical discourse analysis. The results show that staff on most occasions take a class-evasive approach. They reject discussions about social class and avoid the terminology. Instead, they often talk about differences between families in terms of different attitudes and time resources. However, observations reveal how children experiencing economic disadvantage carefully navigate interactions around birthdays and holiday celebrations due to a lack of economic resources. Ignoring social class, or being class-evasive, can increase existing inequalities and jeopardise the commitment to social equality in ECEC.

Keywords: *class-evasive, early childhood education and care, inclusion, exclusion*

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Introduction

The intersection of social class and early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a critical area of study that illuminates how systemic inequalities are perpetuated through educational practices and policies. The prize-winning Finnish author Sirpa Kähkönen (2018) describes realising her family was "poor" only when children pointed it out in school. Her story shows how social class becomes visible not only through material conditions but through social relations and educational experiences.

This study explores various dimensions of social class through key theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, highlighting the implications for children's developmental experiences and social interactions. Its aim is to raise awareness of the social hierarchies based on class that influence children´s interactions. Increased understanding of how social class is displayed in ECEC can therefore help to reduce exclusion. We explored these expressions through our research question: how does social class influence children's interactions and experiences in ECEC?

The research question directs attention to the role of ECEC centres in either reproducing or reducing class-based inequalities. Finnish ECEC offers a valuable empirical case because it follows the educare model that emphasises accessibility, quality, and social equity. This positions it as an essential strategy for mitigating social inequalities (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022). This approach treats learning and wellbeing as inseparable by supporting development, namely emotional, social, cognitive, and physical growth, through play-based learning and nurturing relationships, rather than through rigid academic instruction (Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). The model also affects professional responsibilities. While recent role descriptions differentiate teachers, social pedagogues and childcare workers, the national core curriculum emphasises shared planning and implementation across professional roles (Karila & Kupila, 2023; Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022, p. 18)

At the policy level, Finnish ECEC documents recognise the importance of "*equality, non-discrimination and diversity*" (EDUFI, 2022, p. 1), but do not mention social class (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2025). Even when equality and diversity are highlighted as shared values, policy language can remain broad enough to conceal power relations and leave room for individual interpretations (Paavola & Pesonen, 2021). Because policy helps shape both institutional conditions and family choices, it plays a crucial role in mitigating inequalities in access and quality (Sibley et al., 2015; Alexiadou et al., 2024; Alm & Odenbring, 2019; Donner et al., 2022; Mikander & Mansikka, 2023; Vuorisalo,

2013). By regulation, funding, and accountability, it is possible to ensure ECEC remains a right rather than a market commodity.

In this article, we first present the theoretical foundation and then the methods of data collection and analysis. Following that, we present the findings and finally, in the discussion, we interpret the results through both theory and existing research related to ECEC and social class.

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu and the dynamics of power

To analyse how social class becomes meaningful in children´s inclusion and exclusion, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory. Bourdieu conceptualises how social class is produced through various forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). *Economic capital* refers to material wealth and financial resources that can be translated into money and property. In ECEC this could mean opportunities for extracurricular activities like hobbies. According to Bourdieu (1986) *cultural capital* takes form through the embodiment, objects and institutional capital when language skills, manners, books, instruments, qualifications, and degrees signal competence and legitimacy. Families with high cultural capital have high language skills and educational goals for their children, which gives them an advantage as such traits are rewarded also in ECEC (Lareau, 2003). With *social capital,* Bourdieu (1986) refers to the networks of relationships and social connections that families use to access information, support, and gain opportunities. For example, families can use networks to get insider knowledge about resources like where to get support if your child needs extra support in ECEC and which different recourses you can apply for (Lareau, 2003). In *symbolic capital* we find prestige, honour, and recognition derived from other forms of capital, such as by using cultural or economic capital to gain status, like having certain type of fruits from home for snack time at ECEC (Alm & Odenbring, 2019). These forms of capital are interrelated and interchangeable, and economic capital can be used to buy cultural goods, cultural capital can lead to symbolic recognition, and social capital can open the door to economic opportunities.

Education often reproduces rather than counteracts social hierarchies, since it rewards and legitimises the economic, cultural, and social capital of dominant groups (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Through *reproduction*, educational success can appear merit-based even when it largely reflects pre-existing advantages (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu &

Passeron, 1977). In the same way, curricula and pedagogical norms can make the dominant culture appear universal and other ways of being as inferior, normalising inequality as "natural" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These processes rely on symbolic power, the possibility to define what is “normal”, and to symbolic violence, the harm that occur when these norms are misread as neutral and common sense (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Reproduction helps explain why social mobility remains limited, despite the formal goal of equality in education; the system favours those who already possess valued forms of capital. Children from higher social classes often access more valued resources and experiences, while the social capital of children from lower social background is easily overlooked (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

