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# Just before pre-primary education: interplay between age and resources in the transition processes of diverse pre-primary education contexts

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## ABSTRACT

This article describes the interplay between age and children's resources during the transition from Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) to pre-primary education. We describe how age operates in the structures of ECEC during the time before the actual transition. We approach the transition to pre-primary education and the relation between age and resources with the concepts of capital and informal and formal practices. The data are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork and video records at two types of ECEC centres: one that provides pre-primary education and one that does not. The findings underscore transition practices and age as the main aspects providing diverse resources for the transferring children during the transition from ECEC to pre-primary education. Investigating the interplay between resources and age helps to understand how ECEC centres with different age-related group structures and locations of pre-primary education produce resources and distinctions between the children during the transition.

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## KEYWORDS

age; ECEC; pre-primary education; resources; transitions

## 1. Introduction

Age is a significant part of the social order of educational systems as it defines the age-based school classrooms and organization of children's groups in ECEC (Fincham & Fellner, 2016; Hopkins & Pain, 2007). Age also includes the expectation that children develop at the same pace and move as a group to the next level of education (Gallacher, 2005). In this sense, age intersects with educational transitions, when children are moving along their educational path (Garpelin et al., 2010). Even though age is a significant part of transitions, there are only a few studies in which the focus is on age as a part of the transition process (Puroila & Estola, 2014). In this article we are interested in the transition from ECEC to pre-primary education, one of first age-based transitions in the Finnish context. In Finland, unlike in other Nordic countries, municipalities may independently decide where they organize pre-primary education and what kind of practices to use on transition processes (Kauppinen & Alasuutari, 2018). The starting points for pre-primary education can therefore vary within and between municipalities from ECEC centres to school, which might produce different transitions and institutional lives for children (Garpelin et al., 2010). Recently, research and practice development in Finland have focused on cooperation

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between pre-primary and primary education, but there is a lack of research on the diversity in how pre-primary education is organized (Lappalainen, 2008; see Rantavuori, 2019).

Previous studies have focused on children's first days in the new settings by investigating transition as a single event rather than as a longitudinal process that starts before the actual transition (Ackesjö, 2013; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). The aim of this article is to deepen the understanding of how the transitions from Finnish ECEC centres to pre-primary education are organized within these practices during the spring before the actual transition. The transition to pre-primary education is understood as a social-spatial process that includes the interplay between age and practices (see Ackesjö, 2013). To understand this interplay, the focus of this article is on children's and educators' daily actions through the concepts of transition practices by conjoining practices with socially constructed age-based relations. In addition, the authors are interested in how age-based relations and practices provide various resources for children during the transition process in diverse ECEC centres.

## 2. Educational transitions in early years

Educational transitions are a major part of children's daily life in the ECEC and school context. Lately, the significance of transitions has also been increasingly identified in educational studies. Research findings have shown how early year transitions affect children's lives by transferring them physically to new classrooms or buildings with new curriculums (O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014), roles (Ackesjö, 2013), identities (Puroila & Estola, 2014), relations (McDevitt & Recchia, 2022), and expectations on how children should behave on the first days in new settings (Fincham & Fellner, 2016). Studies have shown the changing circumstances might produce negative impacts on children's daily lives, which refer, for example, to challenges of social adjustment in the new settings (Dunlop, 2021). On the other hand, research findings in different countries, such as in Finland and Australia, have also shown positive effects of successful transitions, such as academic achievements and adaptation to new social environments and practices (Ahtola, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2014). In recent years policy-makers, especially in the Nordic countries, have tried to promote the positive changes by increasing the continuity between educational institutions (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). However, this has also raised critical discussions of schoolification, which refers to the process of formal ECEC becoming more school-like (see Jahreie, 2022).

The structures of ECEC centres divide children into age-based groups, which also means age-based transitions. In these transitions children and educators describe "getting bigger" and "growing up" from positive viewpoints, such as competence increasing with age (Fincham, 2022; Puroila & Estola, 2014; White & Sharp, 2007). Sometimes children encounter age-based transitions abruptly from one room to another in accordance with when new younger children arrive at ECEC centres. Moreover, development of certain skills may enable the transition as educators assess the child to be ready for a new group (Fincham & Fellner, 2016). Age-based transitions can also be anticipated and expected and be seen as taken-for-granted, "vital" practices, especially when arrangements are made from one age-based class or group to another. One of the expected age-based transitions occurs when children start pre-primary school or primary school at a certain age.

