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Children's transitions in early childhood education and care: various combinations of dis-/continuities

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ABSTRACT
This longitudinal multiple case study explores children's transitions within early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. In ECEC children typically transition from one group or center to another. This study explores how physical, social and philosophical discontinuities and continuities constitute these transitions. Five focus children's transitions were followed in and between separate ECEC centers. The data include interviews with parents and educators as well as observations noted. Fabian's discontinuity division, which argues that transition consists of physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities, was used for content analysis of interviews as primary data. Interpretations were reflected on and supplemented with fieldnotes as secondary data. Analysis demonstrated that children's transitions in ECEC comprise various permutations of discontinuities and continuities. Based on our findings, we suggest that the dis-/continuities in children's daily lives should be considered when identifying and planning transitions as well as in planning ECEC centers' operation and grouping structures.

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early childhood education and care; transitions; discontinuity; continuity; longitudinal multiple case study

Introduction

In this study, we focus on transitions in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions that are for example transitions from one group to another within a single ECEC center or transitions between centers when children change to a new center. These transitions are relatively rarely studied (Garpelin et al. 2010; O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2013, 2014), and consequently, they go unnoticed and are poorly supported (Brooker 2008). Unlike school practices in which children move on to the next class at the end of the year, children in ECEC may be transferred more often in response to practical issues associated with balancing the children's needs with the efficient operation of the center (Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000). Studies on transitions in ECEC are thus required, as these transitions can be unique to particular ECEC contexts.

Educational transitions are often defined as the process of moving from one educational setting or context to another (Fabian 2007). Herein transition is approached as *a process of change over time* (Colley 2010). The central aspect of this study is that

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transition must be understood from multiple perspectives (Jindal-Snape 2010). As such, transitions will be scrutinized based on a structural understanding of educational transitions within ECEC, such as transitions from one age group or center to another, but also from the perspective of less obvious transitions that emerge when children's daily life in ECEC is investigated. The latter may relate to, for example, changes relating to interaction between the child, peers, teachers, and families (Jindal-Snape 2010). This study also focuses on relations between the physical environment and institutional structures in ECEC. In line with our relational and socio-spatial theoretical framework (Fuller and Löw 2017), the basic assumption is that an active ECEC environment is created through interaction between humans and the environment (Raittila 2012) and interplay between structures and processes (Fritz and Binder 2018), with transitions similarly constituted (Lucas Revilla et al. 2022).

We explore transitions in the context of Finnish ECEC – specifically, the transitions that occur after the first transition from home to ECEC but before the transition to pre-primary education. In Finnish center-based ECEC, children typically undergo major transitions from one group or center to another during their time in ECEC (EDUFI 2022). However, ECEC providers are free to decide on the grouping structures if the groups are pedagogically appropriate and aligned with child – adult ratio requirements and group size limitations (EDUFI 2022; Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018 2018). In the Finnish ECEC core curriculum (EDUFI 2022), the age-based system is suggested as one option, but sibling relations and special support needs could be considered in planning centers' grouping structures.

This article approaches and investigates transitions as processes of change. Changes in children's daily ECEC lives will be tracked and analyzed using Fabian's (2012) discontinuity conceptualization, according to which transitions include physical, social, and philosophical discontinuity. Below, we will demonstrate how earlier studies of transition within ECEC institutions focused primarily on certain aspects of one of these dimensions. The present study's novelty is that it explores how all three dimensions interact with one another to constitute these change processes. Consequently, our research question is as follows: *How do physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities and continuities constitute transitions within ECEC institutions?*

Discontinuity and continuity in transitions within ECEC institutions

Fabian's (2012) conceptualization of discontinuity is particularly useful as an analytical tool as it approaches the perspective of children's everyday lives (Ackesjö 2014). Leaning on Fabian's (2012) work, our premise is that transitions can be better understood when physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities are more thoroughly examined.