Central to Bourdieu’s argument is the concept of *habitus*, defined as ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Habitus is formed through socialisation within a class or group until the experiences become internalised and feel natural. Institutional habitus further explains how this normalisation operates in practise, referring to a working culture where staff´s own background, values and attitudes affect what counts as “normal” conduct from families and “good” participation (Reay, 1998). This supports the analysis of how the staff handle social class issues in the ECEC centres. Habitus predisposes individuals towards certain choices, but it does not determine behaviour (Bourdieu, 1984). A family with high cultural capital fosters a habitus that values education and cultural consumption that in turn aligns with institutional expectations. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that individuals reproduce hierarchies because their habitus match the opportunities and constraints of their class position. Closely linked to habitus and the different forms of capital is Bourdieu´s concept of *field* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). By a field, Bourdieu refers to a structured social space in which individuals or groups interact, like education, and where specific forms of capital can be valued in it to gain resources or influence social positions. Each field is influenced by larger social structures; the education field is shaped by economic and political impact, yet it also has its own set of internal rules. In that way, Bourdieu's perspective is highly relevant for critical theories in education by challenging norms, exposing power dynamics, and advocating for social change (Burawoy, 2012).

Previous research on social class in relation to ECEC

Lareau’s (2003) research on families of ten-year-olds in the U.S. shows how social class influences parenting styles, and consequently, children's life outcomes. We see Lareau´s research as important for this study because it can be applied to the ECEC context and institutions. According to Lareau, children from working-class and poor background are often reared through the *logic of accomplishment of natural growth*, where basic needs

and free play is seen as important. The children raised by this parenting style face institutions without the ability to manipulate rules of the institutions to their advantage. Children from working-class or low-income backgrounds often develop a "*sense of constraint"* when interacting with institutions such as schools or healthcare services. This means they tend to either accept authority without question or view the institution as untrustworthy or unreasonable (Lareau, 2003). In comparison, children from a middle-class background typically develop a "*sense of entitlement"* as they are often reared through the "*logic of concerted cultivation"*, through which parents actively organise structured, adult-led activities that they believe will support their child's success at school (Lareau, 2003). The capital that children from a middle-class background gain from this parenting style can be valuable in adulthood, such as how they are taught to maintain eye-contact and shake hands with strangers who could be important in future job interviews, learning to be part of a team, or how the children learn to expect institutions to be responsive to their individual needs (Lareau, 2003). The differences between the family logic of either concerted cultivation or accomplishment of natural growth show that social class shapes family routines, affecting children's experiences and teacher perceptions within educational settings. This is evident in how educators often see children from middle-class backgrounds as more competent and children from working-class backgrounds as less engaged (Lareau, 2003).

Similar results were found in Vuorisalo´s (2013) research, which conceptualises ECEC as a social field where children, educators, and families engage in everyday struggles over resources and recognition. Routine interactions enact symbolic power, shaping who is seen as competent or valued. Huilla et al. (2021) illustrate how symbolic violence can arise when middle-class norms are normalised and families are framed as "lacking" if they do not align with them. Mikander and Mansikka (2023) add that classed assumptions shape staff perceptions and practices, even where class is rarely discussed, illustrating how habitus and cultural capital operate in everyday interactions. They argue that staff´s own social backgrounds influence their expectations and awareness, and social class is navigated through their perceptions of children, staff interactions, and comparing their centre to other, less privileged centres.

Lareau´s (2003) research indicates that families from higher class background may possess cultural capital that aligns with the expectations of educational institutions, thereby facilitating smoother interactions for their children. This demonstrates that social class is shaping attitudes, expectations, and interactions even in systems committed to equality. Professionals' sensitivity to diversity and awareness of structural inequalities are essential for preventing the reproduction of social hierarchies in early education (Lareau, 2003; Alm & Odenbring, 2019). In Sweden, Alm and Odenbring (2019) reveal

how practitioners in leisure-time centres recognise disparities in children's resources and implement compensatory measures, such as providing clothing or meals. While the aim of these efforts is to reduce inequality, they also underscore the structural persistence of class differences, reinforcing Bourdieu's and Passeron´s (1977) argument that educational spaces are deeply embedded in social hierarchies.

Donner et al. (2022) found that children's play negotiations often reflect underlying social hierarchies. This results in exclusionary practices and favouritism among peers, further entrenching class-based disparities in social interactions and emotional experiences. Watson et al. (2015) present how objects like wristbands and scooter boards can shape inclusion and exclusion in early childhood environments. The authors argue that these material artefacts are used to actively mediate relationships, regulate movement, and influence children's identities and participation. By focusing on these 'special' factors, the study shows how materiality and technology contribute to power relations and educational practices.