In Finland, pre-primary education is obligatory, so the transition to pre-primary education can be characterized as the first, age-based transition which concerns all children. Pre-primary education refers to planned pedagogical education and care for 6-year-olds, lasting 4 h a day, with ECEC in the afternoon if needed (Basic Education Act (628/1998)). Pre-primary education starts in August and lasts for a year whereupon primary education starts. The aim of Finnish pre-primary education is based on the Nordic educational regime, which refers to the idea of universalism through values of social rights and equality (Garvis et al., 2019). One of the main aims of Finnish pre-primary education is to support all children's rights for a good school start (Lappalainen, 2008). Finnish policy-makers have placed a high value on pre-primary education, which is evident in the

binding and free-of-charge character of pre-primary education as well as the higher qualification requirements of pre-primary teachers compared to other ECEC staff (Kalliala, 2012, pp. 74–76). Pre-primary teachers must hold a university degree.

Children and educators participate in activities where the forthcoming transition is negotiated with formally or informally organized practices that prepare children for the new settings (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Formal transition practices refer to adult-initiated, planned actions, such as visits to pre-primary education, ceremonies or other planned activities, with the intention of preparing children for the forthcoming transition and celebrating it (Garpelin et al., 2010). Informal practices refer to unwritten activities such as child- and adult-initiated spontaneous discussions about the forthcoming transition (Ackesjö, 2013; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). These practices interact and are highlighted in the spring when the transition becomes more intensive. In this article the authors focus on these practices which occur before the transition to the new setting.

### 3. Age-based relations and resources in the transition process

This article is theoretically informed by a relational perspective on age-based relations, which refers to intra- and inter-generational relations (see Hockey & James, 2003). The relations are produced and regulated both space-specifically in situ by individuals but also through the national laws and normative patterns by which different institutions are established (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021). In educational systems, age-based relations are represented and maintained through the age structures of institutions. Relations define hierarchic positions between educators and children, but also among children through the location of children in age-based group system.

In age-based transitions, children's roles can change from "expert" in the younger group to "novice" in the group for older children (Garpelin et al., 2010; Merry, 2007; White & Sharp, 2007). Similarly, the age-based transition means a transition from being one of the "small kids" to one of the "big kids". In ECEC, these concepts refer not only to children's size or age, but also to differentiation and distinctions among groups of children. Being identified as a small kid or a big kid, implies values, social status, and power relations, which form children's everyday life in ECEC (Puroila & Estola, 2014). However, even when the competency of children is usually linked to age, it does not ensure power positions, but it depends on the relations between individuals and context (Lago & Elvstrand, 2022).

Age-based relations are also an important concept for investigating the relative shares of important resources among different age groups (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021). In this article, the concept of *resource* refers to the accumulated and utilized skills, knowledge, and material goods of individuals participating in and defining the ECEC field's action, relations, and positions (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992, pp. 148–149). The concept of resource is embedded theoretically in the idea of capital, which means a valued and legitimate resource in a certain field and in relation to its practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu himself divides capital into three fundamental forms. Economic capital refers to money and materials which can be transformed into financial benefits. Cultural capital can take many forms, such as various cultural knowledge and skills as well as material forms (e.g., instruments). Social capital refers broadly to the quality and quantity of social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). The power of resources is embedded in relations: relations define and value certain resources as well as the exclusion and access to certain social actions. Both national and international research has given attention to children's capital in various educational institutions. In the ECEC field, researchers have identified *conversation capital* (Vuorisalo, 2013) and *embodied capital*, such as *body controlling* (Kuukka, 2015), as forms of cultural capital which enable participation in ECEC's daily activities and relations. Children's social capital refers to peer relations, which enhance how they acquire knowledge about social and cultural policies in school (Devine, 2009), while material capital represents toys and other material goods, which also provide access to the relations of certain fields (Lehtinen, 2000).

This study aims to explore children's resources within transition practices by focusing on age-based relations within everyday activities. These practices and relations then provide various resources for children during the transition process (Blaisdell, 2019; Can et al., 2023; Cromdal, 2001; Hellman, 2012). Instead of approaching resources or age as the features of an individual, the relational perspective highlights the social dimensions of resources and age, which are negotiated in relations by making distinctions with others (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Data and method

The study was conducted at four Finnish ECEC centres which have taken part in a larger longitudinal research project (Tracing children's socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions – project). Two of the centres were private and two others were municipal. In these centres pre-primary education was organized differently (Table 1). For the children at those centres which offered pre-primary education, the transition to pre-primary education occurred by moving from one room to another. In other centres, the transition happened by moving to pre-primary education in a school. Centre 2 participated in a national trial for 2-year pre-primary education (see Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). In terms of transitions, this trial created two transitions for some children. During the first trial year, the children moved from one room to another in the same building and in the second year they moved to a school context.

