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Professional development opportunities and a newly built daycare center: incentives in ECEC teacher job advertisements in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Attracting and recruiting qualified, high-quality teachers is a global challenge. In Finland, the recruitment of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers has been particularly problematic, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area. This paper investigates the incentives used in job advertisements to attract ECEC teachers in Finland and the differences in incentives between urban, semi-urban, and rural municipalities. The analysis of 322 ECEC teacher job advertisements revealed that the most frequently highlighted incentives were related to professional development opportunities and physical work environment. Urban municipalities featured more incentives compared to their semi-urban and rural counterparts, reflecting the observation that, unlike many other parts of the world, the teacher recruitment challenge in Finland is most acute in urban areas. This study contributes to the limited research on teacher recruitment and enhances the understanding of incentives used in recruitment beyond financial ones.



KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; teachers; recruitment; job advertisements; incentives; Finland

Introduction

Attracting, recruiting, and retaining high-quality teachers is a global challenge, with increasing shortages of competent educators reported worldwide (European Commission 2021; OECD 2020). In Finland, the recruitment of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers has been particularly problematic, and daycare centers have long struggled with teacher shortages (Lassheikki 2023; Manner 2023). For example, in the UK, this similar challenge, where ECEC employers are struggling to recruit the necessary staff, has been described as an acute workforce crisis (Sakr, Halls, and Cooper 2023).

The ECEC workforce crisis in Finland seems to be most severe in urban areas. For instance, in the Helsinki metropolitan area, some daycare groups lack any permanent teachers (Palkoaho 2022), and there are situations where permanent positions receive

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no applications at all (Aalto 2021). Directors of ECEC in the six largest Finnish cities report that the issues stem from a significant increase in the participation rate in ECEC since the 1990s, while the number of qualified teachers has halved (Aalto 2023). Despite recent efforts to address the shortage of ECEC teachers through increased student intake and offering diverse teacher training programs (Chydenius 2024), the largest cities are calling on the government for more substantial action; without it, they may struggle to meet their responsibilities as ECEC providers (Aalto 2023).

Since the shortage of quality teachers hampers learning, provision of effective education, and diminishes educational opportunities (Gerritsen, Plug, and Webbink 2017; Goe 2007), various strategies and policy initiatives have been introduced in response to address recruitment and retention issues. Many of these involve financial incentives, such as increased pay for teachers in specific areas or early career payments for those continuing in the position after their first teaching year, but recently policymakers have also moved beyond financial incentives to retain teachers (See et al. 2020). These strategies aim to make teaching a more attractive profession by addressing the often-challenging working conditions associated with the profession by providing reduced teaching timetables, promoting induction programs, offering access to professional development, and enhancing leadership (See et al. 2020). Additionally, public-facing messages such as advertising campaigns on TV and social media platforms have been established to aid teacher recruitment (Klassen et al. 2021).

One important public-facing message for attracting and recruiting teachers is job advertisements. These written documents about specific job openings disseminated through public media channels aim to attract the most suitable candidates for vacant positions (Harper 2012). Despite its objective to attract employers, a recent scoping review by Mankki (2023) revealed that job advertisements in the education sector have not been studied with regard to incentives aimed at attracting teachers. The review also suggests that research on job advertisements for ECEC teachers has been practically non-existent (Mankki 2023).

This paper examines the incentives aimed at attracting applicants in ECEC teacher job advertisements in Finland. The main research question is *what kind of incentives are used in Finnish ECEC teacher job advertisements?* In contrast to the global recruitment challenges faced by rural schools (e.g. Burke and Buchanan 2022; Goldhaber et al. 2020), issues regarding the availability of ECEC teachers in Finland are particularly pronounced in urban areas (Aalto 2021; 2023; Palkoaho 2022). Therefore, this study also adopts regional and comparative perspectives. Thus, an additional research question is the following: *what differences in incentives can be observed between job advertisements posted by urban, semi-urban, and rural municipalities in Finland?* Overall, this study contributes to the limited research on teacher recruitment and enhances the understanding of incentives beyond financial ones currently used in the competitive effort to attract applicants for ECEC positions. Moreover, by incorporating the employer's viewpoint, this study offers a fresh perspective, in contrast to recent ECEC teacher research that has focused on the reasons for leaving the profession (e.g. Sirviö et al. 2023).

