Introducing the child and its parent(s): Child-teacher-parent relationship-building during preschool transition

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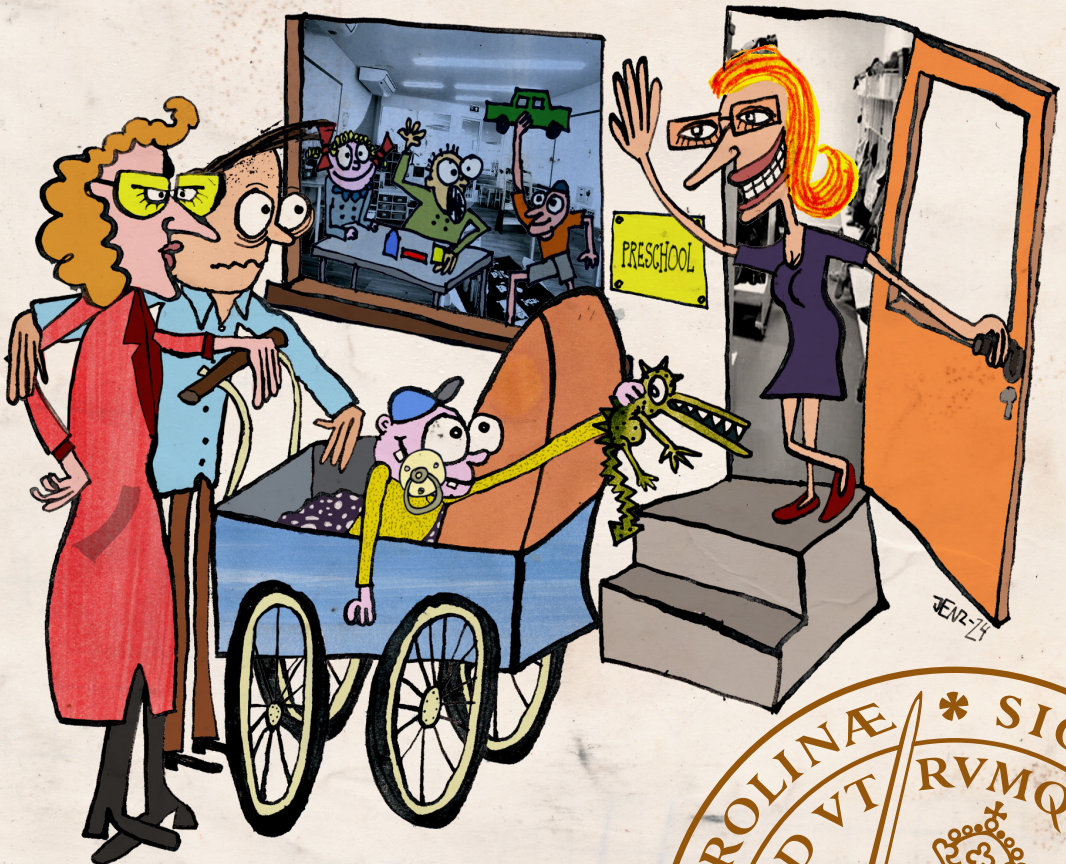
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Abstract:

Current child developmental research encourages a more systemic understanding of attachment-related relationship-building. As many young children spend a substantial part of their daily life in professional childcare, e.g., "preschool", interactions with teachers at preschool are of particular interest in this respect. In bridging the developmentally important contexts of home and preschool for the first time, the child's first transition to preschool, e.g., "introduction to preschool," provides a particularly valuable setting for studying how a child's relational network broadens to include teachers. An important aim of this thesis has therefore been to conceptualize a child's introduction to preschool as an opportunity to initiate the expansion of a child's relational network with teacher(s) at preschool.

However, empirical research on the topic of relationship-building during preschool transition is sparse, and no formalized guidelines on how to structure the introduction process to this end exist in Nordic countries. To enable investigations of how different organizational approaches to preschool introduction may influence child-teacher relationship-building, Study I investigated introduction practices at Swedish preschools using a mixed-methods design to collect data from teachers. Findings identified two main introduction models: the traditional model and the parent-active model. Besides differing in terms of introduction length and intensity, the models also differ in how to organize the parent's role during the introduction process.

Recognizing that different approaches to how to involve the parent may create varied structural conditions for supporting family-teacher relationship-building during preschool introduction, study II was designed with a qualitative methodology to further explore teachers' thoughts about and experiences of the role of parents in child-teacher relationship formation. To this end, teachers from study I were invited to take part in focus group discussions. While agreeing on the importance of building a relationship with the parent to support the child's transition, teachers seemed to perceive the parent as either facilitating or constraining the child-teacher relationship-building process, depending on how the parent was invited participate. In the parent-active model, parents are invited to participate actively with their child. In the traditional model, it is more common to instruct the parent to take a more "passive" role in the background, allowing more space for the child and teacher to interact one-on-one.

Consistent with a systemic approach, parent-teacher communication may be hypothesized to influence child-teacher relationship-building. Study III therefore quantitatively investigated child-teacher-parent relationship-building as an interconnected process during and after the child's preschool introduction. Results indicate that a parent perceived as trusting by the teacher facilitates child-teacher relationship-building, with key factors being teacher mentalizing capacities, low child-adult ratios, and teachers' extensive preschool work experience. Moreover, a high level of parent-teacher interaction during the introduction process further contributed to establishment of trust.

While the parent-active model may effectively support the parent and teacher in getting to know each other, the present thesis suggests that organization of preschool introduction should focus on creating opportunities for teachers to attend sensitively to the parent(s) as well as the child, rather than adhering strictly to a specific introduction model. Indeed, a systemic approach in the context of preschool introduction emphasizes trusting, sensitive interactions as concerning not only the teacher and child, but the triad of the child, the accompanying parent, and the key teacher. To this end, structural factors such as maintaining low child-adult ratios and having a staff team representing substantial preschool professional experience may be crucial. Finally, a systemic perspective may also support researchers in conveying the nature of attachment-related relationship-building as a relational and context-sensitive process.

Key words: preschool; home; professional childcare; transition; attachment theory; systemic perspective; child-teacher relationships; parent-teacher relationships; parent-teacher trust

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To my teacher from 1st to 3^{d} grade in primary school, Birgitta Lindgren: thank you for making a hard transition to school more bearable by providing an ideal balance of safe haven and secure base care. And to my teacher from 5th grade through the end of primary school, Karl-Assar Bagewitz: thank you for showing authentic warmth to each and every student in our class. I am sure that I developed ad hoc attachments to both of you.

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Acknowledgements

The passage of time over these 4,5 years has been the weirdest so far in my life. In one way, it feels like just yesterday that I began. I still remember sitting at my pandemic home "office" —also the kids' playroom—in our Nørrebro-apartment, preparing for my interview with the department before being accepted into the PhD-program. I desperately tried to adjust the Zoom angle to keep the toddler mess in the background out of sight. Now, all of a sudden, my toddlers have started school, we have moved from Nørrebro to Snekkersten, Troels has bought and is running his own company (wtf??!), and I am finishing this PhD-project. Of course, this would not have been possible without a lot of help and support. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to say: Thank you!

Elia Psouni, my main supervisor – thank you for inviting me to join your EoC-project and thank you for trusting me with so much freedom to shape the focus and direction of my PhD-project. I am certain that it is rare to find a supervisor with your level of engagement and passion. Thank you for sharing this spirit with me, and for always using positive feedback so effectively. To cite my wise colleague Amanda Klysing: as "academia sometimes feels like the land of rejections", this has been well-needed. A special thank you also for always helping me stay focused ("djupandas!") whenever I got wound up about something (which happens more often than you might think). Elinor Schad, my co-supervisor – thank you for often offering a different perspective. This has encouraged me to more actively take a stance on my own, which, in turn, has been helpful in finding my voice as an independent researcher. A special thank you also for guiding me through my initial "quantitative struggles" – you may not realize how helpful that was, but it was!

On the topic of quantitative struggles: thank you, Katrine and Palle for supporting me through my initial statistical hardships (but even more for being the best fellow twin parents and travel companions). And Martin Bäckström: ending up getting credits for an exam report based on structural equation modelling—and then even using this method in my thesis—is one of my greatest achievements during this PhD. This wouldn't have been possible without your generous guidance and support! Similarly, though on the opposite side of the methodological spectrum, discussing qualitative methodology (and much more!) with Tove Lundberg has been invaluable. I still think about our "munta" in the M-kitchen – thank you for helping me structure my "all over the place" thoughts on various methodological issues. Similarly, I want to thank Patric Nordbeck for the best methodological discussions ever about our common interest in systemic thinking and philosophy of science – much of the thinking in this thesis has been influenced by our talks. But I also want to thank you for all the great talks we've had in our M-kitchen about everything "mellan himmel och jord" (and families)!

Emilia Thorup and Pelle Olsson: thank you both for being such great teaching companions! Teaching with you has been a nice break from thesis work and collaborating with you has been deeply rewarding.

Abstract

Current child developmental research encourages a more systemic understanding of attachment-related relationship-building. As many young children spend a substantial part of their daily life in professional childcare, e.g., "preschool", interactions with teachers at preschool are of particular interest in this respect. In bridging the developmentally important contexts of home and preschool for the first time, the child's first transition to preschool, e.g., "introduction to preschool," provides a particularly valuable setting for studying how a child's relational network broadens to include teachers. An important aim of this thesis has therefore been to conceptualize a child's introduction to preschool as an opportunity to initiate the expansion of a child's relational network with teacher(s) at preschool.

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Recognizing that different approaches to how to involve the parent may create varied structural conditions for supporting family-teacher relationship-building during preschool introduction, study II was designed with a qualitative methodology to further explore teachers' thoughts about and experiences of the role of parents in child-teacher relationship formation. To this end, teachers from study I were invited to take part in focus group discussions. While agreeing on the importance of building a relationship with the parent to support the child's transition, teachers seemed to perceive the parent as either facilitating or constraining the child-teacher relationship-building process, depending on how the parent was invited participate. In the parent-active model, parents are invited to participate actively with their child. In the traditional model, it is more common to instruct the parent to take a more "passive" role in the background, allowing more space for the child and teacher to interact one-on-one.

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high level of parent-teacher interaction during the introduction process further contributed to establishment of trust.

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Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Relationer med nära vuxna är viktiga för barns utveckling. Forskning om känslomässig trygghet, så kallad "anknytning", mellan barn och förälder har visat att hur föräldrar bemöter barnets behov av tröst och närhet inverkar på barnets sätt att hantera känslomässig stress och navigera sociala relationer. Även andra omsorgspersoner i ett barns vardagsliv kan bli anknytningsfigurer för barnet, såsom personal på förskolan. Nyare forskning visar dessutom att kvaliteten på samarbetet mellan de olika vuxna omkring barnet, exempelvis förskolepersonal och föräldrar, kan påverka barnets relationer med de enskilda vuxna. Därför blir perioden när barnet börjar på förskolan, ofta kallad barnets "introduktion i förskolan", särskilt viktig. Under denna process skapas nämligen en bro mellan hemmet och förskolan för första gången.

Även om det verkar vara en viktig tid för barnet och dess familj, finns ingen konkret vägledning till arbetslag på förskolor för hur introduktionen av nya barn bör organiseras. Empirisk forskning som undersöker hur olika sätt att introducera barn påverkar barnets välmående och relationsetableringen mellan familj och förskolepersonal är dessutom mycket sparsam. Denna avhandling har därför haft två mål. Det första var att undersöka och dokumentera hur förskolor i Sverige gör när de introducerar nya barn i förskolan (studie I och studie II). Det andra målet var att undersöka hur olika aspekter av introduktionsförfaranden kan påverka relationsetablering mellan barn, förälder och personal som en triadisk process, där alla är beroende av varandra.

Resultaten från studie I och II visade att förskolor i Sverige huvudsakligen använder en av två introduktionsmodeller: den traditionella modellen och den föräldraaktiva modellen. Skillnader gällde bland annat längd och intensitet av introduktionsprocessen, men även organisering av förälderns roll under introduktionen skilde modellerna åt. I den föräldraaktiva modellen bjuds föräldern in att aktivt delta med sitt barn. I den traditionella modellen är det vanligare att låta föräldern inta en mer "passiv" position i bakgrunden, för att ge mer plats åt barnet och personalen att agera på tumanhand.

Studie III visade att när personalen uppfattade föräldern som tillitsfull, underlättade det etableringen av en varm och nära relation mellan barnet och personalen efter avslutad introduktion. Viktiga faktorer för utveckling av tillit var personalens förmåga att känna in förälderns känslor och tankar omkring förskolstarten, tillsammans med ett lågt antal barn per vuxen i barngruppen och personal med lång erfarenhet av att arbeta i förskolan. Dessutom var det gynnsamt för etablering av tillit om föräldern och personalen hade samspelat mycket med varandra under introduktionen.

Sammanfattningsvis föreslår avhandlingen att förskolan bör skapa förutsättningar för personalen att bemöta både föräldrar och barn på ett inkännande sätt under barnets introduktion, snarare än att följa en strikt introduktionsmodell. För att lyckas med detta kan strukturella faktorer på förskolan vara avgörande, såsom lågt antal barn per personal och en personalgrupp med gedigen yrkeserfarenhet.

List of papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, hereafter referred to as study I, study II, and (manuscript based on) study III.

I.   Andersson Søe, M., Schad, E., & Psouni, E. (2023). Transition to preschool: Paving the way for preschool teacher and family relationship-building. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *52*, 1249–1271. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-023-09735-y

II.   Andersson Søe, M., Schad, E., & Psouni, E. (2024). "We tend to underestimate the children!" – A qualitative analysis of preschool teachers' views on child-parent-teacher relationship-building during preschool transition. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2394392

III.   Andersson, Søe, M. & Psouni, E. (2024). Parent-teacher trust as a relational pathway to the child: Teachers' perceptions of child-teacher-parent relationship-building during a child's transition to preschool. *Submitted to Early Education & Development.*

Abbreviations

CAMSQ	Certainty of mental states questionnaire
CQR	Cocaring relationship scale
PAM	Parent-active introduction model
STSR	Student-teacher relationship scale
TM	Traditional introduction model

Chapter 1: Introduction

I have always been interested in the significance of relationships to our development and well-being. While studying to become a psychologist, I therefore quickly became fascinated by systemic thinking, attachment theory, and the concept of mentalization. After completing my degree in 2016, I went into the field of family therapy and pedagogical-psychological counselling at schools and preschools. Based on experiences from these positions, I became particularly interested in the significance of relationships in a more network-oriented perspective. Because when facilitating understanding and well-working communication between close adults in the different contexts of a child's daily life, I found it easier to contribute with a positive impact for the children. I was therefore delighted when I in 2019 read about the developmental-psychological research project "Evidence over Conviction: Young children's development of attachment security and socioemotional adjustment when they grow up with shared residence" (PI: prof. Elia Psouni) that was about to be initiated at Lund university. By using attachment theory as a conceptual framework, this project investigates the role of children's early years relational network to child and family socioemotional development and well-being. The project's theoretical framework contrasted early postulations that children have one main attachment figure (usually the mother) to later evidence that children form attachment relationships with several important caregivers and focused on the contribution of these relationships to the development of attachment security and socioemotional adjustment. Furthermore, the project proposed that an updated theoretical framework for attachment development in today's families must consider the introduction of professional childcare ("preschool"[1]) in the daily life of the family, arguing that the transition from exclusive home care to a mix of home and preschool in the child's second year alters the ecology of attachment development. Studies were planned to investigate the impact of preschool introduction, along with parent and child characteristics, on parental mental health and child socioemotional adjustment.

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[1] I will throughout the present thesis use "preschool" to connote professional childcare centres. In Sweden, a preschool commonly cares for children between 1-5 years old. In about 54% of Swedish preschools, the divisions consist of mixed age peer groups (i.e., children aged 1-5 years), while the rest organizes their divisions by separating the youngest (1-3 years old) children from the oldest (4-5 years old) ones (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024).

Based on the conceptualization of this project, the present thesis set out to focus on the expansion of the child's relational network when being enrolled in preschool for the first time. More specifically, the idea was to investigate how different aspects of handling the shift, or transition, from being cared for in the home environment to being enrolled in the everyday life of preschool (e.g., "the introduction to preschool") might impact the child from an attachment-informed perspective. Because despite preschool professionals'("teachers"[2]) keen desire for more research-based guidance on how to introduce children to preschool, there is limited empirical understanding of how to make this life-changing transition smooth for the new child(ren) while simultaneously respecting the preschool's daily practices. Indeed, while the curriculum for preschools in Sweden (i.e., "Läroplan för förskola"; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) emphasizes that every child, and its parents, should get a good introduction to preschool, no formalized guidelines of how to go about this process are included. This is, to the best of our knowledge, also the case in other Nordics countries (Daníelsdóttir & Ingudóttir, 2020). To initiate the project of the present thesis, we therefore decided to first find out how Swedish preschools actually organize the introduction process (study I). This study also resulted in a paper about preschool introduction conduct at Swedish preschools during the pandemic of Covid-19 (Andersson Søe et al., 2022).