The data have been produced by fieldnotes and video recordings in each group. The fieldnotes are explanations describing children's and educators' interactions, the physical environment and researcher's own interpretations and notes about the various situations. The video recordings consist of children's daily routines, such as mealtimes, indoor and outdoor action and teaching activities. The observation period in each centre occurred before their first days in pre-primary education. The children were between the ages of 5 and 6 years during data collection. There were four to five observation days in each centre, consisting of a visit about once a week to each place during the last month (May) of the semester. Some observation days were selected due to their content, such as visits to the future pre-primary group or the spring celebration of the group. Each observation day lasted 8 h.

### 4.2. Analysis

The theory-informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) is based on ethnographic fieldnotes and transcribed video recordings. Videos and fieldnotes were selected for deeper analysis based on the following criteria. The selected data included discussions about age and the forthcoming transition (see Ackesjö, 2013; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Derry et al., 2010). Intra- and inter-generational discussions were observed as micro-events that occurred between individuals

**Table 1.** Summary of data collection.

ECEC centres	Centre 1	Centre 2		Centre 3	Centre 4
	5	4	4	6	6
Observation days	5	4	4	6	6
Total time of video records	3 h 39 min	3 h 42 min	3 h 4 min	6 h 7 min	0 h 49 min
Group structure	6-year-old pre-primary schoolers and 5-year-olds	6-year-old pre-primary schoolers and 5-year-olds	6-year-olds pre-primary schoolers and 3–4-years-olds	5-year-olds and 3–4-years-olds	5-year-olds and 3–4-years-olds
Number of children in group	18	16	20	14	18
Staying/leaving in pre-primary school	Staying	Staying	Leaving	Leaving	Leaving

and their relations, which are the basis of social processes (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). In these social processes the transition is produced and formed (see Lucas et al., 2022). Preliminary observations showed differences between the centres in how the coming transition was presented and discussed. The data were first analyzed separately for each case and then together to identify what was common and what differed. After identifying the informal and formal transition practices, the data consisted of 186 episodes. The observations led the analysis to consider two different types of ECEC centres separately in relation to the location of pre-primary setting (ECEC or school).

Nearly all ECEC centres provided one or more formal transition practices, which consisted of visits, ceremonies, and other planned types of formal recognitions for transferring children. All the children also produced and attended informal practice, which consisted of spontaneous dialogs related to age and the forthcoming transition. This part of the analysis focused on age and age-related social, material and cultural resources. The key interest of the analysis was on how age-based relations provided resources to children differently according to their age and how distinctions are produced within this process together with transition practices (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). Finally, the interplay between age and practices constructed a category of distinction, which classifies children into categories of *leaving big ones* and *staying little ones*. In the results, these findings are divided into three sections based on the types of ECEC centres (within or without pre-primary education) and transitions to pre-primary education (*leaving/staying*) to clarify children's diverse realities in the two types of ECEC centre, in which age-based relations provided various resources differently.

## 5. Ethical considerations

The data used in this article are part of a research project that was approved by the partner ECEC centres and municipalities. Furthermore, the methodology and methods followed ethical guidelines (Ethics Committee of University of Jyväskylä; TENK, 2019). Written informed consent was obtained from the educators and legal guardians of children who had already participated in the larger research project.

During the fieldwork, the first author observed participants in the “least adult role” (Atkinson, 2019). In practice, the role as an atypical adult led to observing children's daily actions from their level by writing the fieldnotes on the floor next to them and avoiding teaching or other typical actions of the staff. Children's ongoing interest and motivation to participate was observed over time (Kousholt & Juhl, 2023; Rutanen et al., 2023). The children's agreement to participate in the research was negotiated in situ, which means spontaneous discussions of agreement with the children and the observation of the body language and nonverbal communication of children during data collection. Sometimes children forbid the researcher from filming and writing notes or refused to participate in interviews. In these situations, the children's opinions were respected. The balance between silent observation, spontaneous discussions and short interviews alongside daily activities was negotiated with the children and staff. Participating in spontaneous discussions provided an opportunity to ask for children's opinions and interpretations of earlier events in ECEC and helped to understand the relations and actions between the children. Simultaneously, children also had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project. After the fieldwork, the names of children as well as other identification characteristics were pseudonymized and all staff members are called “educators”.