As we have seen from previous studies, families from a higher social class background typically have greater access to resources, including financial means, educational opportunities, and social networks, which facilitate their engagement with centre-based care (e.g. Lareau, 2003). In contrast, Sibley et al. (2015) highlight the barriers faced by families from a lower social background in accessing ECEC services due to economic constraints and lack of information, which restrict their utilisation of ECEC services. Simpson et al. (2014) are critical to the neoliberal framing of ECEC policies that often place the burden of children's outcomes on parents in poverty. Neoliberal policies can stigmatise families from lower social class background and exacerbate class differences, affecting children's interactions and staffs' attitudes, thereby reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. Sibley et al. (2015) also explore the positive impact of policy changes aimed at increasing ECEC accessibility and affordability, suggesting that such systemic interventions can mitigate social class disparities by fostering greater inclusivity and social cohesion.

Research indicates a strong correlation between the quality of early childhood educators and centres on one hand, and positive developmental outcomes for children on the other, especially for those from a low socio-economic background (Kulic et al., 2017; OECD, 2025). Social differences in early educational settings are expressed through children's interactions, but educational staff can also reinforce existing inequalities if they are not aware of the implicit biases they carry (Alm & Odenbring, 2019). Educators need to recognise and value the diversity in cultural capital that children bring to the setting (Lavanti et al., 2023). Accordingly, the role of staff is essential not only for delivering

quality education, but also for bridging the gap that can arise from varied socio-economic contexts. This is particularly critical for children deemed to be “at risk" due to social factors such as parental education, socioeconomic status, or family structure and stability (Kulic et al., 2017). Addressing these complex dynamics is essential for fostering equitable opportunities and interactions within ECEC settings, ultimately contributing to reducing social inequalities.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project called *All children included* (ALLBINK) that focuses on inclusion and exclusion based on four factors: language, gender, racialisation, and social class. Finland is a bilingual country with two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. The data were collected from 18 Swedish-speaking ECEC centres in southern Finland. The centres that participated in the study were in both large urban areas and rural regions. Some centres served families from wide geographic areas, while others catered to much smaller, more local, communities. Additionally, the centres were situated in neighbourhoods with varying socioeconomic profiles, reflecting a diverse range of family backgrounds and living conditions.

For this multi-sited short-term ethnographic study, permission was granted by the municipalities, the directors and staff, as well as guardians who signed consent forms to let their children participate. For the participatory observations and informal discussions with children, the researchers continuously obtained the children's assent each time they engaged with a child throughout the research (Köngäs & Määttä, 2021). The children were told they could decline to participate at any time, and researchers were observant of the children's non-verbal cues regarding participation.

For this article, we used data drawn from interviews with staff and observational field notes of the groups in the centres. The 74 interviews with staff consisted of interviews with 28 teachers, 11 directors, 25 childcare workers and ten staff members with other roles. The interviews were semi-structured, and audio recorded for transcribing verbatim. The staff came one at the time to do the interviews during work hours; most were done at the centres, but some were conducted through digital video meetings. The interview length ranged from 26 to 108 minutes, depending on how much time the staff could be away from their groups.

The three fieldworkers who conducted participant observations spent one month at each centre and talked informally with the children. The fieldworkers did a total of 1177 hours

of participant observations and the number of observations per centre varied from 34 to 96 hours depending on COVID-19 circumstances. The researchers made observation notes that were later rewritten into fieldnotes and read and coded in the same way as the interviews. During the observations, the researchers took a participatory position and talked informally with the children when possible. This meant that researchers could actively engage with the children in play while remaining outsiders, who did not reprimand the children or correct their behaviour. The fieldworkers did not intervene in the centre's activities and adjusted observations, informal talks, and interviews to the centre's activities and according to the needs of both staff and children.

Based on the university's rules for ethical review, an ethics committee review was not needed. We followed the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity's guidelines (TENK, 2023) data regulation and handle the data with confidentiality. We included 18 centres with varying profiles to protect the centres' confidentiality and to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results. Fieldnotes and transcribed interviews were pseudonymised and stored on a secure university server behind password. Personal information about the participants was removed and altered to make it unrecognisable. The staff were given pseudonyms with a name and number according to their professional role. We gave the centres pseudonyms of asteroids and stars (e.g. Ara, Chara, Ran, Solaris etc.). The data was accessible only to the research group. The data is stored password protected on a secure server until the end of the project.

Analysis

We collected data from the end of 2021 to the end of 2022, and coding of the interviews was completed in 2023. The data was coded in Atlas.ti. After reading through the data, material connected to social class was coded and separated for further analysis. Four researchers read through and collaboratively coded the data. The codes included under the code group "social class" had to do with implicit and explicit mention of economic resources, family or staff background and values that were divided into the subcategories of cars/home, celebrations, travel, family, education, toys, and clothes/things. The coded data were analysed using critical discourse studies (CDS) (Van Dijk, 2015; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDS provides a framework for examining the intricate relationships between language, power, and social inequality (Van Dijk, 2015). To ensure shared interpretations and consistency of the analysis the project group met to discuss the findings regularly.