The theoretical framework

In classifying the incentives, this study relies on the conceptual framework proposed by Viano et al. (2021), which defines, based on prior research, three types of factors that may

attract or repel teachers from certain schools or teaching positions: (1) structural features of teachers' employment, (2) fixed characteristics, and (3) malleable processes.

Financial incentives, typically addressed in attempts to remedy shortages (See et al. 2020), are part of the *structural features of teachers' employment*. These financial attractants, such as higher salaries, are based on the assumption that if individuals are sufficiently well compensated, they can be encouraged to enter or persuaded to remain in the position (See et al. 2020). Research suggests that while higher salaries can reduce teacher turnover rates in the short term, their long-term effectiveness is uncertain, often dissipating once the financial incentives are removed (Podolsky et al. 2019). According to the OECD (2018) report on teacher recruitment policies, relying solely on extrinsic financial incentives is inadequate for attracting high-quality teachers and may attract candidates primarily motivated by salary rather than a genuine fit with the profession.

Fixed characteristics refer to the enduring features of educational institutions. Research has consistently shown that certain fixed characteristics, such as neighborhood attributes and the socioeconomic status of the area, significantly impact teacher mobility patterns (Borman and Dowling 2008; Hughes Gail 2012). These studies indicate that educational institutions with higher proportions of minority or lower socioeconomic students, as well as lower average student achievement, tend to experience higher rates of teacher turnover. Conversely, institutions situated in high-income areas with convenient access to amenities like shopping venues, improved transportation links, and shorter commute times tend to positively influence teachers' willingness to apply for and remain in positions (Boyd et al. 2011; Engel, Jacob, and Curran 2014).

Malleable processes are those where control resides within the education institution and/or educational administrators, and that can be adjusted relatively quickly. These include for example social working conditions: for example, Johnson Susan, Kraft, and Papay (2012) argue that while working conditions are generally significant for teachers and their career plans, it is the social conditions within these settings that wield the greatest influence. Consequently, teacher collaboration and collegiality (Johnson Susan, Kraft, and Papay 2012; Simon, Johnson, and Reinhorn 2019) and support from administrators (Borman and Dowling 2008; Boyd et al. 2011) have emerged as strong predictors of teachers' employment decisions. The expectations regarding team leadership in ECEC have grown in recent decades, especially in Finland, where teachers are responsible for leading the pedagogical work within their teams (Ranta, Heiskanen, and Kahila 2023). Consequently, collegiality and support for educational leadership can be even more impactful for ECEC teachers' employment decisions compared to teachers at other educational levels. More recently, professional development opportunities have gained recognition as a means to enhance teachers' job satisfaction and potentially influence their decisions about entering and staying in teaching positions (Coldwell 2017). These opportunities also encompass induction programs, specifically designed to offer professional support for early career teachers (Helms-Lorenz, van de Grift, and Maulana 2016). Previous research also indicates that other malleable factors such as expectations of work outside regular hours (Simon, Johnson, and Reinhorn 2019), group size, and work safety are correlated with teacher turnover (Horng 2009).

Methods

Data collection

Methodologically, the study relies on document analysis, a systematic procedure for reviewing various pre-existing organizational and institutional documents that include text and images not originally created for research purposes (Bowen 2009). This method provides benefits for qualitative researchers, helping to address concerns about the resources needed for data collection, as well as ethical and stability issues related to the data (Morgan 2022). However, to ensure the credibility of the data, it is crucial to establish a justified framework for sampling by defining clear criteria for selecting sources and documents (Kim and Angnakoon 2016).