## 6. Results: interplay between age-based transition and resources

The results of this article have been divided into three sections, which are based on the types of ECEC centres (*within/without pre-primary education*) and transitions to pre-primary education (*leaving/staying*). Both sections consist of interplay between age-based relations and the forms of practices (*informal/formal*), which provided resources differently for different aged children in

the ECEC centres. In the final section all ECEC centres are considered side by side in relation to the age structures, which produced categories of distinction where children were classified into *leaving big kids* and *staying little kids*.

### **6.1. Staying in pre-primary education within the ECEC centre**

When pre-primary education was in the same building as the ECEC centre, the transition occurred by moving from one familiar room to another. In this kind of transition, the child group remained the same and retained familiar features of the physical environment (building and outdoor area). Even though the children were going to stay in the familiar ECEC centre, they were to have a new qualified pre-primary teacher, who was responsible for 4 h of pre-primary education a day. In these centres, the order of age-based relations is built on relations between 5-year-old children and 6-year-old pre-primary schoolers. In the mornings, the 5-year-olds and pre-primary schoolers were divided into two small groups, when pre-primary education was in progress. In the afternoons the children spent their time together in the same rooms. In these centres, the 5-year-olds did not have the position of being the oldest children due to the presence of the pre-primary schoolers.

In these centres educators offered only a few formal transition practices for the 5-year-olds. One in two of these centres organized a visit to the future pre-primary education room. During the visit, the pre-primary teacher led the children in pre-primary education tasks. Children needed to recognize the letters of their name, write their own name and count numbers from one to ten. The teacher also introduced the rules of pre-primary education, such as staying seated during guided time, raising one's hand to speak, and listening and acting independently with tasks and instructions. Even though the visit was organized only for 5-year-olds, the age-based relations were embedded in the visit, which reproduced unit-specific age-based relations and resources for children:

It is a visit day to pre-primary education. The educator walks in front of the whiteboard and starts to teach: "When we start pre-primary education, we have some important rules. You can read those rules or look at the pictures on the wall [...]" The children raise their hands and answer, "be quiet" and "listen" [...]. The educator continues: "We start pre-primary education by watching what day it is today" [...] When the children are making their name tags independently in silence, the educator encourages the children: "Oh you look like a pre-primary schooler when you do this task so precisely". Almost all the children succeed in the name tag task independently.

Here, age-based relations were embedded in various ways into formal practice through the visit. This was evident in the educator's way to make distinctions between 5-year-olds and pre-primary schoolers by comparing academic and cultural resources (calendar, writing, reading, being independent) ("in pre-primary education we do things this way", "you look like a pre-primary schooler"). During the visit, the current pre-primary schoolers were constructed as "competent" in relation to the 5-year-olds, who just practiced all the above actions even though the activities were already familiar from ECEC (being quiet, listening, doing tasks carefully, writing one's name). The episode demonstrates how the hierarchical positions of pre-primary schoolers occurred in relation to younger children. The skills and actions of the 5-year-olds were not considered as valued resources because their age-specific position defined them as less competent. This exemplifies how age-based social relations are embedded into the formal practices of ECEC.

The age-based relations and positions emerged differently in another centre, which was participating in a national 2-year pre-primary education trial. The trial produced two types of future pre-primary schoolers: the 5- to 6-year-olds who participate in traditional, 1-year pre-primary education and 4- to 5-year-olds, whose pre-primary education started 1 year earlier than normal and lasted 2 years. In addition, there were also the current pre-primary schoolers, who would be starting school in the next autumn. Because of the trial, it was not possible to mix these two sorts of future pre-primary schoolers together, so the group in the 1-year program was transferred to pre-primary education within the school. This centre organized a visit only for children who were leaving to the school. Even though the 4–5-year-olds' circumstances were going to change because



of the transition, they did not have the opportunity for formal practice, such as the visit day. Overall, they lacked the opportunity to accumulate transitional resources because of their age and the fact they were staying in the familiar ECEC centre.

Age-based relations were also present in formally organized *ceremonies*. At these, the events of the past year were reviewed while also looking to the future and the transitions to new settings. The trial centre organized a ceremony only for the pre-primary schoolers, which highlighted again the special positions of the oldest children by excluding the 5-year-olds. Another centre organized a ceremony that the 5-year-olds and pre-primary schoolers attended. During this formal practice, the age-based relations were manifested in the ceremony through the formal recognitions pre-primary schoolers received for the past year:

It is a ceremony day. Children are sitting on the benches while the educator says a few words about the past and future years. Firstly, the educator explains the meaning of certificates: “It proves that you have, for example, learned some skills of five-year-olds or you have practiced the skills of pre-primary schoolers.” [...] Johanna (pre-primary schooler) raises her hand: “Why are those roses over there?”