A fundamental assumption of CDS is that discourse, society, and cognition form a triangular theoretic framework (Van Dijk, 2015). From such a perspective, we applied a

three-layer analysis to identify discursive strategies, social and cognitive layers in our material. This created more depth in searching for the meaning behind the language used and made visible the larger use of language that shaped the overall opinion. Discursive strategies describe analysis through vocabulary, text structure, and cohesion (Van Dijk, 2015). In the analysis of the interviews, we used CDS analysis to examine the words staff used to avoid talking about social class, like *"that"* or pausing, and what values show in how they expressed themselves, such as by talking about *"good toys"* and *"we are not allowed to"*. The social layers show the hegemony of power constructed in speech or text and what consequences it has for different groups (Van Dijk, 2015). This could be normalising certain standards, like seeing travel as normality, without considering that many children have not travelled outside their local community. The cognitive layers consider speech acts, attitudes and intertextuality, the factors that link text to its context (Van Dijk, 2015). An example could be when staff question why they cannot take contributions from families, versus saying that ECEC should not cost anything extra.

The children´s discourses were analysed by looking at their word choices, assumptions, turn-taking, silences, and non-verbal cues (Van Dijk, 2015). From the two examples of the observation fieldnotes that we chose, we could detect the interaction between material/consumerist discourses and avoiding/face-saving discourses.

After the analysis, we grouped the similarities into discursive strategies and constructed the three categories used in the presentation of results. The first category we identified was a discourse of avoidance, whereby staff downplay or deny class differences. Second, we identified a discourse of recognition, whereby staff acknowledge gaps or inequalities. Third, we identified an action-oriented discourse, whereby staff offer solutions or coping strategies. These were then named *walking past the cracks: avoiding social class*, *spotting the gap: recognising social class*, and *building bridges: strategies for handling social class-related questions*.

We did not gather specific data about the social class status of the children or the staff, other than what was brought up spontaneously in interviews or observations (such as parents' education or work status, families' economic situation or need for economic support). Instead, we used the theory and critical discourse studies to determine the participants' social class status when relevant and possible. This was somewhat limiting for our study, but our focus was on the children's and staff's discourses around social class issues. The Covid-19 put some constraints on our study since it meant that the time spent in some of the ECEC centres was cut short due to Covid outbreaks. More time spent in each centre would have deepened our understanding of the children's perspective on social class issues.

Results

The results are divided into two parts. We first present the children's discourse through two examples, Advent calendar and the Birthday gift from the observations to show the observed reality of the children. These examples give a picture of situations that children with a lower social class background encounter at the centre, and how skilfully the children "cover for" their disadvantage. In the second part of the results, we present the class-evasive stance that was common in the staff interviews. This stance is divided into the three categories (1) walking past the cracks: avoiding social class, (2) spotting the gap: recognising social class, and (3) building bridges: strategies for handling social class-related questions.

Children's discourses about social class

The Advent calendar[1]

In the first example, we have a 3–4-year-old child, Olivia (Chara), who is very skilled in navigating discussions about social class. Olivia is a socially capable child who comes from a less well-to-do background. She is observant and manages to play with all children in the group and moves with ease from one play to another. The comfort and skills in playing with large groups and without the help of adults could be explained by the logic of accomplishment of natural growth that encourage children to learn to manage relationships and navigate diverse social situations, fostering resilience and independence.

Through Bourdieu's (1986) theory on capital, we can determine some of Olivia's economic capital as her family's limited economic resources are visible in second-hand clothes (staff did not seem to think this was because of ecological choices) and long hours at the centre (likely due to parents' work schedules). These material constraints can influence how others perceive her and the opportunities available to her. Despite economic limitations, her strong social skills suggest she possesses embodied cultural capital, dispositions like confidence and communication that are valued in ECEC settings. This can partly compensate for the lack of material resources. Social capital could be seen in her ability to connect socially that might help her build peer relationships, creating informal social capital within the ECEC centre. Symbolic capital through her clothing often functions as markers of status. Her habitus, shaped by her family's circumstances, makes her

[1] In Finland known as Christmas calendar, to count down the days to Christmas.

comfortable with second-hand clothing and having early arrival and late departure routines.

In a situation in which children are waiting to go to lunch, a child is going around the group asking how many Advent calendars the children have, and whether they are Advent calendars that have a piece of chocolate for each day. There is a power relation to the question *"How many calendars do you have?"*. It assumes it is normal to have multiple calendars and can be interpreted as a consumerist discourse that marginalises those with fewer resources (Huilla et al., 2021). Olivia is honest and says that she does not have one. As the group had discussed earlier, there would be a paper calendar sent by mail to all families from a non-profit organisation. Olivia has not received this calendar.

