

**Pedagogical Environments in Education for six-year-old
children in Finland and in the Netherlands**

Outi Schumilov

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Department of Education

University of Jyväskylä

Instructor: Raija Raittila

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Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tarkastella pedagogisia toimintaympäristöjä 6-vuotiaiden lasten kasvatuksessa Suomessa ja Hollannissa sekä selvittää, löytyykö niiden välillä eroja tai yhtäläisyyksiä. Tutkimus rajattiin, mukailien varhaiskasvatuksen laatuun keskittyviä tutkimuksia, tarkastelemaan pedagogisia strategioita sekä puitetekijöitä.

Tutkimus oli laadullinen, ja se toteutettiin pääosin etnografian periaatteita noudattaen. Tutkimuksessa näkyy myös poikkikulttuurisen sekä vertailevan tutkimuksen ominaispiirteitä. Aineisto koostui havainnointimuistiinpanoista, valokuvista sekä havainnointipäiväkirjasta. Aineistot kerättiin kahdesta suomalaisesta esiopetusryhmästä sekä kahdesta hollantilaisesta koululaisryhmästä. Havainnoiteja tehtiin jokaisessa ryhmässä noin viikon ajan. Aineisto analysoitiin käyttämällä aineistolähtöistä sisällönanalyysejä.

Tutkimus osoitti, että havainnoituissa hollantilaisissa ryhmissä käytettiin enemmän eriyttämistä pedagogisena strategiana 6-vuotiaiden lasten opetuksessa kuin Suomessa havainnoituissa esiopetusryhmissä. Viimeksi mainittujen ryhmien opetuksessa korostui enemmän toiminnallisen oppimisen strategiat. Hollannin ryhmät käyttivät enemmän teknologiaa opetuksen tukena kuin Suomen havainnointiryhmät, vaikka sitä korostettiin enemmän Suomen varhaiskasvatusta ohjaavissa asiakirjoissa. Huomattavin ero puitetekijöissä oli aikuisten ja lasten suhdeluvut. Suomen ryhmissä oli keskimäärin vähemmän lapsia aikuista kohti kuin Hollannin ryhmissä. Tämän tutkimuksen perusteella kulttuurien väliset erot pedagogisissa toimintaympäristöissä näkyvät helpommin pedagogisten strategioiden myötä, joita ohjaa kuitenkin myös varhaiskasvatuksen puitetekijät.

Avainsanat: pedagogiset toimintaympäristöt, relationaalinen ympäristö, etnografia, poikkikulttuurinen tutkimus, vertaileva tutkimus, 6-vuotiaiden opetus

ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to observe pedagogical environments in Education for six-year-old children in Finland and in the Netherlands and to find possible similarities or differences in them. This study was delimited, paraphrasing research about the quality qualifications of Early Childhood Education, to observe the pedagogical strategies and structural conditions.

This study was carried out with qualitative approach and followed the principals of ethnography. Some features of cross-cultural and comparative research is also seen in this study. The data conducted of field notes, pictures and field diary with refinements and conversations with teachers. The observational data was collected in two Finnish preschool groups and two Dutch school groups. One week of observations were carried out in each group. The data was analysed using inductive content analysis.

The research showed that the Dutch groups used differentiating as a pedagogical strategy more than the Finnish groups. In the latter, functional learning strategies were highlighted. The Dutch groups used technology as a tool in teaching more than the Finnish although the Finnish theoretical framework highlighted it more. The most notable difference in the structural conditions was found in the adult-child ratio. Finnish groups there was on average less children per adult than in the Dutch groups. Based on this study it can be stated that cultural differences in pedagogical environments can be seen well in pedagogical strategies which are however, also guided by the structural conditions.