To minimize sample bias, job advertisements were sourced from a centralized recruitment website (<https://www.kuntarekry.fi/en/>), where nearly 80 percent of Finnish municipalities post all their open vacancies (A.-M. Mourukoski, pers. comm., January 11, 2022). In Finland, municipalities are responsible for organizing ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 2018). Although private service providers can legally organize daycare operations, municipalities remain the primary recruiters of ECEC teachers. For instance, in 2019, almost three-quarters (72.5 percent) of daycares were municipal, with just over a quarter (27.5 percent) being private (The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2019). Therefore, the recruitment channel used in this study is the most significant among ECEC teachers. Furthermore, job postings from Helsinki and Vantaa, key cities in the Finnish metropolitan area suffering from an ECEC workforce crisis, were included in the dataset. These cities opt to advertise their openings on their respective recruitment websites.

The advertisements were collected over a six-month period (between 1st January and 30th June 2022). New advertisements were reviewed on the final working day of each week, typically Fridays. Advertisements in Finnish for permanent ECEC teacher positions were meticulously saved as PDFs. The collected dataset consisted of 1756 advertisements. However, for research efficiency, the dataset was streamlined according to the following principles: 1) a maximum of 10 advertisements per municipality was included in the final dataset (if this required reduction, the advertisements from each municipality were ordered chronologically by application deadline, and the advertisements from every tenth percentile were included in the final dataset) 2) a maximum of 50% of advertisements from each municipality was included (if this required reduction, the advertisements from each municipality were ordered chronologically by application deadline, and every other advertisement was selected). These criteria ensured that all municipalities that posted advertisements were represented in the dataset, allowing for better representation of municipal variation than if a specific proportion of all advertisements had been accepted.

In the final dataset analyzed for this study, there were 322 advertisements, which is a typical sample size observed in job advertisement studies in the educational sector (Mankki 2023) as well as in other fields (Harper 2012; Kim and Angnakoon 2016). According to Statistics Finland's (2024) municipal grouping, which categorizes municipalities based on urban settlement proportions and the population of the largest urban settlement, the advertisements were distributed as follows: 139 from urban municipalities, 82 from semi-urban municipalities, and 101 from rural municipalities. The

aforementioned measures taken to support research efficiency also supported the formation of relatively balanced group sizes, which facilitated the comparisons of incentives used in recruitment across urban, semi-urban and rural municipalities.

Analysis

This study employed a theory-driven and deductive approach to its analysis, following a path from theory to data (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). Deductive qualitative content analysis involves using predefined categories derived from existing theory or prior research findings (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). In this study, the framework proposed by Viano et al. (2021) was adopted to categorize the incentives recognized in the advertisements. However, an inductive approach was utilized to capture incentives that could not be categorized using the aforementioned framework.

The analysis began with comprehensive familiarization with the data through multiple readings of the job advertisements. The advertisements were reviewed, incentives related to the theoretical framework were searched and coded in Nvivo. Simultaneously, the data was coded inductively in cases where the incentives could not be placed within the theoretical framework. These identified openly coded incentives were then grouped into categories. To maintain consistency, a subsequent round of coding was conducted after the initial phase. This process helped identify and correct any inconsistencies in how incentives were categorized across different categories.

Coding rules for both deductive and inductive approaches were iteratively refined throughout the analysis. Explicit and concise exemplifications (anchor samples) were selected for each category to enhance clarity of definitions and to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The coding rules included specific exclusion criteria; for instance, employee benefits not explicitly specified for ECEC teachers but presumed to apply to all municipal employees were excluded from the analysis. These benefits were not considered relevant to the incentives aimed at attracting ECEC teachers specifically, which was the objective of this study. Additionally, wording mattered: if, for example, job postings did not emphasize ‘reasonable group sizes’ alongside the typical number of children in each group or ‘competitive salaries’ alongside their monetary figures, such expressions were not interpreted as incentives.

