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Overview of Childhood (Finland)

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Keywords

agency, relationality, materiality, ethnography, institutions, culture, ethics, multidisciplinarity

Glossary

ECEC: ('Early Childhood Education and Care') In Finland, ECEC is a non-compulsory part of the Finnish education system and is based on an integrated approach to care, education, and teaching. ECEC is offered to children before they start compulsory school at the age of seven. All children receive compulsory pre-primary education at the age of six (4h/day).

1. Theoretical approaches to childhood and childhood studies

According to Strandell (2010), Finnish childhood studies and sociology have been influenced by a divide between actor- and structure-oriented approaches. This was especially the case in the 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, a more political understanding come into play and, more recently, fluid and mobile concepts, aimed at overcoming the action-structure divide, have begun to inform childhood research (Strandell 2010). Agency is and has been one of the core concepts in Finnish childhood studies, as in many other countries, and it was of especial interest in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Alanen 2020; Strandell 2010). However, other concepts, such as space, generation, belonging, and embodiment, have also been introduced.

Theoretically, different approaches are visible in Finnish childhood studies. A Foucault-inspired understanding of governmentality was applied by Siippainen (2018), who analyzed intergenerational relations in day care from the viewpoint of governance, and by Kuukka (2015) in relation to children's bodily lives. Harrikari et al. (2011) discuss the concepts of governmentality and the underlying rationalities in the context of institutional early childhood education, child welfare practices, public spaces, and participatory structures.

Relational approaches differing in their conceptual emphases have been widely applied. Intergenerational relations have been studied by applying Bourdieusian concepts (e.g., field, capital, habitus). This approach foregrounds the view that the social worlds of children (and adults) are gendered, classed, raced, and generationed, while the theory of fields bridges different

analytical levels and, for that reason, is also a promising theory in relation to childhood research (e.g., Alanen 2011, 2020; Kiili and Larkins 2018; Moilanen and Kiili 2019; Vuorisalo and Alanen 2015).

Kallio (2014) draws on the work of Raewyn Connell and connects relationality with the politics of childhood. She argues for the usefulness of geographical approaches and the concept of 'spatial socialization', in which children are understood as participants rather than recipients of socialization, including in relation to the politics of their everyday communities (see also Stenvall 2018). Juutinen (2018), adopting a relational perspective and the concept of 'politics of belonging' analyzed the processes of inclusion and exclusion in children's daily lives in ECEC. Drawing on scholars such as Soja and Bourdieu, space and relationality have also been addressed by Vuorisalo, Rutanen, and Raittila (2015). In their view, space is socially produced in everyday interactions with the physical environment, personal interpretations of physical and cultural space, and cultural and collective views about space.

Childhood studies in Finland have also adopted 'more-than-human' approaches to childhood that foreground the entanglements of materiality, human life, and childhood (Alasuutari, Mustola, and Rutanen 2020). The new materialist and posthumanist scholars seek to overcome the dualist thinking of material vs. non-material or human vs. non-human (Mustola 2018; Rautio 2014). Hohti and Tammi (2019), for example, used de la Bellacasa's theory of everyday caring relations in analyzing the relations between human children and other than human animals. Mustola (2018) applied Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) in analyzing objects (physical, digital, as well as transformative and imagined) in the context of children's play and art practices.

2. Methodology

In Finnish research, the methodology used in childhood studies is mainly qualitatively oriented. Since the emphasis is on children's agency and voices, a qualitative approach including various participatory methods seems a natural choice. However, the quantitative data and information produced in broader research projects is typically more visible in the Finnish news media and more widely used as a foundation for political decision-making.

Quantitative surveys and barometer-type statistical information generally concern the life situations of children and youth or the Finnish service system as seen from the perspective of children. Barometers and surveys are conducted by, for instance, NGOs, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, and the National Institute of Health and Welfare. Additionally, large research projects with diverse data sets (e.g., Kuukka, Siippainen, and Alasuutari, forthcoming), nowadays often also have sections in which children are informants and participants in the study instead of adults speaking for them.

One of the most prevalent qualitative approaches to the study of childhood in Finland is ethnographic. Some of the ethnographic studies conducted in educational settings have been methodologically more conventional (Paju 2017; Raittila and Vuorisalo 2021) while others, such as multispecies ethnography (Hohti and Tammi 2019) and autoethnography (Silova et al. 2018) more novel. The ethnographic gaze also enables study of the youngest children, infants and toddlers, to be incorporated into the domain of childhood studies (Rutanen 2012; Salonen, Sevón, and Laakso 2020; see also von Bonsdorff 2020).