Educator: “The roses are for pre-primary schoolers, because this was your last year in ECEC.” [...] “Five-year-olds, you going to be next year’s pre-primary schoolers, and we wish you good luck. Pre-primary schoolers, you have learned many things. All our pre-primary schoolers will now move to school.”

In the episode, the age-based relations were embedded into the ceremony through repetitive, age-based naming (see Fincham, 2022), which educators used by producing distances and distinctions between children’s age-based skills and learning (*academic resource*). In addition to academic resources, the formal ceremony also offered *social* (social acknowledgement) and *material* (roses, diplomas) *resources* for pre-primary schoolers in relation to the 5-year-olds, who got only cards as acknowledgement for the past year.

Age-based relations were also embedded in spontaneous, informal practices when children and educators talked about the transition during daily activities. In these centres, individuals occasionally discussed the approaching transition. The informal practices consisted of discussions about being a future pre-primary schooler, which occurred mostly in situations in which children were expected to participate in daily activities independently using the everyday skills of a future pre-primary schooler (dressing, eating, knowing the rules of the centre (being in the line, motor skills)). In these informal practices, 5-year-olds were considered less competent than current pre-primary schoolers. The next episodes illustrate how age defines the embodied cultural resources of the pre-primary schoolers:

Children are dressing to go outside. Malva (age five) asks the educator for help with a pant leg. While helping Malva, educator says: “You had a lot of time ... These are the skills of a pre-primary schooler ...”

It is mealtime. The present pre-primary schoolers can take lunch by themselves while the five-year-olds sit at a set table. The educator moves Pauli (pre-primary schooler) to another table and states: You will be a schoolchild next autumn; you should show the way for the younger children!

In the first episode Malva’s age was not considered a resource by the educator, who highlighted that being a pre-primary schooler requires and produces broader competency than Malva has now. In the second episode 5-year-olds are not considered as competent as the current pre-primary schoolers, to whom the food was served on the counter tables for self-service. The self-service system at mealtimes was organized only for older children. Furthermore, the educator’s statement that Pauli was responsible for showing younger children the way because of his future role as a schoolchild highlights again the competence of older children, which marked the age-based relations and positions between the children. In both episodes, the interplay between age and informal transition practice offered *cultural* (knowledge of the rules of ECEC) and *embodied cultural resources* (the skills to dress and take food) for pre-primary schoolers in relation to 5-year-olds, whose competency was not identified.

Children occasionally discussed the forthcoming transition in peer relations as well. They connected the concept of being a pre-primary schooler with a specific age by considering their present

and future position through age but also who is going to stay or leave from the centre next autumn. This was evident in all the centres even though it was not always clear for the children when the transition occurs and who is going to join the process. Sometimes age-based connections to being a pre-primary schooler produced confusion, such as when the children turned six in the spring. This was evident especially in the trial unit, which itself challenged the familiar age-structures of the ECEC:

Outdoor activities in ECEC. Children are on the swings in the yard. “I’m going to pre-primary education” Marcus (age five) tells Thomas (age six). “Five-year-olds don’t go to pre-primary education”, Thomas argues. “But I have my sixth birthday when I am in pre-primary education” Marcus continues.

In the episode, it is evident that Marcus acknowledged himself as a future pre-primary schooler even though his pre-primary education starts 1 year earlier than normally. Thomas refuses to acknowledge Marcus as a future pre-primary schooler due to his age. In this episode Thomas sees that Marcus’s age did not provide a social resource (social acknowledgement) and excluded 5-year-olds from the transition to pre-primary education. However, Marcus eventually accepts the connection between age and the transition by appealing to his sixth birthday.

## **6.2. Leaving to pre-primary education within school**

When pre-primary education was in a school context, the transition occurred from the familiar ECEC centre to the unfamiliar location and classrooms for pre-primary education. Children’s peer relations changed as new groups were formed in the school context. The changing elements of transition were linked to educators but also to peer relations through new classmates as well as school children, which enter into the order of age-based relations in school. Besides the social elements, children encountered changes in the physical environment in the form of a new school building with new hallways and outdoor areas.

In ECEC centres which did not organize pre-primary education, age-based relations were produced between 5-year-olds and those under five. In these centres the 5-year-olds spend their time in the same groups with 3- to 4-year-olds. Sometimes the educators offered small group activity specifically tailored for the 5-year-olds and younger children. However, this kind of division was not as systematic as it was in the ECEC centres which offered pre-primary education. In these, 5-year-olds were the oldest group, which offered various resources for them in relation to younger children through formal and informal transition practices.