In addition, quantification was employed in the analysis. Quantification can be advantageous for establishing a foundational overview of the reviewed documents (Bowen 2009). In this study, quantification was used to highlight the prevalence of incentives aimed at attracting ECEC teachers in Finland. Quantification was also utilized to identify differences in incentives among urban, semi-urban, and rural municipalities.

Ethical considerations

Although document analysis mitigates certain ethical concerns related to data (Morgan 2022), it remains essential to uphold ethical standards across all stages of research also in document analysis. This study meticulously adheres to the Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity mandated by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2023) and complies with the EECERA Ethical Code. The job advertisements used were publicly available information posted on a centralized recruitment website. Therefore, the

advertisements were not anonymized, and identifiers indicating the municipality posting the vacancy were retained when presenting direct excerpts.

Results

In ECEC teacher job advertisements, the most frequently mentioned incentives were related to professional development opportunities (31.1% of the advertisements) and the physical work environment (27.6%). Table 1 provides an overview of the proportion of advertisements featuring specific incentives. When comparing differences across municipalities, it becomes apparent that advertisements from urban municipalities more frequently included incentives compared to advertisements from semi-urban and rural municipalities: urban municipalities had the highest proportion in twelve out of fifteen incentives, with significant differences observed in incentives such as professional development opportunities (50.4% in urban versus 17.8% in rural municipalities and 14.6% in semi-urban municipalities) and commuting incentives (17.3% > 2.0% > 1.2%).

The following sections provide a comprehensive description of each category, along with authentic excerpts from the data to illustrate and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. These excerpts were translated from Finnish into English by the first author during the manuscript preparation.

Structural features of employment

Among structural features, salary has garnered the most attention in attracting teachers. Advertisements that explicitly emphasized salary size (in addition to specifying the salary denominated in euros) were coded into this category. These expressions indicating a competitive salary included phrases such as: ‘we offer [...] a competitive salary (up to €2800.05/month)’ (municipality of Parkano), ‘the salary is considered regionally good. Currently, the task-specific salary for an ECEC teacher is €2,596/month’ (Urjala), ‘the appreciation of your contribution in ECEC is also reflected in the task-specific salary, which is €2,710.36/month’ (Vantaa), and ‘the salary program initiated in ECEC ensures a competitive salary level’ (Jämsä).

In addition to salary, ECEC teachers were enticed with various incentive earnings and bonuses. These incentive earnings varied by municipality and included personal allowances, task allowances, pedagogical allowances, allowances based on the assessment of job demands, experience allowances, language allowances for knowledge of the Sámi language, degree allowances for a master’s degree in education, and remote area allowances. Regarding bonuses, teachers were attracted with recruitment and relocation bonuses. For example, the city of Helsinki promised in its advertisements that ‘when you start a permanent position as an ECEC teacher with the city of Helsinki in 2022, we offer you a €2,000 incentive bonus’ (Helsinki). The municipalities of Pöytyä (50% of the monthly salary), Kinnula (€1,000), and Tohmajärvi (€500) offered slightly smaller one-time bonuses. Some municipalities also offered recruitment bonuses as monthly payments (€100-200/month) typically for six months. Additionally, the city of Vantaa paid a €1,500 relocation bonus to ECEC teachers, and heads of ECEC centers who moved to the city from specified nearby municipalities.

Table 1. The proportions of ECEC teacher job advertisements encompassing specific incentives.