When analysing the data from this initial study, I became very interested in the differences suggested by our results regarding how preschools involve parents during the child's enrolment process (see "Study I" in chapter four). Because as the parent is central to the child's introduction to preschool, the opportunities given to the parent(s) by the preschool to engage in the process will naturally impact the child's adjustment and, importantly, the establishment of a relationship between the child and teacher. However, while the significance of the parent's engagement in the introduction process is indeed highlighted in literature for practitioners about preschool introduction (e.g., Broberg et al., 2023; Drugli et al., 2020), no empirical knowledge about how to specifically organize it to benefit the child's adjustment seems to exist. Therefore, I decided to focus specifically on the role of the parent(s) in relation to child-teacher relationship-building during the introduction process for the last two studies of my thesis work (study II and III).

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2 For simplicity, I will throughout the present thesis use the term "teachers" when addressing professional caregivers at preschool. This term is however not meant to solely encompass professional caregivers with a preschool teacher degree, but all professionals working at a preschool.

Why investigating preschool introduction from an attachment-informed perspective?

The present thesis thus has "introduction to preschool" as its object of investigation from a child developmental-psychological point-of-view. Adopting a developmental-psychological perspective in the context of pedagogical practice is indeed important. By offering perspectives on how different life conditions may impact children, developmental psychology can encourage teachers to reflect upon how daily preschool practices might either support or constrain children's developmental opportunities (Swane Lund & Testmann, 2023). The present thesis has moreover been specifically informed by concepts from attachment theory. In attachment theory, children's early relationships with close caregivers are regarded as developmentally critical (Bowlby, 1969/1982). An important aim of the present work has therefore been to conceptualize the child's introduction to preschool as an opportunity for the child to initiate the expansion of its caregiving, or relational, network with teacher(s) at preschool, with a specific focus on the role of the parent in this process.

Focusing on the significance of relationships at preschool is indeed warranted, as current trends to "schoolarize" the preschool curriculum in Sweden (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019) as well as internationally (Borremans & Spilt, 2023; Schachter et al., 2021), might favour a definition of preschool as an educational rather than a caregiving context. Indeed, embedded in the preschool profession is a dilemma of balancing the didactic aspects of the pedagogical curriculum with the more relational focus on children's need of socioemotional caregiving. Some teachers describe an inclination to downplay the parts of their work that are associated with the relational, caregiving aspects to avoid being defined as professional "babysitters" (Schachter et al., 2021). Yet, other reports from preschool teachers, Swedish as well as international, suggest that teachers consider the caregiving task to be the most important part of their profession (Broman & Persson, 2018; McNally & Slutsky, 2018). To inform this debate, attachment theory can contribute with important perspectives.

First, a central idea of attachment theory is that sensitive caregiving in daily interactions with close and trusted adults is crucial for enabling children to explore and engage in educational environments (i.e., "the secure base hypothesis"; see for instance Spilt & Koomen, 2022. See also the first two sections of chaper two for a more detailed discussion). From an attachment perspective, it is thus not meaningful to conceptualize didactics, or learning, and caregiving as conflicting practices. Indeed, as reported by Macagno and Molina (2024), some preschool teachers regard exploratory behaviours of children as an educational goal in itself. Second, the developmental benefits for a child of establishing an attachment-like relationship to a teacher at preschool go far beyond merely supporting learning opportunities (see the third section of chapter two). Focusing on establishing pedagogical practices and

-environments that can support warm and close relational engagement between the children and the teachers is thus crucial. In this respect, as will be further discussed in chapter two, the process of introducing new children to preschool can be considered an important context for initiating such interactions.

The importance of prioritizing attachment-related child-teacher-parent relationship-building during preschool transition

As introducing preschool into a young child's everyday life is characterized by daily separations between the child and its parents, some of the earliest attachment-informed preschool research focused on whether attending preschool would negatively impact the quality of child-parent attachment. Years of research, however, suggest that this seems not to be the case, given that the quality of the preschool is high. In fact, if so, attending preschool is considered developmentally beneficial to most children (see Ahnert and Lamb, 2018; Lamb & Ahnert, 2007 for overviews). While a definition of "preschool quality" naturally depends on theoretical and epistemological orientation, a common way to conceptualize and operationalize it in preschool research is to use the concepts of "structural quality" and "process quality" (Friedman & Amadeo, 1999; Slot, 2018). Process quality connotes the quality of interaction a child has with the teachers, parent(s), and other children in the preschool context, often conceptualized within an attachment-theoretical framework. To enable supportive, or sensitive, process quality, structural features of the preschool and characteristics of the teacher group, i.e., structural quality, is however considered a prerequisite (Slot, 2018). In this respect, child-adult ratios, peer group sizes, teachers' educational background, professional training, and their work experience have shown to be particularly influential (Slot, 2018).

A main argument of the present thesis is therefore that preschools, particularly when introducing new children, should prioritize relationship-building between teachers and children through sensitive caregiving, as conceptualized by attachment theory. So far, much of the research on introducing children to preschool has focused on studying children's emotional reactions by measuring their cortisol levels during and after enrolment (Ahnert et al., 2022; Ahnert et al., 2004; Bernard et al., 2015; Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021; see also Tervahartiala et al., 2023). Results from these studies unambiguously show that children experience preschool enrolment as emotionally stressful, especially children with insecure attachments to parents (Ahnert et al., 2022; Ahnert et al., 2004; see the fourth section of chapter two). This research also points out that children with insecure parental attachments may have fewer opportunities to "de-stress" at home after a day of heightened stress levels at preschool, since a relationship to a parent characterized by insecure attachment is less efficient in helping the child to regulate their emotions (Bowlby, 2007; see the second section of chapter two).

The fact that children generally seem to experience preschool enrolment as emotionally demanding is important knowledge. Naturally, experiencing higher levels of stress during and after the process of enrolment will presumably be perceived of as unpleasant by the child (and, most likely, also the parent!). However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no clear empirical evidence available on whether, or how, these heightened stress levels have developmental consequences for the children. What is therefore more important, in my opinion, is that heightened levels of emotional stress can contribute to an overly active attachment system (see the second section of chapter two). This, in turn, will likely make it more challenging for the child to engage with the new preschool environment and, importantly, to seek out contact with the teacher(s) (e.g., the secure base-hypothesis; Spilt & Koomen, 2022, see section one in chapter two). The process of initiating the important relationship-building between the child and the teacher, which ideally leads to a secure pattern of interaction (see section four, chapter two), may thus be delayed.

Aims of thesis: An empirical as well as conceptual contribution

In the last study (study III), rather than using the child's stress levels as an outcome, the focus was instead on investigating the relationship-building process among the child, the child's accompanying parent, and the teacher, primarily responsible for the child's introduction, both during and after the enrolment process. To this end, the study specifically focused on how the parent and teacher interacted with, understood, and related to each other. Because while the accompanying parent, as (one of) the child's (so far) most important attachment figures, is central to the child's introduction process, not much is known about how to organize the interactions between the child, the parent, and the teacher(s) as an interconnected, triadic process during the introduction phase. Using attachment theory as the guiding conceptual framework, an important aim of the present thesis has therefore also been to explore more recent developments in attachment-informed research that integrate a systemic perspective into the theory. This integration highlights the importance of interactions with and between various close caregivers, such as parents and teachers, across different developmental contexts, like home and preschool, to understand attachment-related dynamics in young children's daily lives. The core theoretical question that drove the research conducted in the thesis was therefore:

> How can an attachment-theoretical approach inspired by systemic thinking inform the conceptualization of child-teacher relationship-building during a child's introduction to preschool?

Inspired by this theoretical framework, the empirical questions addressed in the studies (see chapter four) were centred around:

1) Exploration of preschool introduction conduct (study I and II)
2) The association between relational parent-teacher and child-teacher quality during and after the introduction of a new child to preschool (study III).

However, integrating systemic thinking into an attachment-theoretical framework is not methodologically unproblematic, as the more positivist tradition in much attachment-informed research (see Solomon & George, 2016) presents challenges when operationalizing the systemic core concepts of emergence and reciprocity (see section six in chapter two). In the final chapter, I will try to illustrate and discuss some of these methodological challenges, while simultaneously arguing for the continued importance of pursuing this line of research when investigating the role of early relationships in child development.

Epistemological position and conceptual definitions

In the present thesis, a critical-realist epistemology was adopted. In assuming that "knowledge" is the result of a mutually influential relationship between an objectively existing reality and our interpretations of it, this perspective integrates ideas from both realist and relativist paradigms (e.g., Fletcher, 2020). "Reality" is thus believed to exist independently of our interpretation of it, and its (material) structures are presumed to pose actual constraints and possibilities to human practice (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). At the same time, what we can know about reality is understood to be influenced by our interpretation of it, mediated by time, context, and subjects (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007).

Consequently, while rejecting the relativist standpoint that ontology can be reduced to epistemology (i.e., the idea of "epistemic fallacy"; Bhaskar, 1975) a critical-realist perspective still acknowledges that obtaining fully objective knowledge of reality is not possible. At best, knowledge production can result in ideas about what causal tendencies are at play to understand the nature of events and phenomena. As striving towards the most plausible understanding is however both possible and advisable (Fletcher, 2020), research within a critical-realist framework seeks to promote as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the complexities of reality. Using of mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods is therefore encouraged (e.g., Lawani, 2020).

In the present work, I define "child-teacher-parent relationship-building during preschool introduction" within this philosophical stance. Simply put, I thus regard ideas about how to define and implement pedagogical tasks in preschool daily life as contextualizing and contextualized by the structures of preschool daily life. With "structures", I refer to the organizational, or material, aspects of preschool practice that have shown to be of particular importance to family-teacher relationships at

preschool (see Slot, 2018, for an overview of how the structures of preschool can constrain or facilitate process quality). While beyond the scope of the present thesis to include more culturally mediated explanations of how preschool (transition) practices are constituted, I will, however, reflect upon this matter in the final section of the thesis (see "Concluding remarks: Reflecting about the message of the message").

Furthermore, in the present work, I accept the developmental-psychological idea that young children need close and trusted caregivers to regulate their emotions as a crucial premise for their development and well-being. In this respect, attachment theory is understood to provide a meaningful framework for conceptualizing this premise. However, in adopting the philosophical position of critical-realism, the importance of attachment-related interactions must be understood as informed by specific relationships and contexts. In this respect, the present conceptual framework will build upon ongoing efforts to integrate a systemic perspective in attachment theory. In the next chapter, I will provide an overview of these theoretical perspectives, arguing for the relevance of adopting such an integrated approach to understanding child-parent-teacher relationship-building during preschool introduction as an interconnected process.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework: Attachment theory and a systemic perspective

Combining attachment theory with a systemic perspective is not new (e.g., Dallos & Draper, 2010; Minuchin, 1985), especially in research concerning young children (0-3 years) in the context of child-(pre)school teacher relationship-building (e.g., Borremans & Spilt, 2023; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Spilt et al., 2022; Veríssimo et al., 2017). However, when applying this conceptual framework specifically in the context of preschool transition, an important argument of the present thesis is that there is a need to more clearly emphasize that the way parents and teachers relate to, and understand, each other matter to the child and teacher's relationship-building process. To clarify the reasoning behind this argument, core ideas from attachment theory and (family) systemic thinking will therefore be presented in the following chapter. To explain why attachment-theory was chosen as the main framework to conceptualize the idea of close and trusted caregivers as important during a child's preschool transition, it is helpful to understand how, and why, attachment theory was developed. Thus, more emphasis will be placed on explaining this theory compared to systemic thinking in the chapter to follow.

First, a description of how Bowlby's re-conceptualization of core psychoanalytical ideas positioned attachment theory as a new paradigm in developmental psychology will be provided (section one and two). Next, it will be discussed how Bowlby's inspiration from ethology and control systems theory introduced the concept of reciprocity in attachment, enabling the theory to encompass children's interactions with non-parental caregivers in preschool settings. The idea of reciprocity thus suggests the necessity of incorporating a systemic perspective. Before elaborating on this statement by presenting core ideas in systemic thinking, particularly the idea of "emergence" (section six), I will introduce the important attachment-theoretical concept of caregiver sensitivity to attachment-related interactions (section five). This will be done by presenting the more recently developed concept of mentalization, as this can be used to operationalize a more systemic-inspired understanding of sensitive, or trusting, interaction in the context of child-teacher-parent relationship-building during preschool transition. Lastly (section seven), I will present current recommendations in the literature, grounded in systemic- and attachment-theoretical thinking, for how to practically organize preschool introductions. The chapter will then be concluded by arguing for the need to empirically examine child-teacher-parent relationship-

building during preschool transition as an interconnected process, with a specific focus on the parent-teacher interaction and communication to this end.

Attachment theory: Origins and recent developments

Initially outlined by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1958, 1959, 1960), attachment theory has become one of the most influential theories of (child) development in psychology (e.g., Thompson et al., 2022). While basing his thinking on traditional psychoanalytical ideas, Bowlby was also inspired by evolutionary biology, ethology, cognitive science, and control systems theory (e.g., Cassidy, 2016 for an overview) when building the theory. With attachment theory, a new paradigm (e.g., see Ainsworth et al., 1978), of conceptualizing early childhood development was thus introduced to the field of psychology.

Bowlby agreed with the psychoanalytical core idea about the significance of early relational experiences with close caregivers to later development. However, in the traditional psychoanalytical approach, adults' clinical accounts were used to retrospectively theorize about how past relational experiences to caregivers shaped the present psychology of a person. Bowlby therefore criticized this method for lacking an empirical foundation from which an understanding of the nature and dynamics of the relationships could be obtained (Bowlby, 1958). When studying patterns of behaviour in young children (about 0-4 years old) who, for different reasons, had been separated from their mother[3] to be cared for in out-of-home, professional childcare for longer periods of time, ideas about these processes begun to emerge. By using empirical material stemming from actual interactions in childhood, Bowlby thus introduced a new way of investigating the role of child-parent relationships to development (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

When studying the separation behaviours of the children in out-of-home care contexts, Bowlby was struck by new insights about the role of infants' instinctual behaviours towards caregivers, compared to previous psychoanalytical ideas (Bowlby, 1969/1982). In psychoanalytical thinking, the purpose of infants' instinctive behaviours towards caregivers is about increasing the likelihood for (any) caregiver to attend to the physiological need of the child to, in turn, increase the chances of the child's survival. However, by studying the children in out-of-

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3 Although the mother is typically referred to as the child's closest caregiver in attachment theory, Bowlby immediately clarified that he "was concerned with the person who mothers the child and to whom it becomes attached rather than to the natural mother" (Bowlby, 1958:351). Throughout the present thesis, I will discuss the role of caregivers both in the home environment and in the preschool context. To reduce the risk of confusion, I will therefore use the term "caregiver" to connote "any" caregiver providing care to the child, "parent" to connote a child's closest caregiver(s) in their everyday home environment, and "teacher" to refer to professional caregivers at preschool (including both professionals with and without a preschool teacher degree).

home care, Bowlby saw that the children reacted to the loss of proximity to their familiar caregiver, i.e., the parent(s). In other words: children seemed to grieve that the care given was not provided specifically by their parent(s). These emotional reactions indicated that the child had a preference towards its parent in providing the care. Bowlby therefore argued that there must also be a psychologically rooted instinctual need at play in the dynamics of early years child-parent interaction. When engaging in behaviours to attract the parent's attention, i.e., initiating a process of proximity-seeking towards the parent, Bowlby therefore suggested that this process did not only serve the purpose of securing that the physiological needs of the child was met, but that it also enabled an emotional bond, an attachment relationship, between the child and the parent to develop (Bowlby, 1958). The purpose of this instinctual need of the child to psychologically attach to a specific caregiver, e.g., the idea of "monotropy" (Bowlby, 1958), was, however, still described to have an evolutionary purpose of keeping the child alive: by biologically being pre-wired to attach to its parent, the child more efficiently knows who to seek out, i.e., direct attachment behaviour towards, in case of danger, i.e., in anxiety-provoking situations. The parent, in turn, is more inclined to keep the child proximate when being emotionally involved with the child. This idea behind the purpose of attachment was further developed by Mary Ainsworth by introducing the concept of "secure base".

Safe haven and secure base: Balancing the need for proximity and exploration

Inspired by her university teacher William Blatz, Ainsworth introduced the concept of secure base for the first time in relation to attachment in 1940, and by conducting subsequent observational studies of child-mother interaction in Uganda and Baltimore, the concept was empirically underpinned (Ainsworth, 1963; Ainsworth et al., 1971). During her observations, Ainsworth noted that children tended to move away from their mother again after having been provided with protection through proximity, to engage with something in the environment (e.g., to play with toys). In observing this circular process of proximity-seeking and exploration, Ainsworth was led to formulate the idea that the ultimate goal of attachment behaviours was not to secure the child proximity to its parent, but rather to provide the child with a secure base (e.g., the parent) from which the child could explore and learn about the environment (i.e., "the secure base-hypothesis; see Spilt & Koomen, 2022). This work became essential to further developments of attachment theory, as it implied a substantially more far-reaching developmental purpose of attachment: in trusting the parent to protect it from danger and provide comfort in the case of an anxiety-provoking experience (e.g., to function as a safe haven), the attachment behaviours of the child helped the child to also use the parent as a secure base from which to

safely engage in the developmentally important task of exploring the environment to learn about it.