> She explains she would have got a chocolate one, but the shops had sold out. However, they have a chocolate jar at home. (Field notes, Chara)

It appears she has understood that she should not say that they either cannot afford to buy an Advent calendar, or that perhaps her parents are not prioritising or have not managed to arrange a calendar for whatever reason. She understands the family's economic situation and is carefully giving a logical explanation that does not reveal anything about her parents or the situation at home and is a face-saving strategy. This could be explained by Bourdieu's (1984) idea of habitus reproduced from home to not talk about economic constraints to others.

The birthday gift

In another example, two children, Petra and Einari (Hydra), from varying social backgrounds play together when the conversation turns into the subject of birthday gifts and the economic resources become visible. Petra is a quiet child and nothing about her appearance stands out. After observing her, it feels that she is very careful not to stand out. Einari travels on his vacations and is very vocal about this. He has a lot of material things he also likes to talk about, like an electric kick board and big toys he brings to the centre. He positions himself as powerful through these material objects and a material discourse, asserting symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1989; Watson et al., 2015). He utilises the discourse to influence his relationships to either add to his own inclusion or restrict others from participating.

Petra is playing with Einari in the sandpit when he turns the conversation to his birthday party that will take place at an indoor activity playground sometime in the next month. Petra replies that the playground costs a lot of money. They continue to talk about parties and presents when Einari says that he would not like to have a girly gift (from Petra), but an outdoor slide. Petra replies with her gaze turned down that she will know later if she

will be ill on the day of his birthday. Einari reacts and bends to look at her and asks worriedly if she will come to his birthday party. Petra is still looking down and away from him and says it is possible she will be ill that day. Einari lights up and suggests that in that case, she can come with the car and come to the door and hand over the gift. Petra ends the conversation by saying they will see if she feels better. They continue playing with the sand.

Petra is very cautious about giving any indication about whether she will be coming to Einari´s birthday party with a gift. From the start of the conversation, she seems to understand the concept of what seems expensive and when her comment is not met with understanding, she turns to other strategies to save face: here the possibility of being sick and therefore not able to go to the birthday party at all. Petra also uses an avoidance discourse ("*Maybe I'll be sick"*) to manage potential shame, signalling internalised norms about gift-giving and worth. Einari on the other hand is not aware that the birthday gift is a sensitive issue and does not notice the difference in experience between him and his friend.

This interaction between Petra and Einari illustrates how Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and reproduction operate in early childhood settings. Einari's confident references to material possessions and a costly birthday celebration reflect substantial economic capital, which enables participation in socially valued activities. His ease in discussing these experiences signals a habitus aligned with middle-class norms of entitlement, shaped by access to resources and structured leisure. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue, his middle-class habitus matches the opportunities and constraints associated with his social position and thereby reinforces the social hierarchy. Petra, on the other hand, demonstrates awareness of economic constraints through her remark on the playground's expense. Her cautious demeanour shown by an averted gaze, ambiguous responses, and the excuse of possible illness, embodies a habitus marked by a "sense of constraint" in which strategies are used to avoid embarrassment and maintain dignity. These micro-level interactions reproduce social distinctions by normalising consumer-oriented practices as desirable, positioning children with greater capital as central in peer culture while rendering others vulnerable to subtle exclusion.

As a conclusion, both cases above illustrate how the two children, Olivia and Petra, from families with economically disadvantaged backgrounds have already learnt to navigate situations related to capital of different kinds. It also illustrates how the child, Einari, from a family with an economically resourceful background, lacks the awareness and skills to navigate a situation in a more inclusive way. It also shows how special childhood is when play and imagination can be a resource to handle tricky situations. Thus, in the ECEC

contexts, everyday play is a setting where inequalities are enacted and legitimised through interactions of capital and habitus. These situations were not noticed by staff members, so through interviews with them, we wanted to find out how they perceive the presence of social class in the daily life of children in the centres. In our findings, the staff do not identify social class in relation to the children, but they do recognise it in relation to other factors like families and material markers.

The staff´s discourses about social class issues among children

From the staff interviews, we observed that social class was expressed through the staff´s perceptions of children and families. To analyse these dynamics, we organised staff responses into three discourses: 1. Walking past the cracks: avoiding social class, 2. Spotting the gap: recognising social class and 3. Building bridges: strategies for handling social class-related questions.

1. Walking past the cracks: avoiding social class

From the interviews with staff (N =74), we were interested in how the staff see social class in the ECEC context. Majority of staff (n = 58) agreed that social class does not influence the inclusion of children or that children do not think about that kind of stuff. Therefore, they did not see social class as an issue that they needed to deal with, with the children. As a childcare worker (Hydra) explained, *"because children do not understand that your parents earn more than mine"*. The staff also struggled to use concepts and terms like social class and socioeconomic background and did not say directly what they meant, which made it harder to interpret what they meant.