Physical discontinuity refers to changes in the physical environment, such as changes in the facility, building, or room. These changes might include the size of the building, the number of rooms, location of facilities and availability of areas (Fabian 2012, 3–4). Weinberger's (1996) study suggests that a certain degree of continuity in the physical environment supports transitions within the ECEC center. The physical environment is supportive if it includes visual access to the next room and flexible access to the former room, but familiar materials and shared spaces are also important (Weinberger 1996). Earlier studies reported that children

mentioned changed features of the new physical environment, toys, and activities when describing their likes and dislikes in their new age groups (O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2014).

Social discontinuity includes loss of friendships, the challenges of being incorporated into new groups or making friends during transitions (Fabian 2012, 3–4). Fabian's work does not consider continuity in relationships between children and teachers; however, in the context of ECEC, they seem to have significance. During their years in ECEC, children may lose their educator when they move to a new classroom or another center (Howes and Hamilton 1992). Continuity of caregiver (i.e. the same educators are with the same infants and toddlers for a substantial proportion of their first years in ECEC) is rarely implemented in transitions between childcare classes (Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000). For younger infants, transition and lack of caregiver continuity have been linked to increased distress that reduced within a few weeks (Cryer et al. 2005). Findings related to the continuity of peer relationships are contradictory. It is found that transitioning with peers made no difference to levels of distress or negative behavior (Cryer et al. 2005) but also showed that learning about the new environment with a close friend could shield children against transition-related stressors (Recchia and Dvorakova 2012). Transitions between age groups are known to include both challenges and opportunities for relationships (O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2013, 2014).

Philosophical discontinuity includes for example teaching methods, schedules, rules, and routines (Fabian 2012, 4). Values, concepts, and methods may differ across different settings (Wilder and Lillvist 2018). Children who had transitioned from the infant to the toddler room highlighted changing rules and routines (O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2014). In transitioning from under-two to over-two groups, the age-specific curriculum constructs different identities and expectations for the children and thus discontinuities for both parents and children (Merry 2007). Transitions between age groups might be regarded and implemented as a key aspect of pedagogy or may simply be considered a 'necessary evil'. These diverse approaches constitute transitions differently (Garpelin et al. 2010).

Continuity is a central concept in research on educational transitions (Wilder and Lillvist 2018). Several slightly different typologies of continuity (Ackesjö 2014; Wilder and Lillvist 2018) have sought to capture variety in continuity that has relevance in children's educational transitions. For example, Mayfield (2003) discusses continuity as an ongoing process at the program level that includes philosophical, curricular, developmental, physical, organizational, and administrative continuities. However, what is continuing in the transitions can vary, and it can have a varying importance to different children (Wilder and Lillvist 2018). Thus, based on the previous studies it is not possible to draw a conclusion that either continuity or discontinuity is simply harmful or beneficial for children.

In sum, Fabian's conceptualization of discontinuities along with an acknowledgment of continuity highlights that focusing on the combination of physical, social, and philosophical continuities and discontinuities provides a more holistic picture of transitions within the ECEC system. Although earlier studies have focused mainly on individual dimensions of discontinuity, they provide a good starting point for our exploration. Below, with the help of a longitudinal multiple case study, we demonstrate how Fabian's division helps to map various combinations of dis-/continuities that constitute transitions in the context of Finnish ECEC.

Methods and data

The data used in this study were collected as a part of longitudinal multi-case research project Trace in ECEC funded by the Academy of Finland. The project follows five children's transitions in ECEC from their first transition to ECEC as one-year-old infants to their transition to pre-primary education, typically at the age of six. These children come from two middle-sized cities from the same region.

Qualitative case-study approach enables in-depth exploration of the phenomena from multiple perspectives within its real-life context (Simon 2009). This multiple case study data collection comprised observations and interviews. The children's first day in the new/changed ECEC environment was observed. In autumn 2019 one follow-up observation day was added one month after the child's first day in the new setting. Parents and educators were interviewed one week after both observations. The close, long-term research relationship and collaboration with participants, 'long engagements and return interviews' (Tobin and Hayashi 2017), afforded the interviews a conversational atmosphere (Rutanen et al. 2021).