Keywords: pedagogical environments, relationally constructed environment, educational institutions, ethnography, cross-cultural study, comparative study, education for 6-year-olds

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1 INTRODUCTION

This study observes pedagogical environments in two Finnish preschools and two Dutch schools. The aim is to sort out possible similarities and differences between the pedagogical environments in these countries in the education for six-year-old children. In this study pedagogical environments are researched from the viewpoints of structural conditions and pedagogical strategies. These two perspectives are formed based on some quality qualifications of Early Childhood Education. Pedagogical environment as a concept contains two important and relevant components. Pedagogy is an essential part of education, hence it has always raised a lot of conversation and debate among people and cultures. Environments of children are always transmitted by cultural, local, national and international objects and influences (Raittila, 2009, 248). Pedagogical environment is an extensive and versatile concept that tries to embrace all the pedagogical factors and aspects in the educational environment of children (Raittila, 2013, 70). Pedagogical environments are an important subject of discussion because that is what more or less defines the education and its quality.

Importance of this study can be justified with the lack of research about pedagogical environments and the significance of them in education for example based on the new National Curriculum of Finland (2017) and the Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education. Another factor that makes this study important is that it reaches over national borders. Cross cultural study aims to research phenomenon's in different contexts and different cultures (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 99). Comparing pedagogical environments in Finland and in the Netherlands can help us to point out interesting things that might not be noticed if just researching nationally. There is constant educational evaluation in EU countries and a lot of discussion about making uniform regulations and goals for all countries considering Early Childhood Education (Sylva, Ereky-Stevens & Aricescu, 2015, 4–10). Raittila (2013, 88–89) claims the pedagogical

environment of early childhood education in Finland, is going through a big change, for example due to the economic situation. Also the group sizes and number of staff are varying considerably. That is why researching pedagogical environments is currently an important issue and can be justified.

In this study, educational institutions are seen as places such as preschools and schools where children and staff members are active participants forming the interaction and the environment. Public educational institutions are controlled by norms and acts of society and Early Childhood Education and Care ideologies. (Alasuutari, 2009, 54–58.) Six-year-old children were selected as a group of focus based on my own interests on Finnish preschool and the difference between Finnish and Dutch educational systems. This age group hasn't started primary school yet in Finland but in the Netherlands, they are already on the third grade of primary school. There has occasionally been discussion in Finland whether school should be started at earlier age as in many other European countries. Although this study doesn't aim to answer that question, it is an interesting point of view to see how education is organized in two countries where school is started at a very different age. Government policies and parental employment patterns are what internationally effects on the age that children start school (Murray, 2015, 1718). For instance in the Netherlands, where school is started earlier, the other parent commonly works only part time. It very much comes to what adults think about children's development and how they should be educated (Murray, 2015, 1718).

In the second chapter I will define the pedagogical environments in this study and explain the essence of pedagogy as well as relational environment in relation to the pedagogical environments. I will present cultural perspectives and define some dimensions of pedagogical approaches. In the third chapter, structural conditions for pedagogical environments are described including curricular dimensions. Fourth and fifth chapter will introduce the research questions and design of this study in detail and the following two chapters will concentrate on describing the results of this study. Last chapter presents conclusions and significance of this study as well as measures taken to improve the trustworthiness. Further studies are also presented in the last chapter.

2 PEDAGOGICAL ENVIRONMENTS

In this study pedagogical environment is seen as an active environment that endorses children to learn, develop, explore and participate. According to Raittila (2013, 70) environment is being built and produced in everyday practices including aspects from physical spaces to interaction. The actions and the environment always change by the choices, made mostly by adults but also the children, to adapt the environment according to the pedagogical and ideological goals (Raittila, 2013, 70). The objectives of education form and build the pedagogical environment constantly and therefore different goals and quality qualifications have an important role in the process. In this study I am referring to widely used quality qualifications of education to describe aspects of pedagogical environments (see Huttunen et. 1995; Hujala, 1999; Hujala & Fonsén, 2010; Rosenthal, 2003; Alila, 2013).

Goals of quality for early childhood education are often divided to process and structural criteria. Process factors refer for example to social dimension and educational experiences of children. (Rosenthal, 2003, 102.) Dahlberg (2007) also mentions interaction as part of the process factors and in Hujala-Huttunen et. (1995), Hujala et. (1999) and Hujala and Fonsén (2010) model, participation of the children is seen as an important aspect of the process factors. (Alila, 2013, 52.) The structural conditions are often suggested to include factors such as group size, adult-child ratio, teacher education, autonomy and support to educators and physical spaces (Rosenthal, 2003, 102). All above mentioned quality factors together form a premise for the construction of the pedagogical environment in Early Childhood Education in this research. In the following figure, one can see the essence of pedagogical environment in this study.