We found some exceptions when staff did see social class in relation to the children (n = 12). Three teachers mentioned situations around general care when discussing cooperation with families. They had experience of when children reacted to other children's poor hygiene and unpleasant smell or dirty clothes; situations forcing the staff to intervene in the situations (Solaris, Childcare worker; Ursa, Childcare worker; Ran, Teacher). This supports our observations that children are aware of differences in social class background, including the matter of slight/neglect in general care needs for children. The staff members only engaged with the children about the matter if confronted head on. On the other hand, one teacher had the experience that children did not react to differences in hygiene (Vega, Childcare worker), which also let staff avoid the issue.

These are examples of when staff express a class-evasive (Hummelstedt et al., 2025) stance, where they minimise the importance of class or walking past the cracks by ignoring social class differences. It gives them the option to present themselves in a

positive light, such as being neutral or fair when it comes to treating every child equally, irrespective of children´s background. On these occasions, when staff say children do not think about "that stuff" it reflects how the staff´s own habitus is shaped by a class-evasive discourse. They normalise the idea that class differences are irrelevant in early childhood, even though some children demonstrate awareness and strategies to navigate class-based norms.

2. Spotting the gap: recognising social class

Even though most of the staff were reluctant to see social class in relation to children, some (n = 6) did recognise it and brought it up in relation to families. They mentioned examples, related to the families, where social class influenced children´s inclusion or exclusion in the centres. Factors that staff associate with social class having an impact on inclusion was children's play dates outside the centre, or common hobbies. This shows how families can use social capital through connections with play dates outside the ECEC centre that influence inclusion and exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003).

While staff often claim they "do not know" families' social class, they do acknowledge differences affecting children's experiences. They describe economically disadvantaged families as *"having a strong need to do things right"* (Gemini, Teacher), *"keep their children at home when sick"* (Chara, Childcare worker), *"make a big effort to have the appropriate clothes for outdoor play"* (Ursa, Leader; Solaris, Teacher), and *"see asking for help as a failure or accepting help for the child as an obligation"* (Polaris, Leader). In contrast, affluent families were described as *"their ambitions for their careers go before the children"* (Chara, Childcare worker), *"trust their social capital, dare to ask for and receive help from others"* (Polaris, Leader), *"children have little time with the parents"* [as the parents work so much or are busy] (Polaris, Childcare worker) and *"see help for the child as their right or are very knowledgeable of their rights as parents"* (Polaris, Leader; Lerna, Childcare worker; Vega, Teacher). Families from a middle-class background show a familiarity with institutional expectations and by knowing their rights or being able to navigate the systems, while families from working-class backgrounds show a sense of conscientiousness and reluctance to seek help. These distinctions reflect Bourdieu's notion of cultural and economic capital. Despite these differences, staff emphasise that cooperation with families is not connected to social class but is based on personality and values.

However, some, like the leader of Polaris or a teacher from Vega, notice differences while others say it is hard to know families' social class background. As the leader of Ursa say, *"There are clear differences, but parents with low income can have very expensive clothes that are not practical, and families that have a big house and fancy car can have trouble*

affording new rain clothes for the season". Here the leader challenged the assumption that income has a straight correlation with appearance. They also distinguish between economic and symbolic display, like families even when they are unemployed, they know the status signals of having expensive clothing, which reflects an attempt to maintain dignity and recognition. Here we can see a mixture of capitals according to Bourdieu when it comes to the economic, cultural, and symbolic capital.

An interesting comparison is between staff who have recognised social class but lack tools to handle it, and those who have more experience. In an informal conversation with a teacher, she refers to a situation where she had found herself totally lost without knowing how to solve the situation. During Christmas, they had empty boxes wrapped as gifts for role play and one child had become very happy, and with big eyes took a "gift" and did not want to give it back (Field notes, Taika). Other children tried to explain that the box was empty. The teacher later thought that maybe the child did not get presents at home. The teacher felt she had made a mistake with the boxes. In another case, one leader (Chara) was referring to her earlier job experiences and former education as a reason for why she is conscious about social class differences and how they can present themselves in the ECEC environment. From Bourdieu´s point of view, this illustrates a reflexive habitus, shaped by accumulated cultural capital and institutional exposure. Her previous experience enables her to recognise and articulate social class differences within the ECEC environment, positioning her as more critically aware than colleagues who adopt a class-evasive habitus. While the reflexive habitus opens space for questioning and potentially transforming practices, the class-evasive habitus reinforces the reproduction of social hierarchies by framing class as irrelevant. These contrasting ways to relate to social class demonstrate how professional trajectories and educational experiences shape the staff's capacity to perceive and engage with social class dynamics in ECEC.