The educators and parents were contacted periodically to decide on whether the focus child was going to undergo any transitions. We collected the data altogether at 13 data collection points. All five children had various anticipated transitions, ranging from two to five at the time of writing. Educators identified some occurring transitions during the later phases of collaboration thus it was not possible to generate observational data or properly scheduled interviews about these. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collection procedure was adjusted between 8 and 9/2020: only interviews were executed through an online meeting or phone call. Table 1 illustrates the data collection timelines since autumn 2016.

Interviews with educators and parents are the focal data for this study. Primary data included 21 parental interviews and 24 interviews with the educators. Secondary data included fieldnotes and freely available information about the centers and their background organizations collected from their websites and were used to complement the analysis of the primary data. The fieldnotes included ethnographic observations from day spent in ECEC centers along with notes on information given about the transitions during the phone calls or discussions with participants when we have inquired about the upcoming transitions and data collection. Children's opinions about transitions were written down as part of observations. Thus, multiple data-sources were exploited which is a distinctive feature of the case study (Simon 2009).

Table 1. Data collection timelines case by case.

Case	2016	2017	2017	2018	2018	2019	2019	2020	2020	2021	2021
Siri	S		x		x		x		C		
Ali			S				x	(x)	C		
Lilli			S	x	x	(x)	(x)				x
Visa			S		P	P	x	x	C		
Mia						S		P		x	

S= transition to ECEC, x = data collection point, (x) = afterward identified transition, C = adjusted data collection (COVID-19), P = pause in attendance

Ethical considerations

Trace in ECEC-project is approved by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of University of Jyväskylä. The participants gave their informed consent, parents on behalf of their children. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and withdrawal from the study was allowed at any time without any consequences. The child participants were encountered with sensitivity minimizing the possible inconvenience. We observed children's verbal and nonverbal cues for participation. Thus, their consent was situationally evaluated and negotiated throughout the process (Rutanen et al. 2021). In reporting, we considered carefully which details were essential to report, with an attempt to minimize the risk of the identification of the participants.

Tracing discontinuities

The transcripts of the interviews with educators and parents were subjected to close reading to investigate what changed in the children's daily ECEC lives around these data collection points. The main principles of concept-driven analysis were applied (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). The detailed exploration was performed using Fabian's discontinuity division (2012) to identify physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities. Interpretations pertaining to ambiguous situations in particular were reflected on, checked, and complemented with secondary data.

All changes linked to the physical and material environment mentioned in the primary data were coded as *physical discontinuities*. These included, for example, the child's new locker or the new ECEC center building. When coding *social discontinuities*, both changes in educator and peer relationships were considered. All accounts in which changes in rules and practices were mentioned were coded as *philosophical discontinuity*. The philosophical discontinuity dimension was also expanded to include changes at the structural level in line with Mayfield's (2003) conceptualization. Changes such as transition from public to private centers, reorganization of the center's grouping structure and notions about the national core curriculum renewal (year 2018) were coded as *administrative*, *organizational*, and *curricular* changes.

Physical, social, and philosophical dis-/continuities in our data

A more detailed examination of the coded changes indicated that continuity was occasionally present to some extent alongside discontinuity, even within the same dimension. It is thus more accurate to consider both discontinuities and continuities and to discuss physical, social, and philosophical dis-/continuities. Various aspects of these dis-/continuities are explained below and illustrated in Figure 1.

Physical dis-/continuity

Physical discontinuity denoted situations in which *the entire physical environment* is unfamiliar to the child. For the child, it involved unfamiliar buildings and physical layouts, group room(s) or areas, novel outdoor spaces, and new spatial/material practices. The