Attending to a child in a situation experienced by the child as anxiety-provoking is, however, not only about securing the child from actual danger: it is also about comforting, or reassuring, the child through emotional-regulative interaction. Importantly, in repeatedly being successfully emotionally regulated by a parent in times of emotional distress, Bowlby argued that another consequence of the child's inclination to attach to its parent was that it helped the child to develop a sense of *emotional* security in relation to the parent's protective-regulating, or safe haven behaviour (Bowlby, 1969/1982). However, as argued by Bakermans-Kranenburg and van IJzendoorn (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021), it may still be meaningful to conceptualize the purposes of attachment behaviours to provide safety and emotional security as two distinctly different tasks: protection from danger, i.e., providing the child with safety, can be offered also by a parent that is not able to provide the child with a sense of emotional security. In their opinion, it is therefore more accurate to keep defining safety, e.g., protection from danger, as the primary purpose of attachment behaviours. The function of providing emotional security should rather be seen as the result of a "best scenario" situation in an attachment relationship (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021:118). To better understand this claim, it is necessary to turn to the idea of reciprocity in attachment theory.

Reciprocity in the process of attachment: Variability of attachment quality across different caregiver relationships

By inspiration from ethology and control systems theory, Bowlby also re-conceptualized the psychoanalytical idea of understanding instinctual behaviours as driven by internally conflicting drives (Bowlby, 1958). In disregarding the idea of inner psychic energy as the mechanism to activate instinctual behaviours, Bowlby instead suggested that they were driven by innate, motivational behavioural systems (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Each behavioural system, of which one was the attachment system, was described to have a specific set-goal that could be reached only if certain instinctual behaviours were activated. Concerning the attachment system, the set-goal was proximity to parent. For this process to be activated, a change in the external environment was necessary. Once activated, instinctual behaviours of the child (such as sucking, clinging, crying, smiling, and following; see Bowlby, 1958) were then kept in motion through feedback processes with the external environment until the set-goal was reached. Regarding the attachment system, this meant that attachment behaviours of the child, e.g., crying, were activated as a response to a change in the care environment, e.g., the parent leaving the room.

Crying was thus intended to set the process of proximity-seeking in motion, and depending on the response from the caregiver, the intensity of the attachment behaviours was determined (e.g., if the parent did not return, more intense crying was to expect, or, depending on the age of the child, the child could be expected to follow the parent). The result, or "outcome", of the attachment behaviours thus depended on the quality of the feedback from the parent (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

In introducing such a notion of reciprocity, this idea about the mechanisms behind instinctual behaviours was indeed quite contrary to the previous psychoanalytical idea: instinctual behaviours were now no longer understood as resulting from internally conflicting drives. Instead, they were explained to be regulated and impacted through engagement in feedback processes with the external environment. In this sense, Bowlby early on indicated that the quality of the parent's response to the child's attachment behaviours mattered to the result of the child's communication effort: only if the parent was able to respond in an adequate way, the behaviours ceased[4]. In analysing her observations of child-mother interaction and by interviewing the mothers about the interactions with their child, Ainsworth indeed argued that the child's ability to manage the balance of proximity-seeking and exploration seemed to depend on the parent's capacity to understand and respond adequately to these behaviours: i.e., parental "sensitivity" (see Bretherton, 1992, for an overview of the empirical work behind the development of this concept). To further investigate this idea, Ainsworth and colleagues developed the much famous observational method "Strange situation procedure"[5] (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). Based on thoroughly conducted child-mother observations using this new assessment tool, Ainsworth and colleagues provided convincing evidence supporting the idea that children indeed seem to use different behavioural strategies to increase the likelihood of maintaining proximity to their parent, depending on different pattern of responses from the parent in situations that activated the child's attachment system. This method thus contributed with an opportunity to observe

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[4] The attachment system is however thought of as having some flexibility. While the set-goal is always proximity to the caregiver, the intensity of the system is thought to depend on how strongly the child perceives of the situation as anxiety-provoking. Likewise, the amount of response from the environment (e.g., the parent) needed to cease the attachment behaviors depends on how intensely the attachment system has been activated. The behaviors from the child to signal a need of proximity also differ depending on the age of the child, the context of the situation, etc. (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978).

[5] The "Strange Situation Procedure" is considered the "golden standard" for assessing child attachment security (e.g., see Solomon & George, 2016). It is a controlled and standardized observational tool intended to assess the quality of attachment behaviours used by children aged 12-24 months when interacting with a parent. To elicit attachment behaviours, eight anxiety-provoking situations (e.g., a separation from the parent and introducing a stranger to the child) are staged in a laboratory setting to induce different levels of emotional stress of the child, to enable assessment of what behavioural strategies the child display in order to use their parent as an attachment figure.

individual differences in quality of the child-parent attachment relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1974; Ainsworth et al., 1971).

By quantifying these observations of child-mother interactions, the attachment behaviours, or strategies, used by the children to handle the balance of proximity-seeking and exploration, could moreover be systematized and categorized into four distinct – more or less ideal – attachment-related interaction patterns: secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, insecure-resistant attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and, later on, disorganized attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990). Meta-analytical evidence has subsequently further supported the idea of parent sensitivity as important to the quality of children's parental attachment security (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Lucassen et al., 2011; Verhage et al., 2016).

A secure pattern of attachment-related interaction is characterized by a child who can trust their parent to be emotionally available when in need of emotional support. When distressed or scared, these children are seen to seek out, and get comforted by responses from their caregiver, and then return to exploration of the environment. In an insecure-avoidant pattern of interaction, the child is not used to receiving comfort when seeking emotional support from the parent. These children therefore often show few or no signs of needing emotional support, even in situations where the child's attachment system is very likely to have become activated. In an insecure-resistant pattern of interaction, the child is, to the contrary, uncertain on what to expect from a parent when signalling a need for emotional support. While such children may thus signal very strongly when anxious or distressed, they are simultaneously seen to resist, or be ambivalent about, the parent's caregiving behaviour. Lastly, in cases of disorganized attachment, there is no predictable pattern of interaction between the child and parent in situations where the child needs emotional support. While this, in itself, is frightening to the child, it is moreover common for the parent in such patterns of attachment-related interaction to show frightening or helpless behaviours towards the child (e.g., van Ijzendoorn et al., 1999).

Attachment as a guide to shape future behavior

According to Bowlby (1973), the child's experiences of balancing proximity-seeking and exploring behaviours get mentally stored as cognitive representations, that over time develop into "internal working models" to guide future attachment-related behaviours (IWMs; Bowlby, 1973). Indeed, fundamental ideas about cognitive development suggest that children's experiences when interacting with the environment get cognitively conceptualized through processes of assimilation and accumulation, and that these cognitive representations function to guide future behaviour (e.g., Piaget & Cook, 1952). Around the age of 18 months, a child's representational abilities moreover start to develop (e.g., as evident by the initiation of pretend play). This means that certain experiences, or events, can become

spontaneously activated as cognitive representations by relevant triggers (e.g., Psouni & Apetroaia, 2014). Perhaps the most common trigger that will activate representations of a young child's attachment-related experiences with a parent is the situation of being separated from the parent in a new and unknown situation (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978), such as when being introduced to preschool. With age, as its representational abilities become more sophisticated, the child will thus likely be able to use the mere representation of the parent as a source of emotional support to handle the stress of this kind of situation. However, for the child to be effectively comforted by the help from these past caregiving experiences, with or without the parent present, the child needs to have had parent(s) who have predominantly responded sensitively to the child's needs of proximity and exploration. Importantly, a young child will nevertheless use its previous experiences of seeking and receiving emotional support from its parent(s) when initiating new relationships with new caregivers (Cassidy, 2016), such as with teachers at preschool. Depending on the quality of these past experiences with parents, it might be more or less challenging for teachers to initiate a secure pattern of interaction with the child, as a child with a history of insecure attachment to its parent(s) will most likely display behavioral strategies (Groh et al., 2017) that will be more difficult for the teacher to understand and respond sensitively to (e.g., see Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Smith-Nielsen et al., 2022).

Consequently, by introducing the concept of IWMs, the purpose of the attachment system becomes developmentally even more far-reaching, by implying that attachment-related experiences constitute a foundation from where skills to navigate social interplay develop. Indeed, meta-analytical evidence suggests that the quality of a child's attachment security to parents has predictive value to many aspects of later socioemotional development, such as in relation to peer social competence and behavioural problems (Groh et al., 2017; Grossmann et al., 2005; Psouni et al., 2015). As pointed out by Cassidy (2016), it is however important to emphasize that insecure attachment to parents, per se, or in itself, is not detrimental to a child's further development, and there are many unanswered questions of how the mechanisms behind the IWMs develop and work to impact development (e.g., Bretherton & Munholland, 2016). Consensus amongst attachment-informed researchers is, however, that secure attachment to caregivers should be considered an important protective factor for children's development (e.g., see Thompson et al., 2022). This is indeed also the standpoint of the present thesis. Importantly, by introducing the idea of reciprocity in attachment theory, it is moreover implied that the child may develop attachment relationships to different caregivers, and that the quality of it may be relation-specific. In this respect, it becomes relevant to consider the potential for teachers at preschool to become part of a child's caregiver network as "ad hoc" attachment figures (Spilt & Koomen, 2022).

Towards a network-based understanding of attachment

Globally, it has recently been estimated that 51.6% of children develop a secure attachment to at least one parent, while 14.7% can be classified as insecure-avoidantly attached, 10.2% as insecure-resistantly attached, and 23.5% as disorganized (Madigan et al., 2023). Traditionally, the dyadic interaction between a child and one primary caregiver (the mother) in infancy has been highlighted as most central to the child's attachment development. However, Bowlby indeed emphasized early on that attachment should not be conceptualized as being restricted to only concern interaction in a single dyad between the child and its primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Empirical evidence has subsequently supported this idea by showing that children, depending on the number of available caregivers in their relational network, typically direct attachment behaviours to three to four caregivers (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021).

Still, most attachment researchers seem to agree that attachment relationships to different caregivers are not of equal importance to the child (Cassidy, 2016). Based on observational studies, the most consistently available in the child's daily caregiving context will likely acquire a more primary function as the child's attachment figure of preference, compared to other caregivers (the idea about "attachment hierarchies"; see Bretherton, 1980). Importantly, as previously described, by introducing the idea of reciprocity in the attachment process, Bowlby moreover indicated that the quality of the child's different attachment relationships may develop differently depending on the level of sensitivity in the responses given by the specific caregiver. More recent attachment research has indeed established empirical evidence to support this idea, by suggesting that a child's attachment security to each one of its parents, respectively, in infancy (Fox et al., 1991; van Ijzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997) as well as in the later preschool period (Di Folco et al., 2017; Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999), can differ in quality. While some fluctuation of the results depending on method for assessing attachment security is likely at play, a recent meta-analysis concluded that this indeed seems to be the case (Pinquart, 2023).

An important topic in modern attachment research is, therefore, to investigate more specifically how the child's attachments to different caregivers collectively contribute to its overall attachment security (e.g., Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022), and whether attachment to different parents (defined as mother and father figures) influences the child's development in different ways (Cassidy, 2016; Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2021; see also; Steenhoff et al., 2021 for a recent study in a Nordic context; Verschueren, 2020). And while Bowlby hypothesized that the early years IWMs over time would only be reluctantly modifiable in the context of changed quality of caregiving and/or in the event of new caregivers (Bowlby, 1973), Bacro and colleagues (2021) (tentatively) suggested in a recent meta-review that an attachment relationship of primary status to a specific caregiver in infancy can become more secondary as the child grows

older, and vice versa (see also Verschueren, 2020). Meta-analytical studies investigating the stability of attachment security during childhood (Fraley, 2002; Opie et al., 2021; Pinquart et al., 2013; van Ijzendoorn et al., 1999) have indeed found only moderate stability (κ = .23) across the first 12-75 months of childhood (see Opie et al., 2021)[6].

(Pre)school teachers as "ad hoc" attachment figures

The idea about attachment as relation-specific is particularly interesting considering that most children aged about 1-5 years old spend a substantial part of their daily life at preschool, in Nordic countries (Daníelsdóttir & Ingudóttir, 2020), and, increasingly, internationally (UNICEF, 2008). Preschool is generally regarded as a developmentally essential caregiving context, where children's interactions with teachers are seen as having attachment-related developmental value. Indeed, studies have investigated children's relationships to preschool teachers within an attachment-theoretical framework since the 1980's (e.g., Cummings, 1980; Howes et al., 1988), and in 2006, a large meta-analysis of about 3000 children's attachment to preschool teachers was published (Ahnert et al., 2006). Since then, it has become well-established to conceptualize children's relationships with teachers in an attachment-theoretical framework, in preschool as well as in a school context (e.g., Ahnert, 2021; Ahnert et al., 2006; Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Borremans & Spilt, 2023; Spilt et al., 2022; Verschueren, 2020; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Zajac & Kobak, 2006). And although teachers are not as stably and exclusively available (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012) or as emotionally invested (Råde, 2020) as parents in their relationships with a child, an important task for teachers is still to provide the children with safety and emotional security (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021).

A longitudinal study of children with insecure attachments to parents indeed showed that children over time can use a preschool teacher as a secure attachment figure (Howes & Ritchie, 1998), and consistent with the idea about reciprocity in attachment theory, meta-analytical results have suggested that children can develop attachment relationships with teachers that is of different quality than their parental attachments (Ahnert et al., 2006)[7]. A growing body of research moreover suggests that the quality of early attachment-related child-teacher relationships is a better predictor than the quality of child-parent relationships of future relationships with other teachers, thus indicating that attachment might be domain-specific (see Spilt

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[6] The question of whether attachment security is stable over time from childhood to adulthood is, naturally, a relevant issue (e.g., see Thompson et al., 2022). As the present thesis does not focus directly on the nature and effects of attachment, I will however refrain from providing a more detailed overview of this topic.

[7] The rate of secure relationships between children and teachers is moreover not quite as high as when it comes to parents and children (about 40%, see Ahnert et al., 2006, compared to about 50%, see Madigan et al., 2023).

& Koomen, 2022). However, it is still argued that the quality of early attachment between children and their parents might serve as models for the first, or earliest, child-teacher relationships (e.g., see Cassidy, 2016; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

It is thus reasonable for teachers to consider themselves as having the potential to become "ad hoc", or temporary, attachment figures to children at preschool (Spilt & Koomen, 2022; Zajac & Kobak, 2006). This might be especially important for teachers who interact with the youngest children (0-3 years of age; Veríssimo et al., 2017), as this period of time is particularly sensitive in terms of attachment development (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

The importance of child-teacher attachment in the specific context of preschool introduction

This task is important to bear in mind for teachers when introducing a new child to preschool, as most children, at least in Nordic countries (about 90% of children in Sweden; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024, see also Nystad et al., 2021; Reijman et al., 2024), are enrolled to preschool at some point before entering their third year of life. Moreover, as described in the thesis introduction, transition from home to preschool is emotionally demanding for a child (Ahnert et al., 2022; Ahnert et al., 2004; Bernard et al., 2015; Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021). Indeed, from an attachment perspective, this is not surprising. Because not only is being separated from the parent in a new and unfamiliar situation (e.g., preschool) considered one of the most emotionally stressful situations for young children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982); when being enrolled in preschool, the child must simultaneously engage in the process of developing attachments to new caregivers (i.e., teachers).

However, as also mentioned in the thesis introduction, building secure patterns of interaction between children and teachers at preschool is not only meaningful in terms of supporting the child to handle the immediate stress of preschool enrolment. As with the child-developmentally predictive power of children's parental attachment (Groh et al., 2017; Grossmann et al., 2005), affective aspects of child-teacher relationships can have developmental value to the child also in the long run. Meta-analytical results suggest that warm and close child-teacher relationships can predict social, behavioral, and academic aspects of children's development over and beyond different family characteristics (see Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Magro et al., 2023; Ulferts et al., 2019 for overviews). Importantly, a secure child-teacher relationship can even moderate insecure effects of maternal attachment on preschool children's social reaction patterns in relationships with peers (Buyse et al., 2011). Not only do secure child-teacher attachments thus have the potential to positively impact various aspects of children's development, they are also considered to serve as a compensatory buffer for children with insecure attachments to their parent(s)

(see also Broberg et al., 2023; and Spilt & Koomen, 2022 for an empirical overview).

In this respect, there is some ongoing discussion about whether adult sensitivity is as important to the establishment of secure, or close, child-teacher relationships as it is considered to be for children's parental attachments. Ahnert and Lamb (2003) have argued that the specificity of the preschool context as a peer group environment needs to be taken into account when assessing and interpretating the role of teacher sensitivity to child-teacher attachment-related interaction. Results from the large meta-analysis of child-teacher attachment indeed showed that teachers' group-focused sensitivity (i.e., a teacher's child-oriented involvement assessed while attending to the whole peer group) was more predictive of secure child-teacher attachment than teachers' sensitivity as assessed in dyadic interaction with the child (Ahnert et al., 2006). This was however only the case for children in larger peer groups, presumed to consist of older children, aged beyond toddlerhood (Ahnert, 2021). The key attachment-theoretical idea about the importance of adult sensitivity in dyadic interactions is thus still considered significant, especially in interactions with the youngest children (e.g., Ahnert, 2021; Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Smith-Nielsen et al., 2022).

As will be argued in section six of this chapter ("Systemic perspective on attachment"), this more network-based understanding of attachment-related interaction requires a systemic approach. As such, it is necessary to also conceptualize sensitivity in a way that makes it possible to apply it beyond the child-parent dyad. Both to better operationalize teacher sensitivity in relation to the child, but also to enable a focus on parent-teacher supportive interactions. In this respect, the concept of mentalization (Fonagy et al., 2002) is helpful. Before moving on to discussing a systemic approach to attachment (section six) and its implications for understanding relationship-building during a child's preschool transition (section seven), a brief introduction of the mentalization concept will therefore be presented.