	All advertisements (n = 322)		Urban municipalities (n = 139)		Semi-urban municipalities (n = 82)		Rural municipalities (n = 101)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Structural features of employment								
Competitive salary	14	4.3%	8	5.8%	3	3.7%	3	3.0%
Incentive earnings	49	15.2%	23	16.5%	9	11.0%	17	16.8%
Recruitment and relocation bonuses	25	7.8%	15	10.8%	1	1.2%	9	8.9%
Fixed characteristics								
Location	11	3.4%	8	5.8%	1	1.2%	2	2.0%
Commute	27	8.4%	24	17.3%	1	1.2%	2	2.0%
Malleable processes								
Professional development opportunities	100	31.1%	70	50.4%	12	14.6%	18	17.8%
Teacher collaboration and collegiality	53	16.5%	34	24.5%	5	6.1%	14	13.9%
Administrator support	18	5.6%	16	11.5%	1	1.2%	1	1.0%
Expectation for day work	7	2.2%	6	4.3%	1	1.2%	0	0.0%
Moderate group sizes	2	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	2.0%
Safe work environment	6	1.9%	6	4.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other factors								
Physical work environment	89	27.6%	52	37.4%	14	17.1%	23	22.8%
Adequate human resources	30	9.3%	19	13.7%	6	7.3%	5	5.0%
Personal tools	7	2.2%	5	3.6%	5	6.1%	0	0.0%
Feedback and acknowledgements	7	2.2%	5	3.6%	1	1.2%	1	1.0%

Fixed characteristics

Fixed characteristics included features that were linked to the location of daycare center and its connections with neighborhood characteristics. When advertisements emphasized the location, they often highlighted that the daycare center was situated in a ‘quiet residential area dominated by detached houses’ (Helsinki). Only one advertisement deviated from this trend, mentioning, ‘we are looking for an ECEC teacher for the multicultural area of Tuira’ (Oulu). Proximity to good services due to the location was also emphasized: ‘The daycare is located right in the center of Lohja, amidst services and culture’ (Lohja).

Another characteristic categorized as a fixed characteristic is commute time, which is heavily linked to transportation connections to the daycare center. Many advertisements highlighted their good location in terms of transport links, for example: ‘Vaskivuori daycare center is located in Myyrmäki, with excellent transport connections’ (Vantaa). Usually, advertisements posted by urban municipalities, good public transport connections were highlighted: ‘daycare center is located near good transport connections; the bus stops in front of the daycare center, and Savio train station is very close’ (Kerava). One advertisement even specified the various bus lines that serve the daycare center: ‘the daycare center is easily accessible for your commute, for example, from Turku city center by buses 12, 32, 32A, and 42’ (Turku). Outside urban municipalities, the focus shifted from public connections to the advantages of commuting by car. These included a short drive from a nearby city (‘daycare center is conveniently located, about a 30-minute drive from downtown Oulu’ [Lumijoki] or proximity to a highway junction (‘the proximity to the highway ensures good transport connections from both Turku and Salo’ [Paimio]).

Malleable processes

Regarding the malleable processes, incentives related to professional development and teacher collaboration and collegiality were the most frequent in the ECEC teacher job advertisements. From the perspective of professional development, advertisements often mentioned that the employer had a positive attitude towards professional growth and training: ‘we support the professional growth of our staff and encourage further training’ (Forssa). Beyond a positive attitude, many advertisements emphasized the variety and regularity of the free training offered by the employer: ‘we take good care of our staff’s skills. Our training calendar offers many training sessions that staff can attend regularly’ (Porvoo). One advertisement mentioned cooperation with local higher education institutions to ensure the quality of training: ‘we support your further training and skill enhancement. We actively cooperate with the higher education community in the Tampere urban area’ (Ylöjärvi). Generally, advertisements discussed developmental opportunities in broad terms, but one municipality detailed specific focus areas: ‘our goal is to provide training on inclusive ECEC principles for the entire staff. With the employment contract, you will receive internal and external training, focusing particularly on inclusive ECEC in the upcoming operational season’ (Kaustinen).