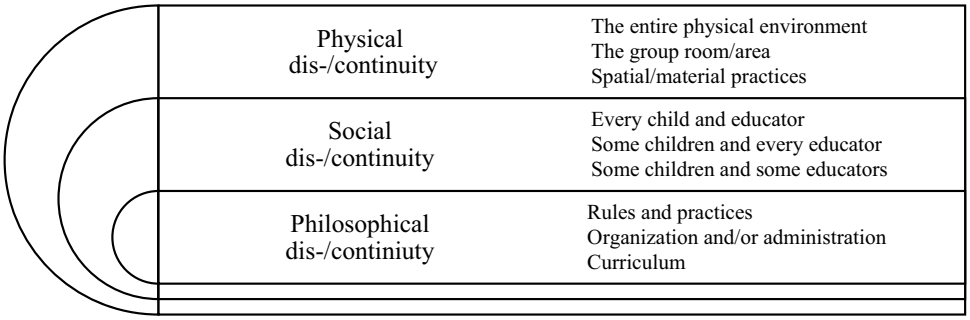

Figure 1. Aspects of physical, social, and philosophical dis-/continuities.

child must make sense of how the physical and material space is used, the locations of their own locker and the toilets, and daily routines. Some transitions preserved continuity at the building and location level, but this varied if these transitions included discontinuity as a movement *to a new group room/area* and *changes in practices* connected to the usage of *the spatial/material* environment. Movement to a new group room/area also included changes in spatial/material practices, such as when the child's seat was relocated to another table in the dining hall. In some instances, physical discontinuity was observed only from spatial/material practices.

Social dis-/continuity

Social discontinuity was particularly evident in situations wherein *every child and educator* in the setting were unfamiliar to the transitioning child. Some transitions occurred wherein *some children and every educator changed*, thus preserving continuity in peer relationships but introducing discontinuity in educator relationships. In some transitions, *some children and some educators* were familiar with the child in the new situation, meaning that some relationships continued while others did not. Such situations involved both familiar and unfamiliar peers and educators.

Philosophical dis-/continuity

Philosophical discontinuity referred in changes to *rules and practices*. These changes were briefly described in the interviews – for example, in the context of discussing a child's transition to an older age group, the interviewee mentioned that the children began to take food or pour milk by themselves. They also mentioned that the new center celebrates birthdays differently and that its outdoor space allows children to play football, unlike the previous center.

Our data also included references to changes in organizational, administrative, and curricular aspects (Mayfield 2003). We categorized the changing ratio and rearrangements in the center's grouping structure as an *organizational discontinuity*. By *administrative discontinuity*, we denote movement between public and private providers. In addition to these, educators mentioned the national core *curriculum* renewal that occurred in 2018 during our data collection and is an aspect of philosophical dis-/continuity.

For the next phase of analysis case-specific transition timelines were scrutinized by examining what combinations of physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities and continuities could be identified.

Transitions within ECEC institution: various combinations of dis-/continuities

Based on the analysis, it became evident that physical, social and philosophical dis-/continuities were intertwined, and it was fruitful to examine the interlinkages between them. Below, we will detail the various combinations of physical, social, and philosophical dis-/continuities in transitions.

We will begin to unpack these combinations by focusing on the physical dimension, starting from the transitions that include the most clearly identifiable physical changes as well as those that are more obscure. First, we will demonstrate transitions wherein children encountered an entirely new physical environment; second, transitions in which the group room/area changed; and third, transitions in which spatial/material practices changed.

Discontinuity in the entire physical environment

In this subchapter, we illustrate how transitions that include clear physical change in the physical environment may also differ from one another when other aspects of dis-/continuity are considered, drawing on examples from Lilli's, Visa's and Siri's cases.

Accumulating discontinuities

Lilli's transition to the new center combined physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities in line with Fabian's (2012) model. First, we can identify an administrative discontinuity: Lilli transitioned alone from a public ECEC center to a newly established private center. The building was brand new, and Lilli's first day there was the first day for everyone in that center. Every child and educator were unfamiliar to Lilli but also to each other.

> *It was the first day of the newly established ECEC center. All the children were in the same group, even though they would apparently be divided into separate groups later. None of the adults who were there would continue in the same group. The adults did not remember all the children's names, and nor did they know them apart from the single induction day. Practicalities were still developing – for example, sleeping arrangements were still in process*. (Fieldnotes)

As the excerpt from the fieldnotes illustrates, Lilli's transition not only involved discontinuities in her own daily life in ECEC but was embedded in intertwined and accumulated combinations of discontinuity in other actors' lives. This change was experienced by everyone in the center: rules and practices were still emerging, and educators were familiarizing themselves with the children and with one another.