3. Building bridges: Strategies for handling social class related questions

The following strategies reveal how staff work with equality and navigate class differences within the ECEC institution. Two interviewees (Solaris, Teacher; Ara, Leader) mentioned how policy documents give them a direction for how to consider social class. For example, staff should not ask parents to bring snacks for excursions or other economic contributions, so that everyone can participate. Another interviewee said, *"We have received municipal-level instructions not to discuss what did you get for Christmas? Or if they have been on holiday that, did you go abroad on the holiday?"* (Chara, Leader). But also, personal experiences guided them to not ask families for a certain type of nappies, only the cheapest kind, and to consider the mental load, not only economic recourses and not have too many things the families need to keep track of (Chara, Leader). These strategies

reflect topic management, whereby equality is pursued through sameness by removing conversations about vacations or gifts.

Likewise, some (*n* = 11) staff members say that if the area is similar regarding social class, then class is not visible or does not become an issue at the centres. Centres that have children from different areas have more issues (Polaris, Childcare worker, Teacher; Lerna, Leader). Here the staff express a view that homogeneity may reduce the visible inequalities while reproducing them at the same time. Both the removal of obstacles and perception of area homogeneity represent an idea that centres can accomplish equality through sameness. Discussing socioeconomic status and social class, a teacher struggles to express herself while discussing how the pandemic increased the economic inequalities between families.

> *It will reveal itself, all these economic issues first maybe during this year. It is hard to say where it, where it will go. And... I struggle to see, because we don't have... because we all eat the same food, you know, and like this, so you don't see the differences.* (Polaris, Teacher).

Here the teacher is postponing recognition or action, which can mean delayed interventions for widening post-pandemic inequalities while also using sameness to show how they manage equality.

A few (*n* = 4) staff members said that children's personality and social skills can act as a buffer and protect them from exclusion based on social class disadvantages and attribute their success to individual traits. *"I also think that personality counts"* (Hydra, childcare worker). In talking about how a child from a lower-class background was included or excluded in the group, a leader explained that *"He was a very popular boy, actually. He was a nice fellow. You must remember that it is not the parents who are here* [at the centre]*"* (Chara, Leader). One could argue that these social skills have developed to overcome disadvantage. Problematically, when staff attribute children's inclusion to personality rather than to structural factors, it uses individualisation to reframe the structural barriers to personal adaptability and placing the burden solely on the child.

Some staff (*n* = 9) also noticed social class and economic capital differences through material markers. They conceive "toy day" as something that have become problematic, as in the following description:

> *We have had toy day, and depending on their economic circumstances, there are some who have these cool toys that can then become popular that way. That's what I've observed, but, and that's why I don't have them in this group now, we don't have toy day, quite simply. You have your toys at home, and we have what we have here at the centre. That you shouldn't in that way get differentiated or that someone should feel bad*

> *because they don't have good toys or someone should become very popular because their parents can afford better toys.* (Timir, Teacher)

Another teacher said their solution to the toy day was to have children bring books as *"most have, in most houses there is a book"* (Ara, Leader). Staff members also did try to smooth over if there were comments made by children about cars, travel, and extra clothing that they perceived could exclude other children (Vega, Teacher; Orion, Teacher; Gemini, Childcare worker; Chara, Leader; Taika, Leader). These staff acknowledge that visible and material things could impact a child´s status in the group. At one centre (Chara) the staff did make extra Santa hats (*tomteluvor*) for the children who did not have one from home during Christmas. The staff replaced toy days with books and provided spare items on special occasions to mitigate social class differences. These small compensations maintain group harmony without mentioning social class, which could buffer stigma but only individualise the solutions and not address structural causes. These local solutions try to equalise symbols while still not explicitly talk about class.

Contrary to the opinions above, there were staff that did not understand why ECEC centres should not ask for extra contributions from families for special activities and there were staff who spoke in a negative tone that *"not able for them anymore"* (Chara, Childcare worker) to do some activities. Others feel at a disadvantage in relation to wealthy families (Ursa, Childcare worker). This points to the differences between the staff's own habitus and values around both economic and social capital, and the habitus of some families. This shows there are hierarchies among the staff in which power asymmetries shape what can be said and done, and institutional culture may prioritise families' economic capital over equity efforts. The institutional policies that ban extra contributions try to mitigate some effects but do not challenge the underlying distribution of capital. While these strategies aim to mitigate visible inequalities, they often rely on symbolic adjustments rather than structural change, reinforcing a class-evasive discourse. The results demonstrate that staff, while avoiding social class in relation to children, do see and even engage in discussion around social class topics through other factors in the ECEC environment and relations. However, most staff members were still class-evasive, both in interviews and in practice.