All these centres systematically organized formal visits during mornings with a group of children or after the ECEC day with families. The atmosphere was encouraging, with the new pre-primary educators presenting the school building while describing the activities of pre-primary education. In addition to the physical environment (cafeteria, gym, own classrooms) educators introduced the rules of pre-primary education, such as children’s responsibility to take care of their personal belongings and own business, raising one’s hand to speak and listening to presentations. One in three of these visits consisted of circle time, in which children need to find their own name tags and introduce themselves to future peers. In the Finnish context, circle time refers to adult-directed action, where children gather for pedagogical activities. Some new educators acknowledged 5-year-olds’ knowledge and skills by encouraging them to apply what they already knew from ECEC activities. However, new educators also connected the children’s future position to school children. In these cases, age-based relations were intertwined with the formal transition practice:

It is a visit day to pre-primary education. Children are listening to educators’ introductions about pre-primary education. The educator describes how drinking glasses get broken, and for that slippers are important. At the same time, she highlights that also the first-year pupils sometimes broke drinking glasses at the beginning of autumn. Later, the similar issue with another group the same educator assures that in pre-primary education educators are going to help children. She justifies her argument by comparing the number of educators between school and pre-primary education.

In this episode, the age-based relations are produced between children aged five and school children by the educator, who assumed that children aged five might have more challenges with the drinking glasses at the beginning of autumn by referring that slippers are going to be most important tools in the beginning of the pre-primary education. As opposed to other centres, a minor position and younger age provided situational support for the future pre-primary schoolers. In addition, the educator's assertion of similar difficulties for pupils in the first year of school softened the idea of pre-conditions for being a pre-primary schooler. In the episode, being 5 years old provided social resources by considering different aged children's skills equally. In addition, the educator highlighted the pre-primary educator's role in helping children in relation to school, in which there are fewer educators due the older age of the children.

All these centres also organized *ceremonies* for the children, the content of which varied between the centres. Two units organized ceremonies in the evening after the centre had closed, where children performed songs within their familiar group of children. Moreover, educators gave short speeches at these ceremonies. At one, the 5-year-olds were also recognized by giving them material goods and social recognition meant especially for them:

It is the ceremony day for all the children. Firstly, the children under five perform a short song, which came over the loudspeakers. After that five-year-olds perform a song for the audience. After the performance, it is time to share diplomas and yellow roses only for the five-year-olds. The educator, who has been with the five-year-olds for many years is touched by this situation and tries to choke back her tears while distributing the diplomas. The educator cannot read the diplomas and gives them to the leader. After sharing the diplomas, the educator states that she would like to move with the five-year-olds to pre-primary education and then says that, luckily, they shared the personal letters for the five-year-olds beforehand.

The above episode reveals various ways age-based relations and positions are intertwined with the ceremony. First, age-based relations were present in the structure of the ceremony, including a song performance with a special spotlight and sharing diplomas and roses only for 5-year-olds. They also got social acknowledgement in the speech of the educator, who became emotional about those children who were leaving. In this episode, age-based relations produced social (collective recognition), material (diplomas, roses, letters) and academic (competency) resources, in which 5-year-olds' positions are highlighted.

As previous episodes showed, 5-year-olds received many types of recognition on account of their special position of being the oldest in these centres but also for the forthcoming transition to new settings. One of these centres organized an annual spring trip only for transferring 5-year-olds as an expression of their last year in this unit. During the trip, the 5-year-olds went to a museum and ate their lunch in a fast-food restaurant. At the end of the trip, the children also received cards and small presents, unlike the younger children, who stayed at the same ECEC centre. In this sense, being five provided the children with material and social resources:

The children are on a spring trip. As they are having their lunch at the fast-food restaurant, the educator brings up the question of what they can say to the younger children about the spring trip. "Nothing!", the children say. "Yeah, they might get sad because they did not have a similar meal, but they will get it when they are five," she explains. [...] When children are leaving to return to the ECEC centre, the educator gives a small gift to one of the five-year-olds, whose parents pick her up from the spring trip.

The spring trip has been, for at least the last few years, a traditional way to acknowledge the 5-year-olds in this centre. The talk of next year's trip also expresses that the tradition will continue. Here, being five provided a social resource that those under five lacked. The age-based relations also become pronounced at the end of the episode, when the educator gave a gift to a 5-year-old as a way to acknowledge the upcoming transition. Age also provided a clear material resource to the 5-year-olds that those under five did not receive.