Similar to Lilli's case, Visa's transition consisted of several intertwined discontinuities. Visa transitioned to the recently established center, in which all children and educators were unfamiliar with him but also with one another. In contrast to Lilli's example, Visa transitioned from a private to a publicly run center, and he had some familiarity and social

continuity from home at the center level because he encountered the new ECEC environment together with his sibling, although they were placed into separate groups. Visa's attendance at ECEC had also been discontinued and he had been at home with his mom and newborn sibling for a year before his transition to the new center. Both these examples involve the accumulation of different discontinuities and the combination seems dense.

Emerging continuities

Siri's transition illustrates both social and philosophical dis-/continuities intertwining in movement to the entire new physical environment. Siri transitioned to the new center with some familiar children and educators. Some peers and educators had been in the same group for several years or at least in the same previous center with Siri. Excerpts from the fieldnotes summarize the situation based on the discussion and interview with the mother and the child. Siri's mother stated that physical discontinuity was the most significant aspect of Siri's transition.

> *The child had been very aware that she would transition to the new center and that some familiar peers would be there too and familiar adults. The mother stated that it was mainly the walls that changed*. (Fieldnotes)

Siri's transition included philosophical continuity that was enabled by administrative continuity. Siri's second center was maintained by the same private company as her previous center. Together, these physically distinct centers formed an administrative unit of two centers with one leader. Circulation of the staff between these centers was customary, and when familiar educators transitioned with the children, it allowed philosophical continuity between these two separate centers at least to some extent.

We observed similarities, for example, in queuing practices. Queuing was used extensively in organizing children's daily transitions from one activity to another in both Siri's first center and the new center. During the fieldwork in Siri's new center, the children explained queuing practices to the researcher, referring to similar practices in both the old and new centers. The researcher had also collected notes about queues in various locations and activities, such as transitioning from one activity to another, on the way outdoors, or returning indoors in both centers.

However, Siri's mother pointed out that Siri herself also reported changed practices (O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2014).

> *Mother: Not that she is longing… she said something like 'then in Berryland we did it in that way'," but it is just normal. Not so that it is [longing], she just digests that then in Berryland, it was that way. And then some habits have apparently changed because she has said like 'In Berryland it was like that and now we are doing it in this way', so there are some different practices that [she] then notices that it is [now] different.*

In the above excerpt, Siri's mother suggested that Siri was making sense of differences (Fabian 2012) between centers while reflecting on them aloud but did not miss the previous center. In addition to our observations about continuities, Siri's reflections about discontinued practices reveal that transition is constituted in intertwining dis-/continuities.

Discontinuity in the group room/area

Examples from Mia's, Siri's and Visa's cases illustrate transitions that sustained physical continuity at the center level but discontinuity in rooms/areas. We demonstrate how different combinations of social and philosophical dis-/continuities constituted these transitions.

Social and philosophical dis-/continuities

Mia's and Siri's transitions to the over-threes groups denoted physical discontinuity as a movement to the new group room as well as changes in spatial/material practices. In Mia's center, the group rooms and outdoor area for under-threes were separated from the older children's areas. When Mia transitioned to the over-threes group, she got to use the different outdoor area, dining hall, toilets, and another lobby containing their lockers in addition to a new group area. Siri's center had shared areas, including a common dining hall, sleeping room, and outdoor area that lent physical continuity to Siri's transition from Blueberries to Strawberries. However, the next example reveals that physical continuity – in this case, at the dining hall level – includes also dis-/continuity.