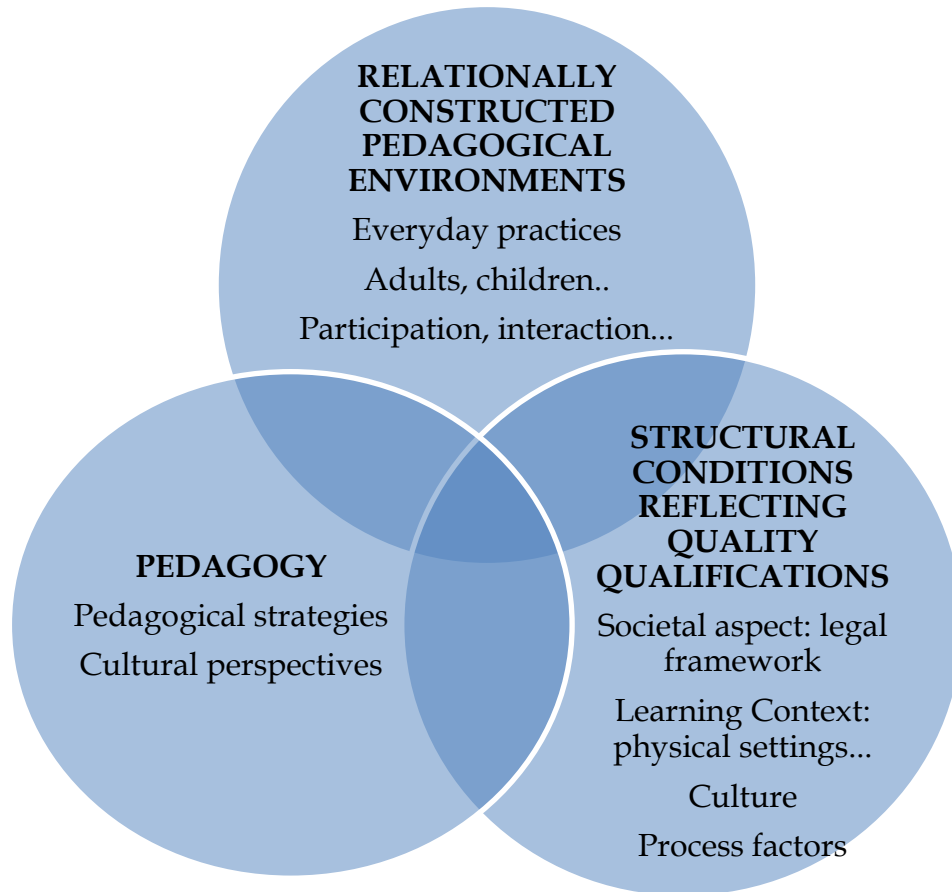


Figure 1 Pedagogical environments in this study

The above figure shows roughly how pedagogical environments are seen to form in this study. Firstly, the essence of *pedagogy* and the meaning of pedagogical strategies are presented in Chapter 2.1. Secondly, *relationally constructed environment* and its meaning in this study will be defined in Chapter 2.2. The importance of cultural perspectives will be presented in Chapter 2.3 although they are also closely attached to the structural conditions. Thirdly, I will introduce the *structural conditions* concerning pedagogical environments such as societal aspects and learning contexts including for instance physical settings and contents of education. Structural conditions will be presented by reflecting them to Early Childhood Education quality qualifications in Chapter 3. In this study I will use the acknowledged abbreviation ECEC, used in scientific articles to refer to Early Childhood Education and Care.