Professional development was often discussed in advertisements from the perspective of new or beginning teachers. High-quality orientating for new employees were

highlighted: ‘To ensure success in the role, individual orientation and support are provided. The orientation ensures that the employee can smoothly integrate into the new job and work community’ (Hyvinkää). For early career teachers, the provision of mentoring was also emphasized:

We offer you the support of our mentorship program when you start working as an ECEC teacher. With the support of the mentorship group, you will become familiar with ECEC in the city of Espoo, recognize your strengths and skills, and receive resources for your professional growth and well-being. You will have the opportunity to discuss the joys and challenges of the early career phase with an experienced mentor and connect with other beginning ECEC teachers. (Espoo)

The possibility of support from a more experienced colleague was also mentioned without organizing group mentoring activities: ‘As a new teacher, you can have a designated teacher to support and assist you with pedagogical questions’ (Lohja).

Incentives related to teacher collaboration and collegiality included statements such as ‘we support each other and are cooperative’ (Salla), ‘strong community and inter-group collaboration are emphasized in daily life in our daycare center’ (Juva), and ‘we work closely together, pulling in the same direction’ (Vantaa). The (culture of) supporting and helping colleagues was also underlined in statements like ‘teams are committed to work and help colleagues’ (Hausjärvi), ‘the culture of mutual help is strong, and we do this work together’ (Helsinki). Collaboration and collegiality in the daycare center were concretized by emphasizing support through meeting structures (‘we collaborate across group boundaries, and our meeting structures have considered collegial support’ [Sipoo]) and ensuring that weekly team meetings and time allocated for planning, evaluation, and development (so-called SAK time in Finnish ECEC) actually take place: ‘We ensure that weekly team meetings and SAK times are upheld’ (Säkylä). In addition, advertisements might highlight the additional times reserved for collaboration: ‘At Takatasku, we work together. In addition to SAK time and team meetings, we regularly gather for house meetings and pedagogical meetings’ (Helsinki).

Incentives related to administrator support included statements describing leadership qualities. These statements might discuss the quality of leaders (e.g. ‘we offer you [...] great bosses!’ [Hämeenkyrö]), their leadership style (e.g. ‘our leadership virtues are particularly listening and dialogue’ [Espoo]), or their presence in the daycare center: ‘the daycare director is often present because they lead only one daycare’ (Helsinki). Descriptions also covered leadership models and the improved support they provided: ‘our unit is led with a new parallel leadership model, where one leader is responsible for pedagogy and client relations, and the other for staff and finances, resulting in higher quality leadership’ (Vantaa).

Many of the advertisements communicated that the work included shift work or working evenings or early mornings. Since these were not considered incentives, they were left out of the analysis, and the focus regarding incentives related to working time was only on expressions explicitly highlighting expectations for teachers’ daytime work. This included statements indicating that while the daycare might be open around the clock, teachers’ work hours would be during the day, as illustrated in this example: ‘Villa Kamomilla is a bilingual daycare that is open around the clock if needed. As a teacher, you will work during the day’ (Parainen).

Incentives related to the group size included expressions that specifically commented on the typical size of groups in the daycare center. References to moderate group sizes were found in two advertisements and followed a similar wording: ‘we have moderate group sizes’ (Koski TI) and ‘we offer you a work environment with moderate group sizes’ (Tammela). Expressions that only included numerical mentions of typical group size ranges were left out of the analysis (similarly to salary, where only explicit mentions of competitive salaries were included, not just numerical salary amounts).

Incentives related to school safety were recognized only in the advertisements posted by the city of Vantaa, where it was mentioned that a ‘safe and equitable working environment’ is provided for ECEC teachers. This could suggest that in other municipalities, a secure and protected environment is regarded as a standard expectation, making it less necessary to emphasize it explicitly in the advertisements.

Other factors

Outside the theoretical framework of this study, incentives related to other factors were also recognized. These include incentives related to 1) physical work environment, 2) human resources, 3) personal work tools, and 4) evaluations and recognitions.