> *Educator: – the one thing was we weren't on the same page here, unfortunately, and I worked hard for a couple of days getting her away from her old food table . . . This was really hard for her. She normally eats over there with those other little ones. . .Now she is eating over here. It's very confusing and very hard for her to understand.*
>
> *NR: How did you see that. . .was she crying? What was her reaction?*
>
> *Educator: She did, she got a bit upset, she was crying a little, she got, she's quite a strong-willed persona and she can be very tantrummy . . . And she got a little bit like that at times and it took some, it took constant work for those first few days to get her to go to the new table and you know, read the benefits of that, 'Now you're a big Strawberry' or 'You get to sit at the big table where you get to butter your own bread and you get to do. . . You can go and take your things yourself and . . . '– It is good, kind of thing . . .*

Although the dining hall remained the same for Siri, dis-/continuities in spatial/material practices intertwined with changing expectations and common rules and practices contributed to constituting her transition.

Social continuity was sustained by shared areas over the years for Siri because the children and educators from all groups met one another in these shared spaces. Unlike Mia's center, where the educator from the under-threes group described their own area as like a bird's nest with its own peace but also observed from her own adult perspective that it diminishes encounters between educators from other groups.

> *Educator: And then, here we are somehow quite on our own in a way, that we eat here and we do everything here in our own group [area], so. That less we are in contact with the adults from the other groups. This is our own kind of birds' nest.*

For Mia in her transition from Oranges to Apples – the group for over-threes – every educator was unfamiliar to her. Mia's mother explained that she had prepared Mia for the possibility that her educators would be different.

Mother: But when it was confirmed, I started to say daily to Mia that you are going to transition with Aapo to that group for bigger ones, to Apples and then that there will be different educators than now, that the ones who are there now will not be there.

Mia transitioned with her best friend Aapo, which facilitated some social continuity from her previous group. Her new group included children who had been in Mia's previous group at the same time as her, and so there were some familiar children. Similarly, Siri's transition included social continuity in the form of some familiar children because she transitioned with some peers from her previous group but in her case also at least one of the educators had previously been in the same group as Siri.

Although Visa's transition comprised the same elements as Siri's and Mia's, the difference here was that Visa was still a member of the same Goblins group for over-threes and that transition was based on organizational discontinuity. Organizational discontinuity implied reorganization of the center's use of physical spaces and grouping structures. The Goblins group was located in the new group room that had been the Elves' group room – the infant group. Some children from Goblins resisted moving to the 'baby room'. Some children and educators in the center were rearranged into groups, leading to social dis-/continuities for Visa: Visa remained in Goblins, but some older children, including Visa's friend Vili, were moved to Wizards.

Educator: It affected [Visa] a lot when Vili went to Wizards. Vili was with him then and played a lot and was more with him [Vili]. Now [some stammering words removed] Lari came back [as a playmate] when Vili left.

Educators observed that Vili's transition to Wizards revived Visa's friendship with Lari. As such, reorganization of the center's operation also reorganized relationships.

Changes in spatial/material practices

In this section, we draw on examples from Ali's case representing two separate occasions that are connected to each other. Both of his transitions combined changing spatial/material practices and social dis-/continuities.

Social dis-/continuities

Ali's transition to Sniffs, the group for the over-threes, was constituted through discontinuity in spatial/material practices and social relationships. In Ali's center, the rooms/areas are not designated for specific groups but rather for certain activities. Thus, all the groups are using all the rooms while having activities led by educators, but not at the same time. Daily routines are scheduled as spatial practice, as tools to monitor the use of the collective rooms, as the educator described:

Educator: We stay inside with the smaller ones, and bigger ones go outdoors for that time and then the other way around, and then we can freely use these rooms here.

Ali's transition to the new group is thus constituted through discontinuity in spatial/material practice linked to the child's daily schedule and rhythms. This practice regulates relationships and opportunities to be and play together, even though the children are not separated into specific group rooms or areas. Although Ali transitioned alone and had social discontinuity from his previous group, some children were familiar: Ali's best friend

Onni and other closer peers had transitioned to Sniffs some months earlier. Every educator was, for the first time, in the same group with Ali.