Discussion and conclusions

The everyday interactions in ECEC are formative moments when social hierarchies are either reproduced or disrupted. This means social class actively shapes children´s interactions and staff members' practices. In this study, we have seen that despite the

strong emphasis on equality in the Finnish ECEC, the class-evasive discourse among the staff contrasts with some children's awareness and strategies for navigating inequalities. However, there are a few commonalities between how some staff and children experiencing economic disadvantage deal with social class issues. Both groups have strategies for how to navigate around inequalities due to social class differences.

Our study confirms previous research on how social class influences children´s interactions and experiences in ECEC. In line with Lareau´s (2003) concepts of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth, children from less affluent families demonstrate resilience and adaptability in peer interactions, as seen in how Olivia and Petra navigate diverse situations in play. Olivia´s face-saving strategies reflect a habitus shaped by economic constraints. Petra´s cautious response discussing the birthday gift illustrates avoidance strategies and managing potential shame, something that can be explained by Bourdieu´s (1984) idea that habitus and cultural capital influence social positions. These interactions are similar to both Vuorisalo's (2013) and Mikander and Mansikka's (2023) findings, that ECEC operates as a social field in which symbolic power and classed assumptions shape everyday practices. Einari's confident references to material possessions and costly activities are examples of how economic and symbolic capital can be used to assert dominance in peer culture and shows that materiality and technology influence inclusion and exclusion among children (Donner et al. 2022; Watson et al., 2015).

While staff often claim not to know families' social class, their descriptions of working-class families as dutiful and middle-class families as entitled, mirror Lareau's observations of institutional alignment with middle-class norms. As noted by Alm and Odenbring (2019), these perceptions risk reinforcing inequalities, when educators' implicit biases can perpetuate structural hierarchies even in systems committed to equality. Our analysis of staff interviews reveals three discursive strategies: avoiding social class, recognising social class, and handling social class-related questions. These discourses reflect varying degrees of awareness and engagement with social class dynamics in ECEC.

The findings are in line with previous research on how educators' habitus and cultural capital shape their perceptions and practices. First, the class-evasive discourse (*walking past the cracks*) aligns with Mikander and Mansikka's (2023) observation that social class is rarely discussed explicitly in Finnish ECEC, despite its influence on everyday interactions. When staff claim that *"children do not think about that kind of stuff"*, they position class as irrelevant and frame themselves as neutral and fair. This mirrors Vuorisalo's (2013) argument that symbolic power operates subtly in ECEC fields, where

ignoring class differences can reproduce inequalities by normalising middle-class norms. Second, the recognition discourse (*spotting the gap*) reflects partial awareness of how family resources and practices affect children's inclusion. Staff descriptions of working-class and middle-class families corresponds with Lareau's (2003) concepts of accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation. These distinctions also illustrate Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital: middle-class families can use cultural and institutional familiarity in their favour, while working-class families often struggle to get their efforts recognised. However, staff often lack tools to address these differences, reinforcing Alm and Odenbring's (2019) finding that educators' limited reflexivity can uphold structural hierarchies. The third discourse (*building bridges*) highlights staff strategies for mitigating visible inequalities without explicitly naming social class. These strategies include declining economic contributions, avoiding conversations about holidays or gifts, and replacing activities like toy day with alternatives such as book day. Staff also provide spare items (e.g., Santa hats) and frame equality through sameness, aiming to buffer stigma while not taking on structural issues, which are compensatory measures reducing immediate disparities but leave underlying hierarchies intact (Alm & Odenbring, 2019). Similarly, Mikander and Mansikka (2023) note that educators often navigate class differences indirectly, reinforcing a class-evasive habitus even when the intention is inclusion.

One underlying reason staff recognise and engage in social equality in ECEC was their personal experience of social class inequalities. This suggests that it is crucial for all staff to be educated in recognising and mitigating social class differences, because otherwise, only some will work to equalise the differences as emphasised by Lavanti et al. (2023) and the OECD (2025). Likewise, it is crucial to educate students in teacher education and childcare education to recognise social class differences. When the staff acknowledge and address social class, they challenge the normalisation of inequality. Our findings show that changing the institutional habitus (Reay, 1998) cannot rely on individual engagement; it must be embedded in structural practices and professional learning. In ECEC this could mean having material buffers as some centres had spare hats for special celebrations, but pairing these with explicit, age-appropriate discussions with the children, about fairness and difference. By creating spaces for dialogue and equipping educators with tools to address class-related issues, ECEC can move beyond avoidance towards intentional inclusion. In doing so, we lay the foundation for a social space where every child's dignity and potential are affirmed. This is important not only because steering documents require staff to promote equal inclusion, but also for children´s long-lasting wellbeing.

Our study calls for a shift from silence to dialogue, from avoidance to engagement. Social class is present in every ECEC setting, whether we talk about it or not. By embracing this

reality and giving ECEC staff the opportunity and tools to act, we can continue to develop early childhood spaces into arenas of equity and inclusion. The question should be not whether we can afford to do this, but whether we can afford not to.

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