2.1 Pedagogy as a Premise for Early Childhood Education

In order to understand the meaning of pedagogical environments in this study, it is crucial to understand the essence of pedagogy. Referring to Raittila (2013, 70) pedagogy means having education, learning and supporting children's development as a standing point for early childhood education. Pedagogy changes and reforms along the changing society and perception of the child as well as childhood. All in all, pedagogy is seen as a contested and dynamic space, defined and experienced in different ways thus it is still essential to remember that much of what is important to Early Childhood Education pedagogy is deeply embedded in current policies and practices (Murray, 2015, 1718–1719). According to Siraj-Blatchford, Muttock, Sylva, Gilden and Bell (2002, 28) pedagogy can be represented as enabling learning to take place in a social and material context with a set of teaching techniques and strategies. Ergo there can be as many different styles and forms of implementing pedagogy as there are teachers and classrooms.

According to Murray (2015, 1715) pedagogy in its simplest meaning is 'leading young children'. He suggests that there are three main philosophers that have had the most impact in forming the meaning for pedagogy in ECEC; Rousseau (1762), Pestalozzi (1801) and Froebel (1826). They all endorsed the importance of environment and saw the child as an individual who learns best through experiences and activities. (Murray, 2015, 1716.) In addition to Murray, Sylva et al. (2015, 6–7) pointed out that theoretical and philosophical traditions regarding pedagogy are widely shared in Europe. Froebel and Montessori as well as Piaget and Vygotsky are according to Sylva et al. (2015, 7) the most cited theorists who built the principles for pedagogy throughout Europe. The principles consist from, pedagogical interactions, enabling learning through exploration, stimulating environment and importance of institutional bodies which guide pedagogical practices, to name just a few. In the Finnish Act of Early Childhood Education and Care (L580/2015, 1 §) pedagogy is mentioned to be

the emphasis for a systematic and goal oriented ensemble of education, learning and care in Early Childhood Education. The Dutch government is also keen on keeping track of the pedagogical standards as well as educational quality in the Netherlands. Meeting and accepting the obligations of Constitutional law, concerning pedagogy and quality, will obtain the financial support of schools. (van Oers, 2012a, 179.)

When contemplating the essence of pedagogy, quality factors are an important point of view. The meaning of quality factors in forming the pedagogical environment in this study will be presented in the chapter 3 with structural conditions. Some quality factors go beyond cultural boundaries yet pedagogical strategies might take different forms in different countries (Sheridan, 2009, 257). Pedagogical strategies are based on how the relationship between adult and a child is understood. Traditional understanding is that the adult is seen to be the supervisor or instructor for a group of children. That kind of view is yet often endorsed although the individuality of children is all the time more highlighted. (Karila, 2009, 261). Pedagogical strategies are formed in order to support learning and development of children. Teachers can have a big role in ensuring high quality pedagogical approaches by being aware of their own values, teaching methods and beliefs, yet the pedagogical strategies are always in relation to goals and objectives of the education. (Sheridan, 2009, 256–257.) All classrooms and groups have their own practices and daily routines which are formed by the pedagogical strategies and also include all the structural conditions of the pedagogical environments. Pedagogy is the main feature and the determiner of the practices of different pedagogical environments. In this study pedagogy is seen as different teaching and learning approaches together with educational quality in the context of relationally constructed environments.

2.2 Pedagogy in Relationally Constructed Environment

The focus of this study is the pedagogical environment and therefore defining environment, is important. Since pedagogy reflects time and societies, the

environment has to change along them. Environment can be defined to include all the surroundings arising from the everyday practices and all actors taking part in it (Raittila, R. 2013, 70). It is a mix of physical spaces and materials but also relationships and interactions happening in the circle of child's habitat. Grieshaber and McArdle (2014, 97) summarise Early Childhood environment as being "places of science, arts, adventures in learning and creativity, influencing the communities and schools around them". That said, not only the environment affects people in it, but also the people affect the environment. Environments should be evermore changing and reflecting the changes in the societies because children of today are not the same as children of yesterday (Zade, 2015). Harris, (2015, 1890) describes the classroom often being the first environment, outside home, where specific learning activities take place and children learn skills on how to live in a global society. In this study I am referring to the spaces of all of the groups participating as classrooms although in Finland preschool groups are not defined to use specific classrooms.