When Onni and the others transitioned to Sniffs, Ali remained in the Hattifatteners group, in the same physical environment with a familiar daily rhythm, although he began to nap in a different bed to before. Loss of friendship in the form of reduced opportunities to be and play with his best friend denoted social discontinuity for Ali. Some familiar children and educators facilitated social continuity for Ali in Hattifatteners; however, as a small group educator, Salla replaced Mirja, who had been with Ali since his first weeks in ECEC.

> *Educator: Yes, actually it changed considerably maybe there, to Ali there were already known [children] like two, three. He [Onni] went to the bigger ones and now there [in Hattifatterners] will be three new [children] more since September. . . so it will be changing again a bit. But actually, Onni was the closest playmate for him [Ali] that we can't yet see how and what their relationship will be. Because now we have had so few children that we have proceeded as one group, but next week we will start to properly run those subgroups so then we will see how . . .*

The educator's reflection implies that they were aware that Onni's transition to the new group would impact Ali. After several weeks, we collaborated with the center's pedagogical leader, who described Ali's reactions:

> *He began to resist, unwilling to do as he was told. Also, in the mornings, it was difficult to come [to ECEC], his parents had noticed. He was angry and reacted strongly*. (Fieldnotes)

Frictions in his relationships altered Ali's daily life in ECEC despite the fact that he underwent no transition from a structural perspective: he was still a member of the same organizational group, but it was no longer the same group of people.

Discussion

In this paper, we explored how physical, social, and philosophical discontinuities and continuities constitute transitions within ECEC institutions. Our results demonstrate various combinations of dis-/continuities that constitute diverse transitions within ECEC institutions. Using the physical environment as a lens showed that these transitions happen between and within ECEC centers but that they are diverse combinations of dis-/continuities that derive their significance from the contexts in which they emerge in interplay with people, structures, and processes (Fritz and Binder 2018; Raittila 2012). Our examples illustrate how the center's physical layout, the use of rooms, the grouping structure and how it is enacted, and the organization of daily life in ECEC centers intertwine with social dis-/continuities to constitute these diverse transitions.

Fabian's (2012) discontinuity division, complemented with aspects of Mayfield's (2003) division, allowed us to split transitions into smaller components, like ingredients. It allowed us to re-constitute and map how these different ingredients come together in diverse contexts. These dis-/continuity divisions are useful for identifying at least some of the dimensions that constitute transition processes. As our study shows, discontinuity alone is not a sufficiently fine-grained concept to illustrate changes, particularly in vaguer dimensions. Transitions between centers might include discontinuities in all dimensions but not necessarily. Transitions within the center were constituted differently, combining discontinuities and continuities to varying extents. Therefore, transitions constituted

through explicit discontinuities were rare in our data, and the concept of continuity was required to complement and illustrate the overall change processes in greater detail.

Like Wilder and Lillvist (2018) stated that what is continuing in the transitions can make a difference of varying importance to children and as such, it is crucial to identify possible transitions from multiple perspectives. As our findings indicate, transitions do not always include physical movement between settings or designate that the child will be part of a different organizational group. Furthermore, considering the flexible grouping structures in Finnish ECEC, it is not possible to identify transitions based exclusively on the group's structural membership. From that perspective, Ali's transition within Hattifatteners does not constitute a transition because he continued in the 'same' group. However, Ali's example highlights two aspects: 1) transition is not limited to those who are designated to be members for the next/new group and 2) the group denotes different things for the child and for the institution. The reorganization of people and physical spaces affects relations, positions, and relationships throughout the center. For the ECEC institution, the groups and grouping structure are tools for organizing and arranging the center's operations and fulfilling and scrutinizing the ratio and limitations of the group size. In children's daily ECEC life, the group is the peers, educators, and maybe the particular group room/area. Therefore, reflecting on combining physical, social, and philosophical dis-/continuities in children's daily ECEC lives, and relations is a better means of identifying potential ECEC transitions and transition periods than mere grouping structure. In addition to the group structural perspective, the dis-/continuity reflection expands the scope to consider transitions from multiple perspectives (Jindal-Snape 2010) approaching children's perspective by exploring changes in their daily lives in ECEC.