From sensitivity to mentalization

Ainsworth and colleagues originally assessed the quality of a caregiver's sensitivity by observing how the caregiver behaved when responding to a child's emotional signals during attachment-related interaction with the child ("The maternal sensitivity scales"; Ainsworth et al., 1974; Ainsworth et al., 1971). Since then, researchers have argued for the need to go beyond this behavioural assessment level to better understand the mechanisms underlying the ability to respond sensitively (Verhage et al., 2016; Zeegers et al., 2017). By presenting the idea that our way of *interpretating* our own and others' behaviour influences the quality of responses given in social interaction, the concept of mentalization (Fonagy et al., 2002) was developed to this end.

Sensitively minding the mind of the other

While the importance for a caregiver to successfully help a distressed or scared child to regulate their emotions is highlighted in a mentalization perspective, the developmental benefit(s) of such interactions are considered to go beyond the function suggested by attachment theory. While sensitive interactions are considered essential for safe exploration of the environment, from a mentalization perspective, they are also seen as teaching the child to differentiate between their internal psychological reality and the external world (see Fonagy & Target, 1996). By being successfully regulated by a sensitive caregiver, the child learns that an emotion, i.e., a mental state, is a transitory, or momentary, response to a specific situation, that can be experienced, and responded to, in different ways, depending on who is perceiving it. Moreover, by having its (attachment) behaviours interpreted by a caregiver as representing a mental state, the child internalizes the caregiver's interpretation of what that behaviour, and the mental state behind it, means. Based on the caregiver's interpretations, the child will thus eventually begin to make sense of its behaviours as connected to specific mental states, in response to specific situations. An example of successful, mentalizing child-caregiver interaction is a caregiver who interprets a child's crying in an unfamiliar situation as an expression of anxious feelings in the child, and consequently interacts with the child in a way that sooths the anxiety.

Interpreting the child's behaviour as expressing a plausible underlying feeling is thus thought to increase the likelihood for a caregiver to respond in a way that sensitively regulates the child's mental state. Moreover, in this process, the child simultaneously learns that this (unpleasant) mental state is a psychological experience that can be managed with the help of a (sensitive) caregiver. An interpretation that, to the contrary, would most likely lead to a less regulatory, i.e., sensitive response from the caregiver would be a caregiver who believes that the child's crying is signalling an intention to annoy, or perhaps embarrass, the caregiver. In this interpretation, the caregiver has a difficulty in seeing the situation from the mind of the child, which, likely, will lead to a less sensitive behavioural response. Consequently, the child will not be given the same opportunity to relevantly connect its behaviour to its *own* mental state in the situation.

Mentalization as fostering smooth communication: Towards a network-based understanding of sensitive interactions

From a mentalization perspective, the purpose of a caregiver responding sensitively to, i.e., mentalizing, the child's (attachment) behaviours is thus not so much about enabling the child to safely learn about the environment and to develop strategies to handle emotional stress. It is rather to make possible for the child to learn how to understand itself and others as mental agents to, in turn, enable smooth communication with others.

To connote this, Fonagy and colleagues have recently introduced the concept "epistemic trust" (Fonagy et al., 2015). In emphasizing the human ability to communicate as crucial to our survival, they describe that a child who repeatedly engage in interactions that successfully mentalize its mental states will develop a sense of others as trustworthy communicators. Over time, such repeated experiences will manifest as generalizable to other social contexts (Fonagy et al., 2015; Luyten et al., 2020). As such, mentalizing interactions with caregivers will eventually enable for the child to develop a sense of the social world as a reliable environment to learn from. If a child holds such a fundamental sense of the social world as trustworthy, they will, in turn, be more likely to seek out and use (unfamiliar) others as reliable sources of information when exploring unfamiliar situations.

In arguing that the function of mentalizing interaction is to facilitate smooth communication, it is thus implied that attending sensitively to others is at play also outside child-caregiver, attachment-related dyads. Indeed, mentalization is argued to be important to social interaction in a more general sense (Slade, 2005; Luyten, 2020). Moreover, compatible with a more network-based understanding of attachment, the concept of mentalization has been utilized to expand our understanding of how interaction within the relational network of a child might function: a child's parents' capacity to mentalize each other has for instance been shown to influence the quality of how they collaborate in caring for the child (De Palma et al., 2023; e.g., "coparenting", see below for elaboration on this matter).

This is important to the topic of the present thesis, suggesting that mentalization may be helpful in operationalizing the assumed importance of the teacher and the parent's way of relating to and understanding each other to child-teacher relationship-building process during a child's preschool introduction. To better understand the meaningfulness of such an operationalization, a systemic perspective must be integrated.

Systemic perspective on attachment

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Bowlby never intended to define the role of the mother *per se* as cardinal to a child's attachment development. What he proposed was that the child had an innate potential to attach to several caregivers, and that the adult who had the most stable role as a caregiver in the child's everyday life would probably achieve status as the child's primary attachment figure.[8]

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8 The strong focus on the mother-child dyad when subsequently operationalizing and researching attachment interaction (e.g., the "Strange situation"-paradigm; Ainsworth et al., 1978) may indeed have more to do with cultural and pragmatic aspects than conceptual (e.g., Madigan et al., 2023), as the mother traditionally have been (and still is?) the most stably available caregiver during the first years of life for many children raised in western countries.

Moreover, by conceptualizing attachment quality as dependent on reciprocal interaction, Bowlby early on articulated a systemic understanding of development.

While a systemic perspective cannot be regarded as representing a unified theory (e.g., Lawani, 2020; Spilt et al., 2022), the anti-reductionist idea of "the whole is more than its parts", i.e., the principle of emergence, is argued to be a core assumption in all systemic thinking (e.g., Mingers, 2011). This principle connotes the idea that the characteristics and behaviours of properties depend on the relationships between the components that make up the property, rather than on the properties of the components themselves (e.g., Mingers, 2011). Thus, in a systemic perspective, a given condition must be understood as a reciprocal and relational process resulting from the interactive exchange, or pattern of communication, between person(s) and their environment. This idea of emergence is neatly captured in a quote from the important systemic thinker Gregory Bateson, in arguing that "individual characteristics":

> *"(…) are really not strictly applicable to the individual but rather describe transactions between the individual and his material and human environment. No man is 'resourceful' or 'dependent' or 'fatalistic' in a vacuum. His characteristic, whatever it be, is not his but is rather a characteristic of what goes on between him and something (or somebody) else." (Bateson, 1972, p. 303).*

Thus, in this perspective, relationships must be studied by focusing on the patterns of interaction *between* individuals and on how the individuals perceive, or understand, these patterns of interaction, rather than on the internal processes of the individual in isolation from the context, i.e., the relationship, in which they are involved.

Bowlby's idea of attachment quality as resulting from reciprocal interactions between specific individuals in specific relationships is thus compatible with this systemic assumption about emergence. Indeed, already in 1985, the family systems theorist Patricia Minuchin (Minuchin, 1985) suggested that a systemic understanding of development should be incorporated into attachment theory to increase its usability beyond the child-parent dyad.

Focusing on the whole rather than on its parts when assessing attachment-related interaction

As mentioned previously in this chapter, an important topic in current attachment research is to investigate whether, and how, attachments to different caregivers in different caregiving contexts interact to impact the child's development (e.g., Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2021; Spilt & Koomen, 2022), thus indicating a systemic approach. Some attachment-informed studies have recently tried to even more explicitly give weight to systemic thinking in focusing on the significance of the

whole, rather than its parts, when investigating the nature and effects of attachment-related interaction.

For instance, by assessing the quality of a child's attachment relationship to its mother and father separately, Bureau and colleagues (2021) investigated whether the quality of each child-parent dyad had an effect on the way parents manage their joint parenting task of caring for their child (i.e., "coparenting", see below). Oppenheim and colleagues (2023) moreover looked into the effect of triadic, attachment-related interaction in the family on parents' abilities to mentalize their child. And in using a systemic perspective to argue that mothers and fathers influence each other's ratings of their family dynamics when being part of the same family system, Iwanski and colleagues (2023) took reciprocity of the parents' self-reports into account when assessing quality of their respective relationship with their child, and of their child's behaviour. These studies are thus examples of how systemic ideas have been incorporated in attachment-informed research: either by investigating how the quality of specific dyads in a larger, relational system function to, in turn, impact the outcome of the whole system, or by exploring how the interaction of the system as a (triadic) whole can impact specific outputs of the interaction.

The quality of communication and collaboration specifically between a child's parents has indeed been argued as particularly important if to understand children's well-being and development from a systemic perspective. The most common way to conceptualize this is perhaps by using the concept of "coparenting" (Feinberg, 2003). By drawing on family systemic and object relational ideas, Feinberg argued that different aspects of shared parenting efforts, i.e., coparenting quality, were important to consider when trying to understand the well-being of each family member, the quality of each child-parent dyad, and the functioning of the family system as a whole (Feinberg, 2003). As previously mentioned, empirical research has subsequently demonstrated that parents indeed seem to mutually influence each other's capacity to sensitively meet the needs of their child (De Palma et al., 2023; Psouni, 2019). Enhancing parents' strategies to support each other in their shared child-rearing responsibilities has moreover been showed to impact the quality of their parenting, their individual well-being, and the quality of their romantic relationship (Eira Nunes et al., 2021; see also Han et al., 2023 for results in a Swedish context and a recent validation of the most commonly used assessment instrument of coparenting). Importantly, coparenting quality has also been found to be associated with several different child developmental aspects, such as social functioning, internalizing and externalizing behaviour (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), and, importantly, quality of child-parent attachment (see Bureau et al., 2021 for an overview).

A systemic perspective: Implications for expanding a child's relational network with preschool teachers

There is thus a fair amount of empirical evidence to support the systemic idea of attachment as functioning and being dependent on interaction within the whole *family* as a system. When aiming to understand attachment-related interaction in young children's lives, it is however, for most children, relevant to also consider the role of teachers as important caregivers at preschool, as described in the fourth section of this chapter. Defining relevant "members" of a young child's relational network, or system, should thus include also teachers at preschool. Indeed, Minuchin pointed out the tendency to focus systemic child-developmental research specifically on the family and its subsystems (e.g., sibling subsystem, parental coparenting subsystem, parental romantic subsystem; see for instance Minuchin, 1985; or Weeland et al., 2021 for a practical example), arguing for the need to also take interactions in other important caregiving contexts, such as preschool, into account (Minuchin, 1985).

While adopting a systemic approach to attachment-related relationship-building thus enables the inclusion of teachers as relevant caregivers in a child's network of (potential) attachment figures, it is however not enough to merely focus on the nature of a child's *dyadic* interaction with different caregivers in isolation from each other. The interaction *between* the dyads must also be taken into consideration (see also Dallos & Draper, 2010). In the context of relationship-building (during) preschool (introduction), it thus becomes necessary to also look into how the teacher(s) and parent(s)' ways of interacting and relating towards each other influence the child's interactions with the teacher(s), and the parent(s), respectively.

The significance of parent-teacher interaction to a child's individual relationships with teachers and parents

There are, indeed, some studies that have investigated child-teacher-parent interactions in the joint contexts of home and preschool. These studies have showed that parent-teacher relational quality is interrelated with quality of the child-teacher relationship (Chung et al., 2005; Jeon et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2000; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012) as well as the child-parent relationship (Lang et al., 2020; Owen et al., 2000), for children aged 0-3 years (Jeon et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2020; Owen et al., 2000) as well as 4-6 years (Chung et al., 2005; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). In one of these studies (Lang et al., 2020), the self-report instrument to measure the parent-teacher relationship ("The cocaring relationship scale"; Lang et al., 2017) was even based on a re-conceptualization of the coparenting-concept, specifically in relation to the youngest children (aged 0-3 years) at preschool ("cocaring relationships"; Lang et al., 2016).

Besides being interconnected with both the child-parent- and the child-teacher relationship, parent-teacher relational quality is also associated with several

beneficial child outcomes (see also Sheridan et al., 2022 for an overview and recent longitudinal results): child adjustment and less internalizing behaviour (Pirchio et al., 2013) and decreased level of behavioural challenges (Cook et al., 2024) at preschool, academic achievements in elementary school (e.g., Benner & Yan, 2015; Hughes & Kwok, 2007), and socioemotional well-being in preschool and school (e.g., Benner & Yan, 2015; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Mediated by the child-teacher relationship, a link between the quality of the parent-teacher relationship and the teacher's perception of the child's socioemotional functioning has also been found (Jeon et al., 2021). Parent-teacher interactions seem also to be important across different sociodemographic populations, as links between parent-teacher relational quality and toddlers' object play, social competence, early learning, and positive parenting were found in an intervention program for low-income families (Elicker et al., 2013). Lastly, parents themselves emphasize the value of establishing well-working relationships with preschool teachers (e.g., Vuorinen, 2021), and parental perceptions of supportive collaboration with preschool teachers have been associated with parent-reported, higher child social competence and regulation (Lang et al., 2020) as well as with less parental distress and lower levels of family conflict (Cook et al., 2024).

A systemic informed conceptualization of attachment-related child-teacher relationship-building during preschool introduction

In the light of systemic thinking and the empirical results presented, it thus seems reasonable to think that interactions between parent(s) and teacher(s) might play a role to child-teacher relationship-building processes at preschool. This is particularly relevant in the specific context of a child's introduction to preschool: together with the teacher who is primarily responsible for introducing the child, the child's accompanying parent is a central part of the child's introduction. To understand attachment-related child-teacher relationship-building during this process, it can thus be argued as necessary to examine how the parent and teacher's understanding of and relationship with each other influence the relationship-building process between the child and teacher. To this end, as has also been indicated in coparenting-research, the concept of mentalization may be useful to operationalize the parent and teacher's way of relating to each other.

In the following section, advice from current attachment- and systems-informed literature on how to help preschools organize the introduction process to foster warm and close child-teacher relationships will be presented. As clear from this presentation, there is insufficient knowledge about how to organize parent-teacher interaction in this regard.

Before moving onto this matter, a few more words are needed on the issue of defining the components, or members, of a system. Because as pointed out by Minuchin (1985), when broadening the contexts for how a system can be defined

outside the family, systemic research will inevitably become more complicated to conduct: where to draw the line for what, and whom, to include in a system? As argued by Minuchin, this choice must, at the end of the day, be understood as a pragmatic decision made by the researcher (Minuchin, 1985). In this respect, it is also important to consider to what degree the researcher, in the process of studying the system, is thought to impact the dynamics of the system. Naturally, this is a matter of epistemology (e.g., see Jones, 1993): depending on to what degree reality is thought of as constructed by, and in, social interaction, the choice of methods to study a system, and the position of the researcher in this respect, will differ. In the final chapter, I will return to this issue when discussing the methods used in the present thesis for studying the child-teacher-parent system during preschool introduction.

Practical implications of an attachment- and systems theory informed understanding of child-teacher-parent relationship-building during preschool transition

Conceptualizing preschool as an attachment-relevant context in literature for preschool practitioners is common (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; see Broberg et al., 2023 in a Swedish context; Drugli & Næsset Mælan, 2022). In conveying knowledge about how to understand the child's needs and behaviours from an attachment perspective, the aim is to facilitate for preschool practitioners to organize daily preschool life in a way that can support sensitive, emotional regulation and warm and close relationship-building with the children.

Current advice to preschools concerning introduction practices

Advising practitioners on the matter of implementing attachment-theoretical knowledge specifically when organizing the preschool introduction is also addressed in the literature, in a Nordic context (Broberg et al., 2023; Drugli et al., 2020) as well as internationally (e.g., Brooker, 2008; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009). A central recommendation is directed towards policy-makers, emphasizing the need to incorporate information and training about the nature of attachment into preschool teacher education programs (Broberg et al., 2023; Drugli et al., 2020) to help teachers understand and respond to attachment-related behaviours of children, and to enable teachers to inform parents about what to behaviourally expect from their child during the transition process. For instance, Drugli and colleagues (Drugli et al., 2020; Drugli et al., 2023) recommend teachers to advise parents to reduce the amount of out-of-home activities during the first weeks of introduction, as the child

may need more close contact with parents than usually to help the child de-stress once home from preschool. Moreover, informing teachers that protesting behaviours of children when the parent leaves should be seen as natural and healthy responses might reassure parents who are worried about their child's reactions during separation situations (Broberg et al., 2023). Likewise, if teachers are aware that low or no protest behaviour of children may be indicative of less trust that adults can be of support (see chapter two), they can also understand that the child still experiences the enrolment as demanding, and, thus, is still in need of emotional support (Broberg et al., 2023). However, as described in the second section in this chapter, for teachers to build a secure pattern of attachment to children who use such insecure attachment strategies can be more challenging. As pointed out by Spilt and Koomen (2022), research that evaluates the effect of interventions aimed at increasing teachers' abilities to respond sensitively, i.e., mentalize, children in this respect, is therefore warranted (see Reijman et al., 2024; Smith-Nielsen et al., 2022 for currently ongoing examples of such research).