Incentives related to the physical work environment typically emphasized the newness and modernity of daycare facilities, for instance: ‘we moved to a new daycare center made of logs in the summer of 2021’ (Hirvensalmi) or ‘the ECEC unit is a newly completed building with excellent working conditions!’ (Pöytyä). Some ads detailed the features of new daycare facilities, such as, ‘newly constructed spaces provide first-class conditions for quality ECEC. The facilities include a large gym, two smaller playrooms with climbing walls, a workshop, a water playroom, and plenty of play areas’ (Espoo). The completed renovations and refurbishments were also highlighted: ‘renovation and expansion of our daycare center were completed in November. The updated facilities allow for versatile learning environments for play and activities’ (Urjala). Features such as spaciousness, healthiness, and flexibility were valued in the ads, for example: ‘spaces that are flexibly divided and combined, enabling new ways of working in ECEC. Instead of traditional group rooms and classrooms, we have cells that are adaptable to the needs of the activities’ (Pirkkala). Modern ICT facilities were highlighted, with some ads noting, ‘Each room is equipped with large professional displays’ (Helsinki).

Physical work environment related incentives also highlighted the outdoor areas and the surrounding environment. Features such as diverse and stimulating playgrounds, opportunities for seasonal activities (e.g. ‘We have a good playground where we can have skating and skiing in winter’), and environmental education were emphasized, as the following extract exemplifies:

Our new daycare center provides excellent opportunities for environmental education. We have gardening beds, green roofs, solar panels on the roof, and a small grove on the lot. The highlight of the yard is a tree over 90 years old! (Helsinki).

A central attraction regarding outdoor areas in many ads was the proximity to nature and nearby natural areas. Ads commonly emphasized that ‘the daycare center is located near nature’ (Helsinki) or ‘the nature surrounding the daycare provides excellent conditions for diverse activities all year round’ (Kajaani). Especially nearby forests and parks were

frequently mentioned: ‘the park surrounding the daycare and the nearby forests offer wonderful opportunities for outings. Groups have outing days to the local area every week’ (Muurame). Other local opportunities nearby to the daycare center mentioned included playgrounds, sports fields, ice rinks, swimming pools, sports halls, and libraries.

Incentives related to human resources stressed the adequacy of staffing, for example, ‘we have invested in staffing resources’ (Jämsä), ‘we maintain good child–teacher ratios’ (Salla), or ‘we have five home bases, where 5–6 adults work according to the new staffing regulations’ (Helsinki). The ads emphasized the presence of multi-professional expertise in the staff: ‘supporting your work is a wide range of ECEC professionals: social workers, psychologists, language and culture teachers, preschool social worker, ICT instructors, and other experts’ (Kirkkonummi). Special attention was given to the availability of special education teachers: ‘our daycare also has its own ECEC special education teacher who works alongside the teachers in everyday ECEC’ (Rusko). The sufficient number of daycare assistants and childcarers were also highlighted. The smoothness of substitute arrangements to ensure adequate staffing was also discussed in the advertisements, for example, ‘we have a functional substitute system’ (Jämsä) or ‘we have our permanent rotating substitutes’ (Sipoo).

Regarding incentives related to personal work tools, a few ads noted that teachers are equipped with a work phone and laptop (‘each ECEC teacher has a personal mobile phone and laptop’ [Lieto]) or an iPad (‘you will have your own iPad’ [Rusko]). However, despite the overall emphasis on a modern work environment, provisions that highlight efforts to equip teachers with essential technology to support their work remain notably scarce in the job advertisements.

Some ads included incentives that were based on evaluations and recognitions. At the daycare level, two ads cited high staff and customer satisfaction ratings, for example: ‘our daycare center has repeatedly received very high scores based on staff and customer surveys’ (Helsinki). At the municipal level, recognitions the employer has received include, for example, being named municipality of the Year in ECEC by ECEC Teacher’s Union of Finland (‘We offer an interesting job in the ECEC municipality of the Year!’ [Kajaani]), or the most education-friendly municipality in the area (‘the ECEC services in the city of Kokkola received the title of the most education-friendly organization in Central Ostrobothnia in 2019’ [Kokkola]).