Results of this study give insights for teachers for pedagogical transition planning and support that begin with the center's grouping structures and their enactment. The national core curriculum (2018) requires that centers' grouping structures are pedagogically appropriate, and in light of this study, transition pedagogy should be considered. The grouping structure, daily rhythms, and use of the physical space of the center are part of this, and it is thus possible to regard transitions as a part of pedagogy (Garpelin et al. 2010). As a practical implication, in ECEC centers it is vital to reflect on how transition is understood and identified in the center, what kind of transitions occur in the center, and how and why transitions are constituted there. Reflecting on our findings and those of previous studies from a pedagogical perspective, it seems that transitioning with peers is used as a pedagogical practice in transitions within ECEC centers, although the existing research is not unanimous with regard to its effects (Cryer et al. 2005; Recchia and Dvorakova 2012). The children in our cases invariably had some familiar children around them, but in some transitions, every educator was unfamiliar. As noted, children may lose their educators when moving to the next classroom or if they change to another center (Howes and Hamilton 1992). More frequently, however, familiar educators were present in the rearranged situations. It is thus safe to assume that ideals of caregiver continuity (Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000) guide transition pedagogy and staff arrangements in centers. Our results do not allow us to editorialize or generalize with respect to how transitioning with peers or caregiver continuity affected stress levels or negative behavior, although challenges emerged in some of our examples (O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2013, 2014).

Previous studies have scrutinized physical, social, and philosophical aspects of transitions within ECEC institutions primarily on an individual basis. In this study and in our examples, we demonstrate how these dimensions combine and constitute different transitions. Siri's and Mia's dissimilar center layouts constituted their transitions between groups, corroborating Weinberger's (1996) ideas regarding how continuity in physical spaces and discontinuity constitute transitions differently. In Siri's case, shared spaces constituted social continuity and familiarity, in contrast to Mia's center, which had strictly distinct areas and less social contact between groups. The philosophical dimension was the most difficult dimension to examine using interviews as focal data. Future research should focus more on the philosophical dimension in observational longitudinal studies to create more knowledge on changing values, teaching methods, schedules, rules, and routines (Fabian 2012; Wilder and Lillvist 2018). More detailed examination of the program-level dis/continuity (Mayfield 2003) is required to examine how the ECEC institution, and its organization materialize in the constitution of transitions. Furthermore, in future research it is crucial to focus on how these transitions are relationally and socio-spatially constituted.

While the perspective of children's daily lives in ECEC was accessed through an 'adult filter' (Babic 2017), it limits argumentation about children's experiences about these transitions. The generalizability of the results is also limited because of the small sample of five focus children coming from quite similar areas. Insufficient data from some transitions owing to restrictions because of COVID-19 pandemic and human oblivions in identifying/informing about upcoming transitions must be acknowledged as limitations also. However, the longitudinal setting of this research and long-term collaboration with participants enabled verification of the interpretations that were made.

Our findings illustrate transitions as processes of change that children make sense of (Fabian 2012) but simultaneously actively co-constitute these processes through their actions – for example, Siri's resistance of her new table or Ali's protests at home and in the ECEC center. While we aimed to explore these transitions and combinations of dis-/continuities to approach the changes in children's daily lives in ECEC we cannot explicitly present the transitions impact and influence. Usually, the risk perspective is given stronger emphasis (Ecclestone 2009) and discontinuity is easily interrelated with threat (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022), but transitions, like double-edged swords, present simultaneously both possibilities and risks (Ackesjö 2014). Our findings don't support the interpretation that either continuity or discontinuity is more positive or negative to the child than the other. Nonetheless, we are able to argue that both of these elements constitute and co-constitute transitions.

In addition to teachers and researchers, the results illuminate the spectrum of the ECEC transitions for parents also. Hopefully they encourage parents to participate in the discussions about children's transition processes in ECEC resulting in trusting and reciprocal parent-professional partnership that is seen as the central element for the positive transition outcomes (Lazzari et al. 2020).

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