Another important recommendation is to advice preschools to implement a strategy of assigning one teacher as responsible for the child, or family, being introduced; i.e., a "key person system" (Elfer et al., 2012). Allowing the child to get to know one teacher before introducing the rest of the staff group is considered a prerequisite (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009) if to enable child-teacher attachment-related interactions that, hopefully, can develop into an ad hoc attachment relationship at preschool.

The need to introduce the child *as well as* the parent(s)

As repeatedly stated in the present thesis, the status of the parent(s) as the child's primary attachment figure(s) makes the parent central to the introduction process. Moreover, when adopting a systemic approach to an attachment-informed understanding of child-teacher relationship-building during the transition process, it is necessary to specifically focus also on parent-teacher interaction to this end. Indeed, as will be presented in the summary of study II, our focus group data suggested that teachers do not perceive of the purpose of the introduction as being only about enrolling the child – but rather about enrolling the child *and* its parent(s) (Andersson Søe et al., 2024).

The importance of the parent to the child's introduction process is indeed emphasized in the literature (Broberg et al., 2023; Drugli et al., 2020) as well as in some of the studies on children's stress during preschool transition (Ahnert et al., 2022; Ahnert et al., 2004). However, while these studies found that both the parent and the teacher who primarily accompany the child during the introduction process can buffer the emotional reactions of the child, not much is known about how to organize their collaboration to this end. Interestingly, the recommendations in the literature for practitioners on how to go about this matter moreover differ.

Besides adopting an attachment-informed understanding of relationship-building and care in a preschool context (see Degotardi & Pearson, 2014), Drugli and colleagues (2020) also make use of a (socio-culturally) inspired systemic approach. To this end, they recommend preschools to make use of group introductions, where several children are introduced simultaneously, each accompanied by a parent. In this way, they argue that the families can benefit from getting to know and use each other as support during the introduction process. They moreover recommend instructing the parent to care for all the needs of their child and to participate actively together with their child during all introduction activities during the first 2-3 days, and thereafter, for the last two days, to adopt a more passive role in the background to allow for the child and teacher to approach each other (see study II for a more thorough description of the "active" and "passive" parental roles during introduction activities). To the contrary, the more "traditionally" attachment-informed work by Broberg and colleagues (2023) emphasizes that the main task for the parent during the introduction is to function as a safe haven and secure base for the child in the new and unknown environment of the preschool. To facilitate this, they recommend positioning the parent in the more passive position, in the background of the introduction activities, already from start. They also highlight the importance of keeping the child-adult ratio as low as possible (Broberg et al., 2023), as larger group sizes have been shown to decrease the quality of teachers' interaction with the youngest children (Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2008).

The importance of considering the parent as an essential participant in the child's introduction is thus clear, and it is also emphasized that teachers should focus on making the parent feel comfortable about the event of introducing their child. However, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no empirical investigations on this matter within an attachment- and systems-theoretical framework. Focusing on investigating the relationship-building process between the child, the teacher, and the parent as an interconnected process therefore became an important aim of the empirical work in this thesis. Before moving on to presenting the study summaries of this work, some brief words will be said about the overall methodological approach to do this. As described in chapter one, and mentioned in chapter two, the methodological approach will then be attended to more thoroughly in the discussion, as another aim of this thesis has been to illustrate, and reflect upon, some challenges with this approach when operating within an attachment- and systems-inspired theoretical framework.

Chapter 3: Methodological approach

While literature on preschool introduction practices thus exists, it is still an under-researched topic (Broberg et al., 2023). When initiating the thesis project, there was, for instance, no empirically based knowledge about how Swedish preschools typically organize the introduction of new children. Therefore, although informed deductively by a systemic-inspired, attachment-theoretical conceptual framework, a more descriptive approach was initially deemed necessary. In this way, we could generate a context-sensitive starting point for further investigations into how different aspects of preschool introduction conduct may affect family-teacher relationship-building. Informed also by the critical-realist standpoint, we therefore chose to use a mixed methods approach (study I) as well as qualitative (study II) and quantitative (study III) methods. Choosing a quantitative design for the final study also allowed alignment with well-established approaches and methods for researching child-preschool teacher relationships from an attachment- and systemic-informed perspective. The issues with, and simultaneous value of, using quantitative methods within this theoretical framework will be given specific attention in the section about methodological considerations in chapter five.

From a critical-realist, as well as systemic, perspective, it is advisable to collect data about the phenomenon of interest from those who perceive it, as their ideas about how to understand it contextualize its meaning (e.g., Fletcher, 2020). Therefore, we started out by turning to the actors who plan and lead the process of preschool introduction: the teachers (study I and II). Moving forward in the project, we also aimed to include the "recipients" of the introduction process: the parents and, indirectly, the children (study III).

Chapter 4: Summary of studies

To enable the more descriptive starting point, study I and study II focused on exploring preschool introduction practices from the perspective of teachers in a Swedish context. By using the conceptual framework of attachment theory and systemic thinking to analyse the results, relevant findings from these studies were then used to design a study of effect (study III). This approach made it possible to investigate how certain aspects of introductory practices—reported by teachers and considered theoretically relevant to pursue—were related to the establishment of child-teacher-parent relationships.

A central theoretical argument throughout chapter two is that the child and teacher's relationship-building must be understood to also involve the parent, with a specific focus on how the parent and teacher relate to and understand each other to this end. In Study I, the statistically significant difference between various introduction models in how parents were invited to participate in introductory activities was therefore identified as particularly relevant for further investigation. To pursue this, a qualitative approach was chosen for study II, using focus groups with teachers. Importantly, the teachers reported that the way they structured the parents' role during the introduction activities, as well as how they understood and responded to the parents' feelings and expectations connected to the child's introduction, played an important role in their perceived ability to engage with the child. Based on the theoretical framework of the present thesis, it is indeed meaningful to believe that the way teachers and parents interact with and relate to each other may impact the child-teacher-parent relationship-building during the introduction process. By operationalizing the relationship between the parent and teacher as a need to develop mutual trust, Study III was therefore designed to test whether a trusting relationship between the parent and teacher was associated with child-teacher attachment-related quality later on.

Study I: "Transition to preschool: Paving the way for preschool teacher and family relationship-building"

Study I: Background and aim

Enabling a good foundation for the development of strong child-teacher relationships at preschool is crucial. The process of introducing a child to preschool

is considered a natural opportunity for establishing such a foundation, as this transition from home to preschool connects the family and preschool contexts for the first time (e.g, Brooker, 2008; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009). However, little is known about whether, and how, different ways of organizing the introduction process may impact the relationship-building. To study such effects, it is necessary to first provide an empirically informed overview of how introduction conduct is organized at preschools, and how teachers themselves evaluate the importance and impact of different organizational features. The first study was therefore aimed at enriching the limited empirical knowledge about how preschools in Sweden organize the process of introducing new children to preschool. Informed by the present attachment- and systems theoretical framework, the results were then analysed with a specific focus on the process of child-teacher-parent relationship-building.

Study I: Study design, recruitment, and methods

To enable a statistically derived overview of introduction conduct, the study was designed as a large-scale survey study targeted teachers at Swedish preschools. Participants were recruited through a snowball strategy to ensure a diverse sample with various geographical and demographic characteristics. Multiple online forums frequented by preschool professionals were therefore contacted to reach a wide teacher population, and we encouraged teachers to also share the survey within their own networks. To protect participant anonymity, we did not ask for the specific preschool of employment. However, the geographical spread of the respondents was regularly monitored, and preschool leaders of different geographical areas were contacted concerning recruitment when in need of balancing the geographical spread of the sample. The final sample comprised $N = 535$ participants.

To capture the aimed "bottom-up" perspective from teachers on "what works and why" in the overview of introduction conduct, we implemented a mixed-methods convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This allowed us to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously by including a mixture of closed and open-ended questions in the survey, and to integrate these data sources in the analysis. Since no validated instruments for assessing preschool introduction organization were available, we designed the survey questions about introduction conduct ourselves. To secure the relevance of the questions in relation to preschools in Sweden, we consulted Swedish practitioner literature about preschool introduction (Arnesson Eriksson, 2010; Broberg et al., 2012; Källhage & Malm, 2020).

While the quantitative part of the study was used to identify structural features of introduction conduct, the qualitative results provided us with the desired first-hand teacher perspective. We used content analysis to categorize the qualitative accounts into descriptive themes, for which we also included a frequency count. Our mixed methods approach then allowed us to integrate the frequency data about the qualitatively derived themes into the quantitative overview of introduction conduct,

by using the mixed method strategy of transforming (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). When applying this method, quantitative and qualitative results are not merely compared, or contrasted, but integrated to enable a more nuanced analysis. In this study, we chose to use this strategy to see whether the qualitative themes, expressing sources of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with specific aspects of the conduct of introduction, were statistically related to specific introduction models.

Study I: Results

Our quantitative data revealed two distinct models for introduction conduct: the "Traditional model" (TM) and the "Parent-active model" (PAM). The models differed significantly regarding several structural aspects, such as length and intensity of the introduction phase. Analysis of the qualitative data resulted in six descriptive themes (see table 1 below).

Table 1. Descriptive themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Relational establishment	*Child-centered relational focus*
Organizational flexibility towards the needs of the family	*Allowing the child to lead the way*
Length, intensity, and child-adult ratio as means of success	*Letting time do the trick*
	More than a few is a crowd
Clearly and consensually defined procedures	–
Actively engaging the parent	*Emotionally secure parents foster emotionally secure children*
	Lack of time ruling out the benefits of active parent role
Preparation of family before the introduction	*Using preparation to enable a relational focus*

The mixed methods analysis revealed that only theme five, concerning an organizational choice of involving the parent in an active manner during the introduction activities, was significantly more often related to practicing a certain model of introduction conduct (i.e., the PAM).

Study I: Discussion and conclusions

As discussed in chapter two, the introduction process, and its activities, should be organized in a way that can take into account the interactions between the child, the parent, and the teacher as a triadic, interconnected process. It was therefore particularly interesting to see in Study I that teachers using the PAM appeared to

organize and conceptualize the role of the parent during introductory activities in a significantly different way than those using the TM. As this may contribute to different prerequisites for initiating the child-teacher-parent relationship-building, we decided to explore this matter further in study II.

Another interesting finding concerned the fact that the average length and intensity of the introduction process significantly differed between the models. As noted in the study, it is however not easy to be firmly conclusive about the role of introduction length to the child's adjustment and the family-teacher relation-building process. Before moving on to the summary of study II, I would therefore like to elaborate a bit more on this complex matter.

Study I: Additional discussion about length and intensity of the introduction process

In a study on children's cortisol levels during and after enrolment to preschool, Ahnert and colleagues (2004) found that children experienced the enrolment process as emotionally stressful, regardless of how many days (0-30) the parent (mother) accompanied them during the process. Yet, having the mother present helped reduce some, but not all, of the stress for children who were assessed as securely attached to their mother prior to enrolment. This supports the attachment-theoretical idea that securely attached children expect their caregiver to be emotionally available during times of distress, which, in itself, has a soothing effect in unfamiliar situations, such as when starting preschool.

Moreover, the number of days the mother spent with the child during the introduction process was not associated with the child's maternal attachment security before enrolment. More days spent together was however linked to minimal disruption in attachment relationships assessed as secure before and after enrolment. Interestingly, mothers who spent more days with their child made it more likely for an insecurely attached child to be assessed as securely attached 2-3 months after enrolment. Ahnert and colleagues (2004) speculated that these findings could be due to the mothers' sensitivity in attachment relationships: mothers of securely attached children, being presumably more sensitive, might have extended their presence based on their child's signs of emotional strain.

Interestingly, in a more recent study, Ahnert and colleagues (2022) found that children younger than two years experienced higher stress levels during the initial enrolment process if their mothers stayed with them for *more* than four days. The study did however not test if this was especially true for insecurely attached children. Yet, it did find that children with secure attachments to their mothers generally had lower stress levels during the transition period, both when the mother was present and when she was no longer accompanying the child. A secure maternal attachment prior to preschool enrolment is thus suggested to buffer the child's stress

also when the mother is no longer present (Ahnert et al., 2022). Importantly, this study also showed that secure attachments to teachers two and four months after the enrolment were associated with profiles of lower stress levels. Whether the security towards a teacher was associated with secure maternal attachment prior to enrolment was however not tested. Nevertheless, these results strengthen the idea that teachers indeed can function as attachment figures to children after the initial period of enrolment. This is good news, as it, in turn, hopefully can facilitate the development of a more long-term, ad hoc attachment relationship.

It is however still difficult to make recommendations about the number of days that the parent should be present during the introduction. A careful interpretation of the results from the studies by Ahnert and colleagues could be that the quality of the parent's presence (i.e., whether the parent is able to function as a secure attachment figure) is more important than the quantity of the presence (i.e., number of days). This may especially be true for securely attached children, since, as suggested by the authors, security towards the mother seems to buffer the child's stress also when the mother is no longer present during the introduction (Ahnert et al., 2022) [9]. However, as the presence of the mother did not, as such, function as a buffer for insecurely attached children, the length of the introduction may thus play a more critical role in the case of an insecurely attached child. Indeed, as the study from 2022 (Ahnert et al.) showed that teachers can become ad hoc attachment figures for children after the initial enrolment period, a longer introduction might be advisable, as it would give the child and teacher more opportunities to interact with each other [10]. First and foremost, this might however depend on whether the preschool makes use of a key person approach to enable as many one-to-one interactions as possible. Second, and more importantly, the teacher also needs to have the capacity to respond sensitively to the behavioural strategies that a child with an insecure parental attachment is likely to use (see initial sections of chapter two for an elaboration of this potential challenge). Including an assessment of the teacher's mentalizing capacity would thus provide useful information about the importance of introduction length to the relationship-building process between teachers and (in)securely attached children. In this respect, in the study from 2022 (Ahnert et al.), it would moreover have been informative to test whether the child's attachment

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9 This may also depend on whether the child has developed the cognitive abilities needed to spontaneously activate mental representations of secure parental caregiving when the attachment system is triggered (see chapter two).

10 There are however no definite answers on how long it takes for a child to establish a bond to a teacher that can be characterized as an ad hoc attachment relationship (see Macagno & Molina, 2024 for an overview). Studies on children's attachment development to foster parents (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2004) or to adoptive parents after a period of institutionalization (Carlson et al., 2014) reveal mixed results to this end. While the period of time ranges from 1-9 months, these studies however suggest that most children can be expected to form attachment to consistently available caregivers within some months of interaction. Children who take as long as 7-9 months are most likely those who have not experienced persistency of caregivers in the past (see Bakermans-Kranenbrug, 2021).

quality to the teacher after enrolment was associated with the child's maternal attachment prior to enrolment.

Lastly, it may not be enough to operationalize "length of introduction" by merely referring to the number of days spent by the parent accompanying the child. First, as suggested by results in study I, teachers do not necessarily define the introduction process as finishing after the first separation between the parent and the child has been made. Second, as repeatedly pointed out by a Norwegian research team (e.g., Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021; Undheim, 2012), long days at preschool during the enrolment process increase the emotional strain on the children. They therefore recommend to schedule shorter days during and after the introduction process (Drugli et al., 2023). Investigating whether length of the introduction process (including and excluding the part where the parent is present/no longer present) in combination with intensity (hours/day), might thus be a more informative way of assessing the impact of introduction length on a child's introduction process.

Study II: "'We tend to underestimate the children!': A qualitative analysis of preschool teachers' views on child-parent-teacher relationship-building during preschool transition"

Study II: Background and aim

In study I, we found that the participating teachers, regardless of introduction model, viewed relationship-building with the family as the most important aspect of the introduction process (Andersson Søe et al., 2023). This is fortunate, because as argued in chapter one and two, it is important for teachers to regard the child's introduction to preschool as an opportunity to initiate a warm and close pattern of interaction with the child. As also argued, the role of the parent is naturally central to this end.

When conceptualizing preschool as an important child-developmental context, the idea of understanding child-teacher relationship-building as involving also the parent is well-established as a theoretical hypothesis (e.g., Drugli et al., 2023; Minuchin, 1985; Pianta, 1999). However, empirically informed knowledge on the child-teacher-parent relationship-building as an interconnected, triadic process specifically during preschool introduction, is scarce. Indeed, recommendations to preschools about how to engage the parent during the introduction activities are not consistent (see the last section in chapter two), and in study I, results indicated that preschools seem to make use of different organizational strategies to this end

(Andersson Søe et al., 2023). To enable a study of effect on this topic, we therefore decided to first explore in more depth teachers' reasoning about, and experiences of, the role of the parent during the introduction activities in relation to child-teacher relationship-building.

Study II: Study design, recruitment, and methods

To enable an in-depth and detailed exploration of the teachers' reflections and experiences, a qualitative focus group design was chosen. To conduct the study, we invited teachers from study I who had indicated interest in participating in a follow-up focus group study. The final sample consisted of 31 teachers with good geographical spread across urban and more rural areas in Sweden. The sample was characterized as very experienced in the preschool profession ($M = 20.3$, $SD = 9.5$), and 84% had a preschool teacher degree. To enhance the likelihood for nuanced perspectives on the ideas behind different ways of engaging the parents, each focus group consisted of teachers who utilized the same introduction model. We formed six focus groups consisting of 4-7 participants. Guided by a re-conceptualization of "data saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) as a matter of information "power" rather than "redundancy" (Malterud et al., 2016), our theory-driven approach, along with the interviewers' relevant occupational background and experiences as focus group facilitators, provided a desired depth early in the interview processes. We therefore assessed the density of the data attained from our six focus groups as satisfactory.