Relationally constructed environment can be seen to be formed from two aspects. Firstly, how children define the environment and secondly, how the environment determines the child. (Raittila, 2009, 245.) Forming and constructing ECEC environment, based on the relational approach, is a never ending process that essentially includes cultural and societal factors together with internal and daily practices (Raittila, 2013, 71). According to Gold (2005) relational pedagogy can be classified as relationships between people and their environments, awareness of cultural histories, inclusion and listening, responding to learners' interests, seeing patterns in learning, co-constructing knowledge and emphasising the experiential learning, language and self-reflection (Murray, 2015, 1722). This theory proves how pedagogical environments can be different in different countries as well as communities. It can also mean that, even though the premises lay in standards and qualifications, still even different facilities and institutions always up to groups and classrooms can have different pedagogical environments. A challenge in relational approach is that everything changes continuously which means no international or national standards

can be made for the pedagogical environments (Sheridan, 2009, 246). However, in this study some national standards and structural conditions are presented in order to be able to research and evaluate the pedagogical environments.

When studying pedagogical environments in the institutions of education, concepts of spaces and spatiality are relevant (Alasuutari, 2009, 66). Soja (1996) uses the term spatiality to define relational environment and the connections between space, societies and the environment. According to Soja (1996, 75–76) in a physical point of view the environment can be understood as materialistic, observed by senses and surrounded by people. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the physical aspect is not everything. Soja (1996, 1) suggests that we are all active participants in constructing the social world around us. Spatiality is constructed collectively and that is vital in order to make sense of our lives intimately as well as globally (Soja, 1996, 1). Albeit spatiality is collective, the relational space is always linked to the individual interpretation. The environment can get such different interpretations depending if you ask a child comparing to an adult's point of view. (Raittila, 2013, 73). Alongside collective and individual aspect of spatiality, Soja highlights the historical aspect in forming the environment. Spatiality is affected by all the traditions and older definitions that might not apply in our contemporary world anymore (Soja 1996, 2–3.) Historicity could be seen in this study as the aspect of cultural perspectives.

2.3 Cultural Perspectives

Cultural practices could be seen as structural conditions for pedagogical environments but in this study I have decided to connect it with the pedagogical approaches and the concept of relational environment. The kind of role education plays in the societies and how ECEC is practiced are matters of social and cultural values (MacNaughton, 2003, 114). Deformation of the culture of early childhood education as well as the pedagogical environment is highly affected by political, historical and social backgrounds of each country and culture. Everything from understandings to different physical ways of interaction influence

substantially the organization of pedagogical environments. (Prochner, L., Cleghorn, A. & Green, N. 2008, 190.) Ergo, it is understandable how the differences or similarities form also in Finland and the Netherlands and how the best pedagogical environments for some culture might not apply with another. Different cultural views on children and childhood create different discourses which makes it harder to have an international understanding of for example child-centeredness (Georgeson, J., Campbell-Barr, V., Bakosi, E., Nemes, M., Pálfi, S. & Sorzio, P. 2015, 1874). This applies to the whole education system and how it is formed, what rules lie under the national documents and how people think children should be raised. National documents pose an important role in both countries though they are highly contextual, historical and also situational in many ways (Onnismaa, E-V. & Kalliala, M. 2010, 275).

The development and education of children can already be seen as cultural project in itself because the environments and communities they grow in are outcomes of cultural development. Children are for instance encouraged to interact in culturally appropriate ways with other people such as talking, thinking and behaving. The educators' knowledge about development and education is reflecting all the internal information in each culture. The essence of education is social so it doubtlessly affects the ways that different societies create a culture. Also educational communities like day care centres and schools are always creating and renewing the cultures by their own actions. Through education, a lot of values, knowledge, skills and social practices are forwarded to children (Nummenmaa, 2006, 19–23). Simola (1995, 41–44) underlies that goals for teaching and learning always rise from outside the educational institutions mostly from the needs and requirements of the society and individuals. Yet the educational institutions have an important role in forming the culture of education.