Discussion

This study investigated the incentives used in ECEC teacher job advertisements in Finland. The most frequently highlighted incentives in the advertisements were related to professional development opportunities and physical work environment. For example, highlighting proximity to nearby forests in advertisements might be perceived as alienating in some cultures, as it could imply a somewhat remote or potentially unsafe wild environment. However, presenting it as an incentive emphasizes the strong connection to nature and the concept of the entire surrounding environment as an integral learning space in Finnish ECEC. Although incentive earnings were also rather common, the incentives related to structural features of employment received relatively modest attention in the advertisements. Consequently, the findings emphasize that research should not focus solely on financial incentives, as other strategies for attracting

applicants are also widely used in the recruitment. These incentives related to working conditions have also been found meaningful in previous literature on teacher recruitment and retention (e.g. Viano et al. 2021; See et al. 2020).

Although rural areas have been highlighted as challenging for teacher recruitment (e.g. Burke and Buchanan 2022; Goldhaber et al. 2020), in Finland this issue is the most prevalent in urban areas (Aalto 2021; 2023; Palkoaho 2022). In this study, it was found that urban municipalities included more incentives compared to semi-urban and rural ones. Therefore, the advertisements seem to reflect the observation that unlike in many parts of the world, the teacher recruitment challenge in Finland is more pronounced in urban areas than in rural or semi-urban areas. However, the study offers a more detailed analysis of how urban municipalities are tackling these recruitment challenges through their job advertisements, compared to their semi-urban and rural counterparts.

The practical implications of these findings are connected to the development of recruitment strategies by allowing employers to use these insights to assess and improve their teacher job advertisements. In countries like Finland, where ECEC teachers are primarily recruited for the public sector (The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2019), marketing expertise may be less developed compared to the private sector, making it worthy of critical evaluation. However, caution is advised when crafting these advertisements. Recruitment strategies based on ‘seduction’ can have drawbacks: they might attract applicants in the short term but lead to, for example, unrealistically high expectations, lower job satisfaction, and increased quitting intentions (Baur et al. 2014). Therefore, despite aiming to attract the limited pool of potential applicants for the position, it would be important to maintain realism in advertisements. Baur et al. (2014) developed the concept of ‘realistic job previews’, which can complement traditional seduction techniques by providing accurate portrayals of the work environment. Highlighting local challenges, such as significant student difficulties, may help to attract committed teachers (Simon, Johnson, and Reinhorn 2019), even at the risk of reducing the number of applicants. Although realism and highlighting challenges may not always align perfectly with the nature of job advertisements, as they are essentially meant to portray the employer and positions in a positive light (e.g. Harper 2012), it would still be advisable to include realism in advertisements whenever possible.

The study had several limitations that should be considered in future research. Firstly, it focused solely on Finnish job advertisements. Since teacher recruitment and an acute workforce crisis in ECEC are a global challenge (European Commission 2021; OECD 2020), cross-national comparisons would illustrate cultural and international variations in incentives. Additionally, comparing incentives in the private and public sectors would be beneficial, given the significant role of private ECEC.

Secondly, online advertisements present methodological choices that can impact the results. One important question is whether researchers systematically follow links contained in advertisements (e.g. ‘visit our kindergarten website at [URL] for further information’). In this study, additional links were not followed, although doing so could have provided valuable data. Future methodological literature should address the rules of thumb for following of links in job ad research. Visual incentives, such as images, videos, and social media material related to the job, also deserve analysis alongside the textual content of advertisements.

Thirdly, this study did not evaluate the effectiveness of the incentives used in recruitment. In overall, the understanding of how job advertisements influence early applicant attraction and job pursuit intentions is limited. Therefore, experimental field-testing on how (future) ECEC teachers evaluate and respond to different incentives identified in this study would be beneficial. This approach could help evaluate current recruitment strategies and develop more effective ones in the field.

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