Our objective was to further expand the research topic of preschool transition informed by attachment theory and systemic thinking. As such, theoretical considerations from these perspectives informed both the creation of the focus group guide and the analysis of data. To make sense of the patterns of meaning within our participants' discussions, we decided on thematic analysis as our analytical approach (originally conceptualized by Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given our critical-realistic position, we wanted to understand our participants accounts as subjectively and contextually informed while still treating them as representative of their experiences. To allow for this interpretative depth, we chose to use the reflexive version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun et al., 2018).

Study II: Results

Two findings stood out as particularly important, captured by the two themes "Looking for emotional security" and "'Introducing the child *and* the parent(s)' – the parent as key to success". First, some teachers expressed an ambivalence about adopting a key person approach due to a fear of creating "over-attachments" (see also a case study by Hostettler Schärer, 2018). This motivated some preschools to focus the introduction process primarily on presenting the child to the routines and environment of the preschool rather than on building a relationship between the

child and one specific teacher. Such a fear may thus discourage the close interaction needed to facilitate the development of an ad hoc attachment relationship.

Second, the finding in study I, indicating varying views among teachers on how to invite the parent to participate during the introduction process, was further confirmed and expanded upon in the current study. While agreeing on the importance of the parent to the child's introduction process, the teachers seemed to perceive of the parent as either facilitating or constraining the child-teacher relationship-building process. These rather opposing ideas seemed tied to different ways of how the parent was invited to participate during the introduction activities. Teachers who practiced the PAM described that they preferred to invite the parent to participate actively during all introduction activities together with their child. In this way, the teachers experienced to be able to create more opportunities to interact with and get to know the parent, which, in turn, seemed to increase the likelihood of the child to perceive positively of the teacher and the preschool as a secure context. This was seen as facilitating the teacher's initiation of the relationship-building process with the child. To the contrary, teachers practicing the TM instructed the parent to stay more passive during the introduction activities, by adopting an observing position in the background. In this way, the teachers experienced to create more undisturbed opportunities to directly interact on a one-to-one manner with the child.

Study II: Discussion and conclusions

As also described in the final section of chapter two, a more "traditional" attachment theory perspective would suggest to position the parent in the more passive way to better allow for the parent to function as a secure base and safe haven (Broberg et al., 2023). However, from a more systemic-informed perspective, encouraging the parent to actively engage with the teacher(s), the peer group, and other parents, is perhaps more meaningful. In this way, more opportunities to benefit from, for instance, support from other parents may arise (see Drugli et al., 2020; 2021). Moreover, the concept of "affective observation" (Clément & Dukes, 2017) from social learning theory might also be useful in explaining the mechanisms behind the potentially beneficial effect of an actively engaged parent to the child-teacher-parent relationship-building process.

Important to say, however, many teachers emphasized the importance of flexibility in how to instruct the parent to participate, depending on the attitudes of the parents and on the nature of the child-parent interaction. This makes sense from a systemic perspective, as the idea of emergence (see the section "Systemic perspective on attachment") suggests that the "output" of an introduction process will depend on the specifics of a particular child-teacher-parent system. And as noted in the summary of study I, this also makes sense from an attachment perspective, as the quality of the child's parental attachment might differently "condition" the child-teacher-parent relationship-building process. Also, instructing

the parent to stay in the background during the introduction activities may only be helpful to the child if the parent is able to sensitively respond to its emotional cues (Ahnert et al., 2022; Ahnert et al., 2004). While it may therefore be important for teachers to be particularly attentive when a parent seems to struggle to regulate their child (see also Drugli et al., 2020), it was interesting to note that teachers in the current study found it helpful to focus on understanding and validating the parent's feelings about introducing their child to preschool in this respect. Drawing on the present attachment-theoretical framework, the concept of mentalizing is relevant in this respect (see section "From sensitivity to mentalization"). Using mentalization to further investigate the significance of parent-teacher interaction to child-teacher relationship-building was therefore made a central part of the study design in study III.

Study III: Parent-teacher trust as a relational pathway to the child: Teachers' perspectives on child-teacher-parent relationship-building during a child's transition to preschool

While, as indicated in Study II, the teachers agreed on the importance of including the parent as a central part of the child's introduction process, they seemed to have differing views on how to arrange the parent's participation to facilitate the child's adjustment and, importantly, to initiate contact with the child. Moreover, from an attachment-theoretical perspective, the teacher's capacity to attend sensitively to, i.e., mentalize, the behavioural cues of the child may be essential to the child-teacher relationship-building at preschool. However, when adopting a more systemic conceptualization of the process of child-teacher relationship-building during preschool introduction, it is necessary to also consider how the different caregivers in the system, i.e., teacher and parent, understand and relate to each other. The aim of study III was therefore to investigate the relationship-building as an interconnected, triadic process between the child, the parent, and the teacher.

To enable a study of effect, a quantitative, longitudinal design was chosen. To better capture the relationship-building process as systemic in nature, we aimed to collect and pair data from the main responsible teacher and from the parent who (primarily) accompanied the child during the introduction process[11]. The idea was

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11 While interaction with the other children in the peer group obviously is also part of a relational system at preschool, we did for pragmatic reasons (e.g., Minuchin, 1985), not include this aspect in the study. Moreover, considering that children are typically being introduced between the age of one and two years, it can be hypothesized that interactions with peers may be less important to their adjustment at preschool than in the case of introducing older children. However, we did include information about child-adult ratios, as this repeatedly has been showed to impact the

then to conduct statistical analyses on the paired parent-teacher data to investigate 1) whether a trusting parent-teacher relationship influenced the teacher's perception of the relationship with the child two months later, and 2) whether parent and teacher mentalizing as well as preschool- and introduction specific structural factors played specific roles to this end.

We employed a mix of probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling strategies. This involved contacting randomly selected leaders of preschools directly, chosen from randomly selected municipalities, as well as existing connections within preschool municipal administrations to help spread the word about the study. Additionally, we utilized social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) and several online forums for preschool professionals to disseminate information about the study. However, despite these extensive efforts, we did not manage to collect enough parent-teacher paired data to conduct a meaningful statistical analysis. The manuscript for study III is therefore based only on data from teachers. However, some preliminary results from an additional analysis on data from 56 parents will be presented at the end of this study summary, as this analysis revealed patterns that conceptually align with the findings by teachers, as reported in the manuscript. The results from the teacher and parent reported data will then be discussed in relation to each other in a synthesized discussion in the final thesis chapter.

Study III: Background and aim

The relationship between teachers and parents in the context of preschool is commonly conceptualized as a "partnership" (e.g., Drugli & Undheim, 2012; Råde, 2020), of which an important aspect concerns a mutual notion of trust (e.g., Elicker et al., 1996; Lang et al., 2016). Yet, official regulations in Nordic countries (see Drugli & Undheim, 2012; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) emphasize that the staff team, as the professional part, must take responsibility for the process of establishing such a trusting partnership. This may be especially important to note when initiating the relationship-building with the family during the child's introduction to preschool, as this process can be expected to evoke strong feelings of the child as well as the parent (Brooker, 2008). Indeed, while maternal worries concerning the enrolment of the child to preschool can increase the likelihood for elevated stress levels of the child (Ahnert et al., 2022) and for the mother to perceive of the introduction as difficult (Swartz et al., 2016), a hypothesis derived from study II was that the teacher's capacity to mentalize the feelings and

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interaction between an individual child and teacher (see Slot, 2018). Indeed, Ahnert and colleagues (2022) found some interesting results related to age differences and size of the peer group: while smaller group size and larger age difference in the group predicted lower levels of stress in the beginning of the transition, the reverse condition was the case 2-3 months after the transition. The authors indeed hypothesize that this might be explained by the fact that engagement in peer relations is less important for young children's immediate settling-in process.

expectations of the parent related to the child's introduction may facilitate the child-teacher relationship-building.

From an attachment perspective, it makes sense that a teacher must establish trust with the parent to increase the likelihood that the parent will "allow" the teacher to approach their child and initiate attachment-related interactions (Bowlby, 2007; Bretherton, 1980). Indeed, literature to practitioners about preschool transition recommends preschools to focus a great deal of their attention during the introduction process to make the parent feel comfortable with having their child introduced (Broberg et al., 2023; Drugli et al., 2020; Drugli & Nordahl, 2021). There is, however, not much empirical evidence to support this argument. In this study, we therefore investigated whether a parent-teacher relationship that was perceived by the teacher as trusting was related to better child-teacher relational quality about two months after the introduction was finished. To this end, we investigated the potential role of teacher mentalizing capacity, different ways of organizing the parent's role during the introduction activities, and preschool structural aspects.

Study III: Study design, recruitment, and methods

Using self-report questionnaires, data was collected about how the relationship-building process between the child, the parent, and the teachers was perceived by the teacher before enrolling the child (T1), immediately after the introduction process (T2), and about two months after finishing the introduction (T3). The final sample consisted of 111 teachers with diverse demographic characteristics.

Using structural equation modelling, we tested if teacher mentalizing, the parent's role during the introduction process, and structural aspects known to impact process quality (Slot, 2018) had direct effects on parent-teacher trust and, in turn, whether parent-teacher trust was related to child-teacher relational quality post-introduction. We moreover tested whether these variables indirectly impacted the child-teacher relationship through parent-teacher trust. Concerning structural aspects, we prioritized to include teacher work experience, child-adult ratio, and parent-teacher cultural similarity due to our somewhat limited sample size.

While information about, and the rationale behind, the chosen instruments are described in the manuscript, I will here add some further comments regarding the assessments of some of the conceptually most important aspects of the study: parent-teacher trust and teacher mentalization capacities.

Parent-teacher trust. A common way to operationalize parent-teacher relationships quality is through teachers' and/or parents' self-reported perceptions of it. In one of the earliest versions, the "Parent-caregiver relationship scale" by Elicker and colleagues (1997), the parent-teacher relationship was presented as a broad, one-dimensional construct connoting trust, open communication, respect/acceptance, caring, competence/knowledge, partnership/collaboration, shared values, and affiliation/liking (Elicker et al., 1997). Since then, it has been

recommended to "unpack" the construct of the parent-teacher relationship by focusing on more specific aspects of the interplay (Smith et al., 2022). Based on the concept of coparenting (see section "Systemic perspective on attachment"), the conceptualization of parent-teacher collaboration as a "cocaring relationship" (Lang et al., 2016) is such an attempt. As such, the subscale "Support" (12 items) was designed to capture the degree to which a parent and preschool teacher perceive their relationship as characterized by trust in collaborating to care for a specific child. In this study, we theorized that a trusting parent-teacher relationship, established during the introduction process, would positively influence the teacher's ability to form a warm and close relationship with the child. Therefore, we used the "Support" subscale to operationalize "trust" in the parent-teacher relationship-building process.

Teacher mentalizing. As we were specifically interested in the role of teacher mentalizing of the parents to the child-teacher-parent relationship-building process, we wanted to include an instrument meant to capture more general mentalizing capacities. While the self-report questionnaire "The reflective functioning questionnaire" (developed by the founders of mentalization theory; Fonagy et al., 2016) is probably most widely used in this respect, recent research has highlighted limitations in its design, such as a focus on self-reflection rather than others and confounding effects from emotional lability (Müller et al., 2022). Moreover, while Fonagy and colleagues proposed a U-shaped scoring procedure, where low or high scores, respectively, indicate flawed mentalization and middle-scores indicate well-functioning mentalization (Fonagy et al., 2016), subsequent validation studies have suggested that mentalization may be better captured using a unidimensional scale (Müller et al., 2022). For these reasons, we chose to use the newly developed "Certainty about mental states questionnaire" (CAMSQ; Müller et al., 2021) to assess the teachers' mentalization capacity.

Study III: Results

Teachers who perceived of their relationship with the parent as trusting were more likely to develop a relationship with the child two months post-introduction that was perceived to be warm and close. To establish parent-teacher trust, teachers' capacity to mentalize the parent as well as structural aspects, such as a low child-adult ratio and longer teacher work experience, were important. The structural aspect related to the organization of the parent's role during the introduction process also contributed significantly. Interestingly, all these factors also contributed indirectly to the warmth and closeness of the post-introduction child-teacher relationship through the trust established between the parent and teacher earlier on.

Study III: Discussion and conclusions

The importance of longer teacher work experience and low child-adult ratios to sensitive family-teacher interaction aligns with empirical research on the topic of preschool process quality (Slot, 2018). What is known to contribute to well-functioning interactions at preschool may thus also play a role when establishing the very foundation for these relationships. Moreover, the teachers' capacity to specifically mentalize the child's parent in the context of the introduction further supported the study's attachment- and systems-based hypothesis, which suggests that sensitive, or trusting, interaction between the parent and teacher may influence the teacher's opportunities to initiate contact, and connect, with the child.

While teachers' perceptions of the process of child-teacher-parent relationship-building during a child's preschool introduction contribute with valuable information, it would still have been beneficial to have included, and paired with the teacher data, also the perspective of the parents (and child) to further capture the relationship-process as systemic. Therefore, although not paired with teacher data, I will in the following present some results from an extended, preliminary analysis on the data from parents that we managed to collect.

Study III: Additional analysis on parental data

Having their child entering preschool is a significant milestone for families, often triggering various different feelings, expectations, and thoughts in parents (Brooker, 2008). Many parents, for example, view this transition as a high-tension event, which can lead to feelings of concern and anxiety (Swartz et al., 2016). To investigate the potential role of such expectations on the establishment of parent-teacher trust, we collected data on parents' thoughts and feelings about the upcoming introduction of their child (T1). Additionally, to enable the planned paired analysis with teacher data, we collected information on how the parent had been invited to participate during the introduction process (T2) and their perceptions of the level of trust established with the teacher once the introduction process was completed (T2).

The following analysis is based on this information from 56 parents. Due to the small sample size, we did not include preschool structural variables. Given the small sample size, the fact that the data is not paired with teacher reports, and the use of some instruments that have not yet been rigorously validated, the results from this analysis should be seen as exploratory and must be interpreted with caution.

Participants

Participants' ($N = 56$) ages ranged from 23 to 46 years ($M = 33.90$, $SD = 4.51$) and for the majority of the parents (about 60%), it was their first time introducing a child to preschool. The mean age of their children were 18.10 months ($SD = 6.31$). About 80% had an educational background corresponding to university level, while one participant had a primary school degree and about 15% had high school degrees. Approximately one-third lived in urban areas (35.10%), with the rest in suburban (22.80%) or rural areas (42.10%). While almost 9% raised their child as a single parent, 89.50% of the participants raised their child together with the child's other biological parent. Most parents (87.70%) were women.

Instruments

Data about the parent's perspective on the level of trust in relation to the teacher ("Parent-teacher trust/Parent perspective"; $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.24$) was collected with the subscale "Support" in the CQR (Lang et al., 2017; see manuscript, study III). The internal reliability was excellent ($\alpha = .91$).

To take into account the potential impact of heightened parental worries concerning the enrolment of their child, we included a recently updated version of the "Maternal separation anxiety scale" (Hock et al., 1989), adapted to a more current context of parenthood (Guedes et al., 2021). Of the original 35 items, this scale consists of 16 items (e.g., "It is good for my child to spend time away from me so that he/she can learn to deal independently with unfamiliar people and new situations."). This adapted scale ("Parental separation anxiety"; $M = 2.66$, $SD = .06$) showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = .82$).

For the purpose of this study, we created five items to assess the parent's expectations about the upcoming introduction of their child (see table 1 for item description; $M = 80.90$, $SD = 12.90$). Computing all items into a scale showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = .76$).

Similarly to how we asked teachers about how they organized the role of the parent (i.e., "Parental role scale", see manuscript, study III), we also asked the parents to rate the way they participated during the introduction process (see table 1 for item description). The three items that concerned direct interaction between the parent and teacher (item 2, 5 and 7) were added together as a subscale ("Parent-teacher interaction/Parent perspective" $M = 64.50$, $SD = 21.70$), showing good internal reliability ($\alpha = .71$). As did all seven items computed into one scale ($\alpha = .78$). When conducting initial bivariate analysis between all study variables (see table 2), only the subscale "Parent-teacher interaction/Parent perspective" was however significantly correlated to the outcome variable ("Parent-teacher trust/Parent perspective"). For further analysis, we therefore only included this subscale.

Similar to the teacher data collection (see manuscript, study III), the item "Cultural similarity/Parent perspective" was also included to assess to what degree the parent perceived that they shared a similar cultural background with the teacher ($M = 73.30$, $SD = 27.10$).

Lastly, we also included a measure on the parents' general well-being, using the same instrument as in the teacher data collection (see manuscript, study III) to control for confounding effects ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .89$).