Rosenthal (2003, 108) suggests that cultural contexts and their underlying values and beliefs about development are highly related to forming of educational practices and goals and for instance when defining and organising the learning environment for children. Karila (2009, 257) agrees that the cultural perspectives of children and how pedagogical environments should be con-

structured, form the current operating practices in educational institutions. She suggests that because of that, it is important that the cultural practices and ideologies should be always analysed and reviewed. Evaluation approach again refers to having certain quality factors that form the basis for reviewing the environments. Cultural values and developmental goals of each cultural community define the quality in ECEC and furthermore the quality of pedagogical environments (Rosenthal, 2003, 103).

As stated above, different things and aspects are valued in each culture. When contemplating differences and similarities of those cultural values, we can start to understand how ECEC is seen and defined in Finland and in the Netherlands. This study represents cross-cultural and partly comparative approach of research which is important in order to understand the spectrum of ECEC policies nationally and worldwide. (Rogoff, 2003, 11–12; Rosenthal, 2003, 112.) What is also essential to remember is that there can be always more to learn and it is impossible to say what is right or wrong concerning cultural practices (Rogoff, 2003, 112). Although it is stated here that cultural aspects and staff members partly create the conditions for children's lives in kindergartens and all the activities carried out by their pedagogical strategies, still the state child policies create the frames for those conditions. (Karila, 2009, 258.) Those frames will be presented in the next chapter about structural conditions for pedagogical environments.

3 STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS FOR PEDAGOGICAL ENVIRONMENTS

As stated in the previous chapters, although I am not researching quality yet I am reflecting the quality of ECEC to frame the pedagogical environments as pedagogical quality is closely attached to pedagogical environments. I decided to paraphrase some theories for pedagogical quality in order to separate the structural conditions of pedagogical environments from the process factors that are seen as pedagogical strategies in this study. (See for ex. Parrila, 2011; Sheridan, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986.) Sheridan (2009, 257) divides the pedagogical quality to be formed from four aspects producing quality which are the society, the teacher, the child and the learning context. In this study I am mostly using the societal and learning context aspects to form structural conditions for pedagogical environments.

In many of the models used to describe ECEC structural quality conditions are mentioned to be important aspects (see Hujala-Huttunen & Tauriainen, 1995; Hujala, Parrila, Lindberg, Nivala, Tauriainen & Vartiainen, 1999; Parrila, 2011; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Leseman & Slot, 2014). Dahlberg (2007) defines that the structural conditions include group size, level of education of the staff and ECEC contents and subjects. Parrila (2011) constructed a model where the framework for quality of ECEC consists of physical environment, composition of the group and the persistence of human relationships. (Alila, K, 2013, 54.) In addition to the above mentioned factors Leseman and Slot (2014, 317) adds availability of the play and learning materials and children-to-staff ratio to the structural quality factors. Hujala & Fonsén (2012, 319–321) and Sylva et al. (2015, 78–84) sum it all up and suggest that structural conditions defined for the quality of ECEC, and for that means also useable for pedagogical environments, include the spaces, materials, activities, staff-child ratio, day orders and other group policies. The following table will present the guidelines for structural factors in this study concerning pedagogical environ-

ments. It paraphrases the ecological theory for ECEC quality defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Table 1. Theoretical framework of this study for structural conditions in constructing the pedagogical environments (See Sheridan, 2007, 204–112; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986)

Structural conditions	
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws, guidelines and curricula
Learning context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical settings: spaces, materials, staff-child ratio, group size • time structure • planning • contents

As seen in the above table, this study will be focusing on the society conditions such as laws and curricula as well as learning contexts including physical settings and contents. Next chapter will describe these guidelines for structural factors in this study. Firstly, I will present the societal aspect including the framework of pedagogical environments in Finland and in the Netherlands. Secondly I will describe the structural conditions for learning contexts.