During their daily activity, the educators and children had informal practices with a range of topics of the forthcoming transition. The tone of the informal practices was gentle and encouraging. Children were seen as competent "big kids", ready for the transition. The tone of the informal

practices also consisted of ideas of letting go for the educators as well as the children, who express sadness about the children's leaving to new settings (see Fincham & Fellner, 2016). The competence of 5-year-olds was seen as "being a future pre-primary schooler", which consisted of academic skills (learning, numbers, letters, writing one's own name, counting, concentration) everyday life skills (eating, dressing, walking and being in line) and cultural skills (the ECEC's daily rules). Children also acknowledged age-based relations, which produced a position of being big and the oldest:

It's mealtime. The five-year-olds practise taking food independently for the first time at the ECEC centre. "The big kids, Martti (age five), you can come also!" one of the five-year-olds whispers. After taking the food, all the five-year-olds sit around the same table, where educators have set butter and bread, so they can practise spreading the butter on the bread. When the educators sit down to eat with the five-year-olds, they start to talk about the upcoming transition. Children look back to the time when they did not spread butter on bread by themselves. Paula (age five) says: "Yes the adults gave the bread to us and sometimes we could take the bread ourselves, but not spread the butter on the bread, because we were younger then." The educator states: "I think that in pre-primary school you are going to take the food by yourself."

The episode describes how informal and formal practices overlap at mealtimes. The mealtimes are a meaningful part of ECEC in general and in this sense are formally organized, but during the spring, the situations produced a space for preparation for pre-primary education. In the episode, the 5-year-olds practiced taking the food independently for the first time due to the upcoming transition. In these centres, the self-service system at mealtimes was organized only for the 5-year-olds. However, there were differences between the centres when the transition practice started as a part of daily action (beginning of autumn or spring). By giving only the 5-year-olds an opportunity to serve themselves, age-based relations were produced. The competency of the 5-year-olds was highlighted while the younger children were excluded. Age here provided an embodied cultural resource for 5-year-olds at mealtimes (independency and competency).

Informal practices also included informal talks about pre-primary education. Educators and children brought up the location and physical place of new settings especially after the visits. Children connected leaving to a new building with changing relations of peers and educators: they imagined their new child group with familiar and unfamiliar peers, educators, and school children. In these centres all the children connected the age of six to being a pre-primary schooler more clearly than children at other centres did. When children and educators discussed the children's sixth birthdays, future peers and the physical features of new settings, the interplay between informal practices and age-based relations excluded younger children from the discussion and offered social resources for the 5-year-olds, like in the next episode:

Outdoor activities at ECEC. Pertti and Frans are together as usual and are swinging and planning their sixth birthdays. Suddenly Frans says: "Hopefully, we get into same school!"

This short episode illustrates how the interplay between age-based relations and informal practices are part of children's daily action in ECEC. Sixth birthdays and the coming departure to another building produced a shared space for the 5-year-olds to make a distinction between themselves and younger children in the ECEC. Pertti and Frans acknowledge they are leaving, which Frans connected to sixth birthdays. Here the children's age offered a social resource which provides present as well as future friendship.

### **6.3. Leaving big kids, staying little kids**

Depending on the context, the transition process of children from ECEC to pre-primary education was constructed both staying in the familiar ECEC centre or leaving to a school context. The interplay between age and the approaching transition produced a category of distinction, which classifies children as either leaving big kids or staying little kids. In centres which did not organize pre-primary education, being older and actually leaving produced special positions for 5-year-olds in

relation to the younger children staying in the ECEC centre. The position of being a leaving big kid offered a range of and formally diverse transition practices and recognition during the spring. The informal practices contained positive expressions and seeing children as ready to be a pre-primary schooler, while those under five appeared as “babies” with less competency. Altogether, the formal and informal practices together with and through age-based relations provided material, social and cultural resources for 5-year-olds:

Mervi (age five) is on the swings in the outdoor area of the ECEC centre. She yells to educators that she needs help to get started. One of the educators is close to the sandbox and yells back: “Can’t you do it by yourself?”

Mervi: “No, because I am a baby!”

Educator: “A baby! How lovely, so you are staying here, and you are not going to pre-primary education?”

In contrast, in those ECEC centres which organized pre-primary education, the 5-year-olds were in the position of staying little kids in relation to the current pre-primary schoolers, who were transferring to the first year of primary school. The tone of informal discussions about pre-primary education was scolding and directed at situations in which children were not independent or failed to use the competency which educators connected to being a future pre-primary schooler. In these centres, 5-year-olds had less formal and informal transition practice and their position did not offer meaningful resources:

It is circle time. Educator: “So yes, we were at the visit with pre-primary schoolers in school, and now we are here celebrating Thomas’ sixth birthday. So, Thomas you can choose who is going to deliver your post today.” Thomas chooses a child who will transfer to the same pre-primary education as him. The educator starts to sing: “I am a little girl postman, postman ...” “No, she is a big girl”, someone yells in the background. The educator starts to sing “big girl” instead of little girl.