Table 1. Item description for scales created for the purpose of the study

Name of scale	Item	Item description	Response type
Parental expectations	1	On a general level – how do you feel about your child starting preschool?	0/a bit unsure – 100/very positive
	2	How easy or difficult do you think it will be for YOUR CHILD to get to know the preschool routines and activities?	0/difficult – 100/very easy
	3	How easy or difficult do you think it will be for YOUR CHILD to get to know the preschool teacher(s)?	0/difficult – 100/very easy
	4	How easy or difficult do you think it will be for YOU to get to know the preschool routines and activities?	0/difficult – 100/very easy
	5	How easy or difficult do you think it will be for YOU to get to know the preschool teachers?	0/difficult – 100/very easy
Parental role scale/Parent perspective	1	To what extent did you participate with your child in play or creation?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	2	To what extent did you talk to the child's responsible teacher about the child's reactions/mood during the introduction?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	3	To what extent did you care for the practical things with the child, such as napping, food/fruit time, diaper changes?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	4	To what extent did you participate with your child in the daily activities of the preschool?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	5	To what extent did you talk with your child's responsible teacher about the plan for the day?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	6	To what extent did you interact with the other children at preschool?	0/not at all – 100/all the time
	7	To what extent did you chat with your child's responsible teacher about everyday topics?	0/not at all – 100/all the time

Results

To look into how parent-specific characteristics may play a role to the establishment of parent-teacher trust, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. Due to the small sample size, we chose what variables to include as independent variables in the model based on significant associations with the dependent variable "Parent-teacher trust/Parent perspective" in an initial bivariate correlation analysis.

As seen in table 2, such associations were found for "Parental expectations", "Cultural similarity/Parent perspective", and "Parent-teacher interaction/Parent perspective". The overall model was significant ($F(3, 39) = 11$, $p < .001$) and explained about 45.70% of the variance in parent-teacher trust ($r^2 = .457$). As seen in model 1, two of the predictors contributed significantly, with similar strength, to explaining the outcome: "Parental expectations" ($\beta = .351$, $p = .008$) and "Parent-teacher interaction/Parent perspective" ($\beta = .365$, $p = .008$). When exploratorily added to the model, "Parental separation anxiety" did not contribute significantly, and the overall model did not improve.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of parental reports

		Parent-teacher trust	Parental separation anxiety	Parental expectations	Parental role (all items)	Cultural similarity	Parental wellbeing	Parental role ("Parent-teacher interaction")
Parent-teacher trust	Pearson's r	—						
	p-value	—						
Parental separation anxiety	Pearson's r	-0.264	—					
	p-value	0.087	—					
Parental expectations	Pearson's r	0.504***	-0.379**	—				
	p-value	<.001	0.004	—				
Parental role (all items)	Pearson's r	0.206	0.373*	-0.021	—			
	p-value	0.185	0.014	0.895	—			
Cultural similarity	Pearson's r	0.429**	-0.098	0.257	0.228	—		
	p-value	0.004	0.533	0.096	0.141	—		
Parental wellbeing	Pearson's r	0.199	0.070	-0.013	-0.038	0.077	—	
	p-value	0.200	0.610	0.922	0.810	0.626	—	
Parental role ("Parent-teacher interaction")	Pearson's r	0.542***	0.111	0.284	0.622***	0.401**	0.136	—
	p-value	<.001	0.477	0.065	<.001	0.008	0.384	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Model 1. Model Coefficients: Parent-teacher trust

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	-.437	.915	-.478	.635	
Parental expectations	.327	.116	2.811	.008	.351
Cultural similarity	.009	.006	1.475	.148	.193
Parent-teacher interaction	.208	.075	2.778	.008	.365

Discussion and conclusions

Similarly to the analysis of teacher data, the regression results suggest that higher levels of interaction between parent and teacher during the introduction process was associated with a higher level of trust, as rated by the parent immediately after the introduction of the child was finished. As with the teacher data, it was again only items related to direct parent-teacher interaction during the introduction that were influential in this respect (i.e., item 2, 5 and 7 computed into the subscale "Parent-teacher interaction/Parent perspective"). Other aspects of the parental role, such as the level of the parent's interaction with other children in the peer group, being engaged in play, or caring for their own child's needs, were not related to perceived trust in relation to the teacher. Given well-functioning mentalizing capacity of the teacher, it is indeed reasonable to believe that many one-to-one occasions of parent-teacher interaction during the introduction process where the progress of the introduction and the reactions and feelings of the family are discussed, can constitute a constructive context for trust to be built.

Moreover, parents with more positive expectations of their family's preschool adjustment felt a greater sense of trust in their relationship with the teacher after the introduction. Moreover, while not contributing to the regression model, parental separation anxiety was negatively associated with parental expectations, suggesting a potential overlap between these two constructs. Indeed, as suggested by previous research on home-school trust (see Shayo et al., 2021) the nature of expectations about the context in which a person is expected to engage in trusting interactions— possibly shaped by prior experiences in similar situations and by (pre)school culture—can influence their confidence to "risk" the vulnerability required to build trust in a relationship.

In the original study design, besides controlling for relevant family- and preschool characteristics, we also planned to include in the analysis parental mentalizing capacities in relation to their child. To this end, we used the most common self-report instrument for operationalizing parental mentalizing ("The

parental reflective functioning questionnaire", "PRFQ"; Luyten et al., 2017). Because as argued in chapter two (e.g., see the idea about epistemic trust; section "From sensitivity to mentalization"), it could be assumed to be more challenging for teachers to establish warm and trusting relationships to families with more insecure patterns of attachments. As aspects of parental mentalization, as assessed with the PRFQ, have been shown to be related to the quality of their infant's attachment security (Luyten et al., 2017), such an assessment would thus in a pragmatic way have enabled an indication of whether the role of parent-teacher trust to child-teacher relationship-building would be the same for families with attachment patterns of different quality. Similarly, it would have been interesting to also include an assessment of parents' more general mentalization capacity, as we did with the teachers (using CAMSQ). In this way, a more direct investigation of the potential impact of parental (mal)adaptive mentalization on the establishment of parent-teacher trust would have been enabled. Not including CAMSQ in the parent data collection was however a pragmatic choice, as we did not want to strain the parents' participation in the study already at the first survey (T1).

Chapter 5: Discussion

While Bowlby conceptualized the theory of attachment more than half a decade ago, trying to answer societal problems specific to that time and context, numerous researchers and practitioners in the field of developmental psychology agree that his insights are still highly valuable. This is also the standpoint of the present thesis. In this sense, the present work builds on the idea that warm and close relationships between children and teachers at preschool have developmental value to children (see Spilt & Koomen, 2022 for an overview of this standpoint). Work that is actively investigating how such relationships can be supported has therefore been a great inspiration (e.g., Reijman et al., 2024; Smith-Nielsen et al., 2022).

In the thesis, this idea has been contextualized specifically in relation to a child's enrolment in preschool. A core attachment-theoretical idea that has been used is that a child's feeling of emotional security will likely increase a child's inclination to engage in exploring behaviour in the process of getting to know the preschool. This, in turn, will likely enhance the child's opportunities to initiate a relationship with a teacher that in the long run can hopefully develop into a warm and close, ad hoc attachment relationship.

In a Swedish context, the work of Broberg et al. (2023) offers suggestions of how to implement an attachment-theoretical understanding of interaction and development in a preschool context. By using examples from preschool daily life as a scaffolding framework, the authors propose concrete ways of how to "translate" the theoretical framework of attachment to preschool practice, also with specific ideas of how to arrange the introduction process to this end. Likewise, by adopting a more systemic take on children's daily life at preschool, a Norwegian research group has brought forward useful ideas to practitioners about the importance of family-teacher relationships and how to build them during the introduction process (Drugli et al., 2020; Drugli & Nordahl, 2021). An important aim of the present thesis has been to further contribute to this work by integrating an attachment-theoretical perspective with systemic thinking. This approach has made it possible to more clearly emphasize the importance of focusing on how the parent and teacher's way of interacting and relating to each other during the introduction process may affect the establishment of the child-teacher relationship.

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will first discuss the main findings of the thesis's empirical work in relation to implications for practice and research. Thereafter, I will reflect upon the present methodological approach in relation to the theoretical framework of the thesis. Lastly, I will provide ethical considerations

followed by some more freely formulated reflections of what we might contribute to when working attachment-informed as researchers and practitioners, and how systemic thinking (also) may be helpful in this respect.

Main findings and their implications for practice and research

The empirical questions addressed in the studies of the present thesis were centred around:

1) Exploration of preschool introduction conduct (study I and II)
2) The association between parent-teacher trust and child-teacher attachment-related relational quality during and after the introduction of a new child to preschool, and structural and process-related factors of importance to this end (study III).

As will be elaborated upon in the section to come about methodological considerations, the aim of the present thesis has not been to present a model of introduction conduct that can be understood as *the* recipe for securing establishment of warm and close child-teacher relationships. Still, the present work has brought forward some knowledge that can provide preschools with useful indications about what might be important to consider when organizing preschool introduction practices to increase the likelihood of establishing warm and close child-teacher relationships. In this synthesized discussion, the main findings from all three studies will therefore be discussed specifically in relation to implications for practice and research.

Introducing the child – and its parent(s)

First, an important empirical result from study III is that a teacher who feels trusted by the child's accompanying parent after the introduction is finished was positively related to the teacher perceiving of their relationship with the child as warm and close about two months later. Moreover, as the relationship quality to the parent and child, respectively, seemed to be thought of as separate constructs in the mind of the teacher (see manuscript, study III), the idea about the significance of parent-teacher trust to the establishment of child-teacher closeness was further strengthened. This is important, as empirical evidence supporting the theoretical idea of parent-teacher communication and collaboration as essential to a child's adjustment to preschool has been lacking in preschool transition research (see the last section of chapter two). Since a trusting relationship towards the parent, from the perspective of the

teacher, thus seems to function as a "relational pathway" to the child, it is reasonable to conceptualize a child's transition to preschool as concerning the introduction of the child *as well as* the parent.

Second, in study I, results suggested that an organizational difference between the two seemingly most common introduction models at Swedish preschools, the TM and the PAM, concerns how parents are invited to participate in the introduction process. As further explored in study II, teachers who practiced the PAM seemed to a higher degree engage the parent in a more active manner during the introduction process. This, in turn, was described as providing better opportunities to get to know the parent and build a relationship with them. Interestingly, literature to preschool practitioners advice preschools in quite contrasting ways on how to organize the role of the parent during the introduction process to this end (see the last section of chapter two). A third important empirical contribution thus came from Study III, showing that assigning the parent a more actively engaged role during the introduction process was indeed related to higher parent-teacher trust – from both the perspective of teachers (see manuscript for study III and study summary) and parents (see "Study III: Additional analysis on parental data").

A matter of quality of interaction rather than how the parent is invited to participate?

In relation to building trust with the parent, practicing the PAM might thus be beneficial. However, statistical analysis of Study III data on the parent's role revealed that only aspects of an active parental role involving high levels of direct interaction with the teacher during the introduction process were related to trust later on. This was true for data from both teachers and parents. Specifically, other actions—also described to characterize the active parental role in PAM (see study II) —such as the parent attending to the child's needs or actively engaging in daily preschool activities with their child and the peer group, were not related to family-teacher relationship-building.

This is interesting, suggesting that it might not be so much about how the parent is specifically positioned, or invited to participate, during the introduction process that matter to the establishment of trusting and warm family-teacher relationships. Rather, it may be more about creating many opportunities for the parent and teacher to interact with each other on a one-to-one basis.[12] This makes good sense when considered together with that fact that smaller child-adult ratios, teacher work experience, and teacher capacity to mentalize the parent also contributed to explaining the establishment of parent-teacher trust: for teachers to develop a relationship where they feel trusted by the parent, it may thus be more about

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12 Highlighting the significance of "parental positioning" during the introduction process may however still be relevant, as there is otherwise a risk that the importance of getting to know the parent may be "overlooked" when the parent is positioned more passively in the background.

enabling opportunities to attend sensitively towards the parent, than it is about inviting the parent to participate during the interaction process in a certain way. Moreover, as suggested in study III, a speculative explanation for why this, in turn, is related to more warm and close child-teacher relationships later on, might be that a parent who is effectively mentalized by the teacher is better equipped to function as an emotional support system (see also Bretherton, 1980), helping their child explore the new preschool environment and approach the teacher.

The potential importance of attending to parental feelings and expectations *before* initiating the child's introduction

In the light of this interpretation, it might thus be more important for preschools to focus on creating many opportunities to enable mentalizing interaction with the parent, than on practicing a certain model. If interpreted in this sense, the use of "organizational flexibility", described as a common introduction practice in study I (i.e., see the qualitative theme "Organizational flexibility towards the needs of the family"), is meaningful.

If following the ideas behind the concept of epistemic trust (see section "From sensitivity to mentalization"), enabling mentalizing interaction may be particularly important in the case of families with more insecure attachment patterns. While we did not have the data to empirically look into these aspects, it may be hypothesized that teachers may find it more challenging to build trust with parents and children who display such interactional patterns. In future studies, it would therefore be interesting to investigate the process of trust-establishment with these parents, and whether the role of parent-teacher trust to child-teacher relational quality would play the same role in the context of preschool introduction[13].

To better account for such, or other, potential challenges in establishing trust to parents, implementing a series of individual "start-up meetings" with new parents before initiating the actual introduction process may be advisable. Besides providing the parents with information about what to expect from the introduction process, such preparatory meetings, or conversations, might also provide the key teacher with a platform to explore the parent(s) feelings and thoughts about the upcoming preschool introduction. In this way, given well-functioning teacher mentalizing capacity and reasonable structural preschool prerequisites, potential hesitant, worried, or perhaps sceptical, parental feelings about the introduction process and/or the teacher can be identified and mentalized before the actual introduction process begins. If successful, a high level of parent-teacher interaction when initiating the

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[13] Similarly, while it may be recommendable to organize the introduction process as a longer and less intensive process (as is done in the TM; see study I), the extended analysis in summary of study I still points to a complexity in relation to length and intensity that may be related to the quality of attachment patterns in the family.

introduction might thus be less necessary, leaving more room for the teacher to focus on the child. As suggested by the analysis of parent data (see "Study III: Additional analysis on parental data"), parental expectations indeed seemed to matter to parents' likelihood to establish trust to teachers. While inviting the family to visit the preschool before the introduction process begins has indeed been recommended for the sake of the child's adjustment (e.g., Drugli et al., 2020), the effects of this organizational strategy need to be empirically explored more thoroughly. In this respect, it would be interesting to include the role of teacher and parent mentalizing in relation to each other, and the child.

The need to structurally scaffold mentalizing interaction

When bringing in the concept of mentalization to enable a more systemic understanding of attachment-related relationship-building, it indeed makes sense to think about trusting, sensitive interaction as something that concerns the whole system, which, in the context of preschool introduction, often means the triad of the child, the accompanying parent, and the key teacher. In light of this understanding, an important message of the present thesis is to insist that policy makers prioritize to provide preschools with adequate structural prerequisites to strengthen teachers' opportunities to attend sensitively to the child *as well as* the parent(s) when introducing a new family to preschool. According to the empirical results from study III, lower child-adult ratios and well-experienced teachers may be particularly important in this respect. Given the somewhat small sample size, future studies however need to investigate the role of structural factors to this end more closely.

Methodological considerations

The reason for so strongly emphasizing a need to integrate systemic thinking into attachment theory has been to enable for an understanding of attachment as shaped by interactions with, and between, a child and its various caregivers across home and preschool contexts. However, as previously mentioned, this theoretical marriage is not uncomplicated, as will now be discussed. Yet, as will be argued in the final part of this chapter, it is still recommendable to do so, as it may simultaneously help researchers to more easily convey the complexity of attachment theory to the field of practice.

Below, I discuss the considerations behind using both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as the reasons for choosing different analytical tools in the qualitative parts of the studies. Next, I will share some reflections specifically related to the integration of systemic thinking into attachment theory.

Aiming for nuances by adopting a complementary approach

A general strength of the present thesis is the nuanced investigation of its topic using methods from the quantitative as well as the qualitative paradigm. To this end, I am inspired by Haavind and colleague's (2000) way of arguing for the unproductiveness of defining "qualitative" and "quantitative" research in a dualistic, or opposing, manner. Because as designing and conducting a study, quantitative or qualitative, inevitably involves some level of interpretation, the process of undertaking research is in this sense always qualitative in nature. Rather than describing it as either "qualitative" or "quantitative", Haavind and colleagues instead suggest to consider the degree of quantification, or standardization, in the research design (Haavind, 2000). In the present thesis, I therefore regard the use of quantitative and qualitative methods as a complementary practice in our strive to enrich an under-researched topic. While this standpoint thus guided the idea to make use of a mixed methods design (study I), it also guided me to carefully consider what methods to use when analysing the different kind of qualitative data in study I and II. In study I, we used a content analytical approach, inspired by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). In study II, we used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun et al., 2018). In choosing these different analytical methods, the nature of the qualitative data in study I and II, respectively, could be better acknowledged, and the specific research questions of each study could more suitably be investigated.