3.1 Societal aspect: National Documents Defining the Pedagogical Environments

Societal aspect helps us to understand the socio-economic and also cultural context in which educational institutions (preschools and schools) of this study exists. Although some cultural perspectives were already presented earlier in the Chapter 2.3 they are also very much connected to the requirements of public policies. (Sheridan, 2007, 205.) Childhood and ECEC institutions and environments are in many ways regulated by the economic, social and political factors of the society (Karila, 2009, 250). Education plays a great role in constructing the identity of each country and that is why evaluating and problema-

tizing the interpretations of the educational matters of countries become important. National identity always reflects the education and the other way around. (Richardson, 2006, 284.) Acts, orientations and national laws of ECEC inspire the forming of concrete and cultural environment of ECEC institutions (Raittila, 2009, 246). In order to educate children to be successful members of cultural communities in their societies, some goals have to be determined for the relationship between individual and social group (Rosenthal, 2003, 111). In this study these goals are defined in laws, curriculums and other national documents.

One of these societal factors defining the pedagogical environments is the Convention on the Rights of the Child by United Nations. It is one of the principle premises honouring children's views and both Finland and the Netherlands have ratified it and follow its guidelines (Pekuri, H-M. 2014, 22; UNCRC, article 12). Educators should create a social environment where the child has possibilities to have their say and take a stand in matters concerning themselves. (Pekuri, H-M. 2014, 23; UNCRC, article 12.) Martin Woodhead (2010) highlights that the status of children in societies as well as in early childhood education has changed after the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Child used to be more of an object of protection instead of someone who is active in forming their own lives and futures. (Woodhead, 2010, xx; Bennet, 2005, 7). The Convention encourages countries to improve their education systems and curriculums by allowing higher level of initiatives to young children as well as reinforcing the elements of wellbeing and involvement of the child (Bennet, 2005, 7). It is a process of development where the staff as well as the whole education municipality level should be involved and supporting its means (Venninen, Lipponen, Leinonen & Ojala, 2014, 212).

Another matter of societal aspect in forming pedagogical environments is the curricula. MacNaughton (2003, 113) suggest that curricula can be seen as a political process which is produced by educators and children's intentions and involvement. Intentions of the educators express some philosophical perspectives of education together with curriculum goals and pedagogical strategies for

instance to use of time, space and resources. According to Leseman and Slot (2014, 317) curriculum is a plan of what children can experience, what skills and knowledge they can develop and what values they can appropriate. All curricula should be based on one important quality factor which is enabling the children a good start in life. High quality of education, and furthermore pedagogical environments, includes competent and professional teacher with pedagogical knowledge. (Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams, 2006, 11.) Kessler (2014, 33) suggest that when planning the curricula, it is essential to have a vision of the future, clear plans of what should be taught and justifications for it, clear understanding if all children follow the same curriculum as well as ponder the relationship between teaching and the curricula. He summons it up by saying that the curricula should be formed based on the vision of what we want the children to become.

Holistic pedagogical philosophy, child-centeredness, seeing child as a unique human being, inclusion and equality are all curricular principles that are shared across Europe ergo also in Finland and the Netherlands (Sylva et al. 2015, 6). Albeit having several similarities between the curriculums of European countries, it is always the implementation that sets the real concrete examples of education in each country. The implementation is constrained by resources including staff training, ratios and budgets. (Sylva et al. 2015, 8.) As stated, having curricula with certain features that are intertwined in all, does not mean special features of each culture should be omitted in the own curricula of each country (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2006, 26). Next, I will present some of these cultural and societal special characteristics of curricula in Finland and in the Netherlands.

Bennet (2005, 11) formed two types of broad curricula in Europe based on all the OECD reviews, which can help us to make a slight difference also in the Dutch and Finnish educational systems. The other curricula used for instance in *Finland* is called the *social pedagogic approach*. In this particular approach the emphasis is on quality of life in ECEC institutions, children's wellbeing and social development. Also staff child ratio, the size of groups and staff qualifications

are important factors of the approach. The other, *pre primary approach*, used for instance in *the Netherlands*, emphasizes teaching and child outputs. One major factor is ensuring continuity with school and facile transitions. In the next table one can see how some of the main traits and features of each approach are presented according to Bennet (2005) and OECD (2006).