As our digital culture becomes increasingly visual, arts-based and other visual methods are also becoming more common (Mustola et al. 2015). Besides giving children, including very young children, a possibility to participate without using complex spoken or written language, for example through taking photographs, arts-based methods can provide children with mediums in which they can safely give expression to experiences that are often hidden or unarticulated (Huuki 2019). A few efforts have also been made to utilize research methods that employ the new digital technology. It seems that these may be found interesting by children of various ages (e.g., Sevón et al. 2017).

Narrative methods enable understanding of how children create, share, perceive, make sense of, and evaluate events and stories (Puroila, Estola, and Syrjälä 2012). Moreover, the so-called child perspective methodology, which highlights the importance of listening to children's voices and stories, calls for being truthful to children's own accounts about their everyday lives and wellbeing (Karlsson 2013; Piipponen and Karlsson 2021). In this respect, the approach draws on the methodological principal idea of doing research with children and children as co-researchers.

Various ways of analyzing data sets, such as conversation, narrative, discourse, and interaction analyses, have been applied in the Finnish context. For instance, Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski (2019) analyzed intertextual information from individual education plans in ECEC to better understand how the voices of children, parents, and specialists are present in these documents.

3. Diversity of research

Current research in the field of childhood studies in Finland draws on multi- and interdisciplinary theories. In addition to its theoretical roots in sociological approaches, much of this research has been informed by, in particular, developmental psychology, social studies, education, and early childhood education. Present research strategies, policies, and structural changes at the level of academic institutions (universities, polytechnics, research institutions) support both the crossing and merging of traditional disciplines and the use of multiple lenses in childhood research.

The outcomes of research in this broad field have many implications for the development of practice and exploring the participation, agency, and rights of children in childhood institutions

such as schools (Alanko 2013), ECEC settings (Lipponen, Rajala, and Hilppö 2018; Paananen and Rainio 2019; Pursi 2019) and social work institutions (Enroos et al. 2017; Forsberg and Ritala-Koskinen 2017; Helavirta 2011; Kallinen 2020). Today, the field also has links with cultural studies and the humanities via a focus on the arts, folklore, aesthetics, literature, and children's cultures (von Bonsdorff 2017; Rissanen 2020).

In recent years, the history of childhood has gained in visibility in the Finnish research context. As in studies addressing childhood today, children's agency and participation is also being studied from a historical perspective (Hoikkala 2020; Malinen and Tamminen 2017). Some emergent fields or topics that are likely to strengthen in the near future include more-than-human approaches to childhood (Rautio and Stenvall 2019), multispecies interactions (Hohti and Tammi 2019), sustainability (Pekkarinen and Tuukkanen 2020), children's rights (Pajulammi 2014; Tolonen, Koulu, and Hakalehto 2019), nationalism (Lappalainen 2006; Millei 2018), belonging and diversity (Kaukko and Wernersjö 2017), children's politics (Kallio and Häkli 2015), and the role of rapidly advancing technologies in children's lives (Mertala 2020; Valkonen, Kupiainen, and Dezuanni 2020).

The Finnish Society for Childhood Studies, founded in 2008, has been an important catalyst in the field, providing platforms for inter- and multidisciplinary dialogues across the different research fields. The members of the society represent a broad range both of approaches and of research institutions, which extend from universities and polytechnics to non-governmental organizations and freelance authors. This diversity in the positions and background institutions of the members of the Finnish Society for Childhood Studies are reflected in the production of knowledge that responds both to urgent needs for planning and policy making and to long-term theoretical and methodological development in the field of childhood studies and research on and with children.

Despite the differences in theoretical approaches within the Society, methodological and ethical discussions in relation to children as participants in research have been extensive and unifying. Two volumes on the ethics of research with children and youth have been coordinated and authored in collaboration with the Finnish Youth Research Network (e.g., Rutanen and Vehkalahti 2019).

Further reading and online resources

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The Finnish Society of Childhood Studies: Twitter-account. https://twitter.com/childhoodfi

The Finnish Society of Childhood Studies: webpage. https://lapsuudentutkimuksenseura.yhdistysavain.fi/in-english/

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