Overall, age as a social dimension provided the positions of big kids and small kids for children of the same age depending on the location of pre-primary education, the age-structures of ECEC centres and how the pre-primary education was organized. When age interplays with transition practice, in which the approaching transition is negotiated, it provides various distinctions and thus resources for children during the spring. When the idea of being a big kid was related to leaving, it seemed to offer more space for transition practices within the daily lives of ECEC centres. The positions and resources of the leaving big kids were reproduced by giving them a space to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to others. In contrast, for those 5-year-olds whose pre-primary education was in the same, familiar ECEC centre, the space of transition was more limited. In these centres the interplay between transition practices and age was negotiated by 5-year-olds and present pre-primary schoolers, which did not offer the position of “big kid” to 5-year-olds but instead that of a “staying little kid”.

## 7. Discussion

This article explored the transition process of pre-primary education in four ECEC centres by focusing on age-based relations and resources within informal and formal transition practices. The results indicate that the transition to pre-primary education is a dynamic process instead of a single event, one which starts before children move to their new settings (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; McDevitt & Recchia, 2022). Based on our findings, transition practices produced situational spaces in which children can demonstrate their age-based skills related to the coming transition. The findings raise questions about the diversity of childhoods when municipalities make decisions on how pre-primary education is organized. By focusing on everyday relations and the actions of individuals, this study provides a basis for better understanding children’s institutional lives and how these lives differ just before the pre-primary education.

Using the concept of resources embedded in Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital, the results reveal how children are active participants in the transition process by (re)producing age-based

relations and distinctions together with educators. Age is often considered a feature which produces transitions due to the age structures of the ECEC system (Fincham & Fellner, 2016; Merry, 2007). Nevertheless, our results show that transition produces the relevance of age differently depending on the context of transition (Garpelin et al., 2010). Age offers certain contextually valued positions and resources through differences and distinctions between children (Fincham, 2022; Puroila & Estola, 2014). Thus, age is a taken-for-granted dimension of daily activities in ECEC, which individuals linked mostly to the personal features of children. This dispels the age structures of the ECEC system and reproduces the structural categories of “big kids” and “small kids” in the ECEC system. Due to this background, we suggest that age should be recognized as a social discipline even more in social science, including childhood studies (Punch, 2020).

The relational approach with intra- and inter-generational relations offered a fruitful framework for exploring young children’s transitions. The results show how age-based relations are embedded in the transition process and how individuals access activities differently based on their age and create certain age identities through reciprocal negotiations (see Hopkins & Pain, 2007). Both children and adults viewed the transition to pre-primary education as a natural part of turning six and growing up, which also influenced how different generational groups perceived and related to each other (Hopkins & Pain, 2007; White & Sharp, 2007). When being “big” is intertwined with going to a new setting, the transition is made more concrete through transition practice, which provided various resources for children and highlighted that they were physically leaving. Simultaneously, when the transition occurred by simply moving from one room to another, practice had a less active presence in daily activities and did not provide resources for children. At its best, transition practices support children’s transition process. However, the results show the contextual feature of organizing these practices. Educators can interpret a transition as “smooth” when it occurs within the same, familiar building, which can lead to thinking that children do not need transition practices. In this article, one of the ECEC centres was informed of their selection to a national trial only a few months before it began, so educators had little time to prepare for the transition.

Based on the results, educators prepared children for the demands of pre-primary education. Two types of resources were clearly the most important ones for the transferring children during the transition process, namely, academic and embodied cultural resources. These resources are required for (1) children’s independence in everyday routines without adults’ help, and (2) children’s competency. Both themes are represented in previous school transition studies, which have raised critical questions about adapting ECEC to meet the school standards, that is, schoolification, but also provoked debates about lowering the school age and ensuring social equality (Lappalainen, 2008; Prime Minister’s Office, 2018). The results indicate the changing character of ECEC and how the political interest to prepare children for school appears in daily activities (Jahreie, 2022). Even though some educators were critical of bringing “preschool-like” or “school-like” activities into ECEC, they still organized preparation activities and were worried about the children’s future in the new settings. The question of schoolification is currently important in Finland. It has spurred many initiatives and projects, showing the value of pre-primary education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021; Siippainen et al., 2020). The results of how educators valued academic and cultural resources as part of the “pre-primary schooler”, once again, raise questions of schoolification which should be considered critically in further research (see Jahreie, 2022).

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