The choice of using content analysis in study I was driven by two considerations. First, we wanted to recognize the less dense nature of this data in comparison to data obtained from interviews, or focus groups, as it was collected in written form through a survey. Second, an important goal of the study was to include in the quantitative overview of introduction conduct a first-hand perspective from teachers about their views on important aspects of the introduction process. While content analysis, similarly to thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), is concerned with identifying and making sense of patterns of meaning in qualitative data, it simultaneously allows for an analytical approach that stays closer to the manifest, or surface, level of the data[14] (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). A common strategy to facilitate this more direct emphasis on the content itself rather on the interpretation of it, is to make use of frequency counts of the prevalence of common topics mentioned in the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). We thus found this method appropriate for our purposes: by counting how often each theme was mentioned by our participants, we could estimate how common they seemed to be in relation to each other. Moreover, it allowed us to statistically investigate whether they were

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14 Similarly to the reasoning by Haavind and colleagues (2000), Graneheim and Lundman (2004) however still acknowledge the interpretative element of the analysis as a methodological prerequisite.

related to specific models of introduction conduct. As this way of handling data implied some degree of quantification, or standardization (Haavind, 2000), we included an interrater reliability check as an indicator of quality of the analysis. This is, indeed, a common way to evaluate quality of a content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

In the analysis of the data in study II, we instead wanted to make use of a deeper level of interpretation to better capture the richness of focus group data. Moreover, we were not merely interested in obtaining the teachers' *descriptions* of how child-teacher-parent interactions were organized to support child-teacher relationship-building. We rather wanted to comprehend how these organizational choices could be understood as informed by the teachers' (subjectively and contextually situated) ideas about "the nature" of relationship-building with the child and its parent(s) during preschool introduction. To this end, we choose to use the reflexive version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun et al., 2018).

Systemic thinking and attachment theory: A complicated marriage

As described in chapter two, the idea to integrate aspects from systemic thinking when conducting attachment-informed research is not new. However, as also previously pointed out, this approach poses methodological challenges because the most established methods in attachment research are based on a more positivist framework, emphasizing causality and objectivity within a realist perspective (see Solomon & George, 2016). Using such an approach while simultaneously integrating systemic thinking, where the core ideas about reciprocity and emergence imply the need of a more relational epistemology (e.g, Jones, 1993), is thus not straightforward. Nevertheless, this is commonly done in attachment-informed, empirical studies (e.g, Bureau et al., 2021; Iwanski et al., 2023; Oppenheim et al., 2023, see also Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz, 2018, and Teubert et al., 2010, for an overview of coparenting research based on the original conceptualization by Feinberg, 2003). And in the present thesis, I do the same: a central idea in the present work is that the relationship between the parent and teacher needs to be considered when investigating attachment-related child-teacher relationship-building during a child's introduction to preschool. This idea was inspired by the systemically rooted concept of coparenting (as originally conceptualized by Feinberg, 2003) and the re-conceptualization of this by Lang and colleagues to fit the context of parent-teacher communication and collaboration at preschool (2020; 2017; 2016; Maras et al., 2018). In study III, this systemically inspired idea was investigated using a quantitative prediction design, focusing on statistical associations between parent-teacher trust and child-teacher attachment-related relationship quality, as perceived by the teacher, and on the statistical significance of factors impacting the establishment of these relationships. To, however, better capture parent-teacher trust

as a systemic concept, the idea was to use, and pair, the perspectives of the parent and the teacher in the statistical analyses (see summary of study III) [15].

The fact that the family-teacher relationship-building process has been investigated primarily from the perspective of teachers must therefore be considered an overall limitation of the empirical work in the present thesis. Besides providing opportunities for a "systemic-friendly" reciprocal assessment of parent-teacher trust, paired parent-teacher data could also have allowed for investigating whether the teacher's perception of trust corresponded to the perception of the parent, and what such (dis)congruence would have meant to the family-teacher relationship-building.

Yet, as argued in the manuscript for study III, having only the teachers' views still contributes with valuable information to understand the role of parent-teacher trust to child-teacher relationship-building. Because in a systemic perspective, the way the individuals in a system experience to be perceived of and constructed by each other shape their options of action. And as the teachers are responsible for organizing and scaffolding the interactions with the family during the child's introduction process, their perceptions of what is going on between them and the family are naturally crucial to how they choose to structure the introduction process and how they perceive of their opportunities to approach the family.

The benefits and drawbacks of self-report in a systemic perspective

There is, however, possibly a more "serious" limitation to the research designs in study II and III than the lack of paired data: using hindsight self-report (quantitatively or qualitatively) is problematic when conceptualizing "relationship-building" as an emergent phenomenon, as is the case in systemic thinking. Because if staying loyal to the systemic definition of emergence, observation should be the choice of method: if the aim is to capture the output of a system, it needs to be studied while in process. Given, however, the clear evidence of the importance of child-teacher relationship quality to child development, it is desirable to conduct more research on the mechanisms behind good-quality relationships. To this end, it has been suggested as advisable to make use of, and refine, methods that are less time-consuming and more pragmatically accessible than observational instruments (see Solomon & George, 2016 for an overview of the most commonly used observational instruments in attachment research); such as self-reports (see Ulferts et al., 2019).

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15 The perspective of the child is of course also part of a systemic understanding of this relationship-building process. From an attachment perspective, the quality of the attachment relationship between the child and the parent, assessed prior to the introduction process, could be argued to indirectly represent the child perspective to this end. As noted in the additional analysis on parental data in study III, the idea was therefore to include the parent's PRFQ as an indirect indication of the quality of child-parent attachment.

While, from a systemic perspective, an observational method will thus better capture the principle of emergence, adding an observing researcher will inevitably alter the nature of the system. This may be particularly important to consider when "preschool introduction" is the research context, as introducing a child to preschool is a vulnerable event for many families (Brooker, 2008; Swartz, 2016). Bringing an observing researcher into the child-teacher-parent system in this specific context would thus, likely, impact the dynamics of the system in a considerable way, making it questionable whether the context of such an investigation would be comparable to an introduction situation without an observer. From a critical-realist point of view, it is therefore sensible not to include a researcher directly in the system to observe its dynamics, as this would likely distance us more from the empirical reality the present thesis aims to capture (i.e., the child-teacher-parent relationship-building during a child's introduction to preschool).[16] Moreover, due to the potentially vulnerable nature of preschool introduction, asking families to get permission to take part as an observing researcher would possibly also present an ethical issue. For these reasons, albeit not methodological ideal from a systemic perspective, asking teachers (and parents) to rate their process of their relationship-building may thus be a reasonable procedure. Besides, as previously argued, investigating how the members of a system perceive of each other when interacting in the system is indeed a valuable aspect to include in a systemic-inspired research design.

The issue of quantitative prediction when adopting systemic thinking

While not paired with parental reports, self-reports from teachers can thus be argued to contribute with a piece of valuable knowledge to the present topic. There is, however, still a problem with the study design in study III. Importantly, this would be the case even if the analysis had been based on paired data from both parents and teachers.

As Minuchin noted as early as 1985, a methodological issue arises when using quantitative prediction designs together with a systemic conceptualization, regardless if the data comes from observations or self-reports (Minuchin, 1985). Again, the systemic principle of emergence causes problems. In suggesting that relationships *between* the parts of a system, rather than the parts alone, shape the quality of relationships, methods must capture processes as reciprocal, rather than linear. Looking for "directions of effect" (Minuchin, 1985), i.e., by using quantitative prediction, is therefore problematic, as this approach assumes a unidirectional causality between the parts of the system. Moreover, aiming at determining the "relative input" (Minuchin, 1985) of different parts of the system

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[16] From a critical-realist perspective, research is always considered to be representative of the empirical reality it aims at investigating, regardless of the choice of method. The question of importance is rather, indeed, to what precision the chosen methods can capture the accuracy of the empirical reality (e.g., see Fletcher, 2020).

(e.g., parent, teacher, and child) to the output of the system (e.g., the "final" child-teacher relationship quality) is also problematic: since change, or development, of parts in a system is understood as resulting from what occurs in the relationships between *all* parts of the system, it is less optimal to focus on isolating what happens between specific parts in a whole system.

The original study design idea in study III of using paired parent-teacher data, is thus strictly speaking still not ideal from a systemic perspective. While it reasonably could be argued to fulfil the systemic idea of reciprocity, at least concerning the parent and teacher's perceptions about the quality of their interactions, the use of a quantitative prediction design would still pose an issue in terms of looking for directions of effect and in trying to isolate the effect of specific parts of the system on the system as a whole. As pointed out by Minuchin (1985), it is indeed tricky to find a methodological approach that satisfactorily can capture the process, and effects, of attachment-related relationship-building in children's relational networks within a systemic line of thinking.

Pianta, a pioneering attachment- and systems informed child-teacher relationship researcher, however suggests a more pragmatic approach to these methodological issues (e.g., Pianta, 1999). He agrees that it is not uncomplicated to make use of prediction in systemic-inspired research: the principle of emergence indeed makes it impossible to say that the output of interactions between person X and person Y at a certain time and place will be the same at another time and in another context. Moreover, not much can be said about how, or especially in relation to what, changes in a system occur. However, he argues that a focus on general principles, and the specific circumstances in terms of those principles, can still contribute with valuable information about whether child X in context/situation Y will benefit from interactions with teacher Z. What is important, though, is to not interpret such results within a strict positivist idea about knowledge as objectively true, but to rather regard them as indicative of whether some aspects of a system seem to play particularly powerful roles in relation to other aspects of it, in certain contexts (Pianta, 1999).

In being compatible with the critical-realist stance in the present thesis, I agree with this position of Pianta, as such a position can allow for the continued integration of ideas from systemic thinking in attachment-informed research while utilizing the most well-established, but positivist-rooted, methodology of the field (e.g., see Solomon & George, 2016). And this is important: because "speaking the same language of methodology" will likely make it easier to keep the communication channels open with the field of attachment-informed research[17] (see Lundberg et al., 2024 for an interesting perspective on the importance of attending

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17 While a bit inelegantly put: for now, it may thus be argued to be more important to focus on "thinking systemically" when interpretating attachment-informed results than aiming for research designs that are more scientifically correct in relation to systemic thinking. It is however desirable to aim for refining quantitative methods to even better fit the principles of emergence and reciprocity in systemic thinking. See for instance Girme, 2020 for ideas in this direction.

to "language barriers" between different methodologies). And perhaps even more importantly, as will be elaborated in the final section of this chapter, while not only allowing for conducting attachment research in a more network-oriented manner, I believe that ideas from systemic thinking can also add important nuances to how we understand and use attachment theory in (preschool) practice.

A conceptual contribution despite methodological issues

However, it is important to remain reflexive about the methodological issues associated with this approach, as previously discussed. To echo Pianta, and as also emphasized within a critical-realist epistemology, care must therefore be taken not to interpret findings in "absolute" terms. Even if data is paired between system members and the sample size is well-proportioned and representative of the population, results from a prediction study within this theoretical framework should thus be generalized to similar systems and contexts with caution.

In this respect, my methodological approach is informed by an "analytical generalizability" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) rather than by the idea about generalizability as defined in a more positivist paradigm (e.g., Elliott et al., 1999). Because while acknowledging the limitations of the empirical part of the present thesis, both in relation to the lack of paired parent-teacher data but also in terms of the more general methodological issues as described in this section, I still believe that it offers a valuable conceptual contribution to the field of attachment-informed preschool (transition) research and practice. Because in encouraging attachment-informed researchers to continue integrating ideas from systemic thinking, I hope that the present work can inspire future studies and practices related to preschool (introduction) to keep focusing on the idea of the parent-teacher relationship as important to child-teacher relationship-building.

Ethical considerations

Study protocols for all studies were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (study I and II: dnr 2020-06276; study III: 2022-05376-01), as it could not be excluded that sensitive, personal information could emerge during data collection. We simultaneously believed that participation in the studies could stimulate reflections, thoughts, and feelings in relation to experiences with introduction practices. For teachers, particularly in the focus group study, we assumed that participation would raise awareness of their approach, encouraging evaluation of their own practices and increase their work-related knowledge (e.g., see Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Indeed, verbal and written feedback from participating teachers in both study I and II, described participation as "educative".

Study I showed that preschools in Sweden practice different introduction models, and the present thesis has discussed the potential child-developmental benefits and drawbacks of different introduction practices from an attachment- and systemic-informed perspective. A potential risk is therefore that our studies could be erroneously understood as promoting one or the other model. Importantly, however, the aim of the present thesis has not been to evaluate introduction models, and the studies have not assessed outcomes for families or teachers based on the use of specific models. No recommendations in terms of specific models can thus be made on the basis of our results alone.

Moreover, as the present work is built only on the perspectives of teachers, it may unintentionally reinforce a prioritization of the needs of teachers and preschool, as an institution, over those of the child and family. However, by employing a child-developmental, attachment-theoretical lens to analyse the teachers' perspectives, it can be argued that we indirectly have considered the needs of the child, and its parent(s), in relation to introduction practices. The theory-driven approach can thus be seen as an attempt to mitigate the risk of overemphasizing the preschool institution's perspective. At the same time, the reverse situation is also important to keep in mind. For instance, as argued in the manuscript based on study III, the suggestion to organize the introduction process in a way that can increase the opportunities for a key teacher to engage in one-to-one interaction with the child as well as the parent must be balanced with the workflow and work-related well-being of teachers.

A common critique of a theory-driven, i.e., deductive, approach, is that it risks reducing the complexity of social phenomena by treating it within pre-conceptualized definitions and to prioritize hypothesis-testing over explorative work (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Indeed, while the present stance is that an attachment- and systemic informed approach can provide well-grounded ideas about what may serve a family well during the child's preschool introduction, it does not capture the context-specific, subjective voices of the children and parents directly. Nonetheless, in the process of investigating a research topic, any methodological approach, deductively or inductively informed, will make certain aspects of it absent (Law, 2007). As emphasized by critiques, a deductive approach may however be especially prone to "silent" aspects that lie outside the theoretical framework. In the final section, I will therefore reflect upon some more "absent" aspects that may deserve to be made more present.

Concluding remarks: Reflecting about the message of the message

In psychological research, we must recognize that we are both the subjects being studied and the ones interpreting the results, creating a "loop effect" (e.g., see

Brinkmann, 2022). Reflecting upon how human practice scaffolds the research being conducted, and conversely, how the research being conducted contributes to shape the practices it exists within, is therefore important.

I find this particularly interesting in relation to preschool research: since preschool is part of our welfare system, conducting research about it is a political project, shaped by and simultaneously shaping culture, whether we want it or not. Introducing preschool into daily family life is moreover a "set condition" for most (Nordic) families (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024; UNICEF, 2008) – and perhaps even one of the most influential meetings with "society" for children. In this respect, I find it incredibly important that we reflect upon how research about preschool is communicated to, and received by, each other, families, practitioners, and politicians. I would therefore like to offer my thoughts on this in relation to employing an attachment-informed approach when researching topics related to preschool practice, based on my previous experiences as a practicing psychologist.

When practicing as a (pre)school psychologist, I did not meet any teacher who found the idea of working in an attachment-informed way to be a bad idea. When conducting attachment-informed supervision or psychoeducation of (pre)school teachers, and parents, I did, however, often wonder "what was heard" and picked up by the recipients. I.e., what was the "message of the message" when conveying an attachment-informed approach to preschool practice? Could there, for instance, be a risk for it to be perceived as deterministic in relation to ideas about children's developmental opportunities? And could this have to do with the fact that attachment theory often is used within a more positivist paradigm?

As was indeed intended by Bowlby, the importance of understanding attachment as relation-specific and as sensitive to contextual, or structural, factors is clearly highlighted in the literature (e.g., Thompson et al., 2022). As is the fact that insecure attachment to specific caregivers should not, per se, be understood as developmentally detrimental (Cassidy, 2016). Yet, the numerous large-scale prediction studies of the developmental power of attachment security might still contribute to an idea of secure attachment as crucial to development. Moreover, the operationalization of attachment security as "secure" or "insecure" might convey an idea about it as categories that children (and adults) can be placed within. "Attachment security" may in this respect easily be understood as a characteristic of the individual, unable to change or develop over time. I have therefore been wondering whether a strong focus on conveying the significance for young children to have secure attachment relationships to close caregivers (as is the case in the present thesis) may simultaneously induce a counterproductive "hyper-focus" on its importance to child development. Could this, in turn, lead to a risk for practitioners and parents to look for "deviant" (attachment) behaviours of children, instead of focusing on "merely" engaging relationally with them? Or could it create a fear in preschool teachers and parents of not "doing it right" in terms of offering sensitive

interactions? May it lead to self-blame if not being able to connect with a specific child (or parent/teacher)?

It is in this respect that I also find the integration of a systemic perspective as very useful. Because the strong focus on emergence and reciprocity in systemic thinking can be helpful in emphasizing the need to see attachment as relational and contextually sensitive. Moreover, the idea in systemic thinking that change, or development, of individuals can be initiated by bringing forward "disruptions" of an ill-working system (e.g., see Jones, 1993) might be helpful to not risk an understanding of insecure attachment as something static and internally dysfunctional with the child (or parent/teacher). To this end, integrating a systemic perspective into attachment theory may help us bring forward the nuances needed to convey an understanding of behaviour as a result of network-based interaction between individuals in specific contexts, rather than as dependent on characteristics residing within individuals.

Or perhaps these worries are ungrounded. Nevertheless, simplifying the complexity of theories is more or less a set condition when designing a research study and, not the least, when "translating" results to communicate them to others (e.g., see Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). I therefore find it important to reflect upon what discourses we might, or might not, (re)produce with our research – especially so when aiming at connecting research with practice, which is a central task when conducting preschool (transition) research.

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About the author

With a clinical background in (pre)school, educational, and family therapeutic contexts as a psychologist, I have long been interested in how relationships in children's daily life can support their development and well-being. To this end, I am particularly interested in the role of communication and collaboration among the adults that are involved in caring for a child. In this thesis, I therefore set out to investigate whether, and how, such patterns of interaction during a child's first transition from home to preschool might foster warm, close relationships between children, their parent(s), and preschool teacher(s).