Table 2 Two curricular dimensions in Europe (see Bennet, 2005, 12–13; OECD, 2006)

Traits	Pre primary approach (For ex. The Netherlands)	Social pedagogical approach (for ex. Finland)
ECEC institution	Place for learning and instruction	Life space where children learn to be, to know, to do and to live together
Curriculum	Ministerial guidelines for objects and goals (In the Netherlands freedom of choice of curricula)	Broad national guidelines
Focus	Learning and skills, school readiness, achieving curriculum goals	Working with the child and the whole family, developmental goals, learning, child-centeredness, interactivity.
Pedagogical strategies	Mix of instructions and child initiated activities, thematic work	Child's own learning strategies and centres of interest, learning through play, relationships and educator scaffolding
Language and literacy	Individual competence: oral competence, phonemic and letter/word recognition, Emergent literacy practices.	Individual competence: language production and the ability to communicate, Holistic programming
Outdoor and indoor spaces	Indoors primary learning space, outdoors more of recreational are, important for motor skills development	Equal pedagogic importance
Assessments	Often required, goals for the group often defined, Graded assessment	Formal assessment not required, Developmental goals defined with parents and teacher, Multiple procedures assessment favoured
Quality control	Based on clear objectives, inspection, and frequently, on pre-defined learning outcomes, standardized testing may be used,	Participatory, based on educator and team responsibility, External validation undertaken by municipal pedagogical advisors, Focus on center performance

Even though these two traditions can't be directly used for describing the Early Childhood Education cultures in the Netherlands and in Finland, it gives us some indications of the institutional outlines for both cultures. Curriculums are not just defining the contents of education, as seen in the table, but also including spatial theories of cognitive and physical development (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, 41–47, Raittila, 2008). James, Jenks and Prout (1998) suggest that spatial decisions in curriculums are in a way using power by defining choices, rules and conventions.

In the pre-primary approach, educational institutions are defined to be places for learning and instructions whereas in the social pedagogical approach the main function of the educational institutions is considered to be a life space where children can learn to be, to know and to live. First cited refers to more academic philosophy and the latter to a holistic view of learning. Although all European countries are said to mainly follow the holistic approach, indications of pointing out the importance of academic philosophy are emerging throughout (Sylva et. 2015, 4–10). This can be seen also in assessment aspect because in pre-primary approach graded assessments are used and goals defined whereas social pedagogical approach lacks formal assessment.

3.1.1 Finnish framework for Pedagogical Environments

In Finland Early Childhood Education for 6-year-old children is to attend preschool which is mandatory for all children since 2015 (Basic Education Act, 2014, 26 a §). In this study preschool refers to education for 6-year-old children organised in public Educational institutions. In Finland preschool and day care institutions are under the ministry of Education and Culture since 2013 which means they are no longer considered as a social service but instead part of the education and schooling systems (Alila, K. 2014, 13).

ECEC is organized and supervised by government and it is regulated by basics of National Early Childhood Education Curriculum and Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education. In addition, every municipality has their own

plans and curriculums to implement early childhood education and preschool. According to Onnismaa and Kalliala (2010, 271) there are three key documents, in Finland for regulating ECEC which are the Act of Children's day care, Educational act and Core Curriculum for pre-primary education. The first mentioned is later improved to a revised Act on Early Childhood Education and Care in 2015 and is used as a guideline in constructing the curriculums. The Act emphasises pedagogy and defines requirements for space and the use of them in order to being able to fulfill all the early childhood education goals (2015/580, 1 §). As one of the most important points in building a pedagogical environment the article number six points out that the environment has to be developing, promoting learning, healthy and safe in consideration of child's age and state of development. It also states that all the function areas and materials should be appropriate and accessibility must be taken into account. (2015/580, 6 §.) The Finnish curriculums include some contents of learning as well as indications to school readiness but are mostly focusing on the essence of good childhood without setting specific learning objectives (Sylva et al. 2015, 27–29, 49).

The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education sets guidelines and objectives for learning environments. Learning environments are sometimes called as synonyms for pedagogical environments. However, in this study learning environments are seen as one major factor of how pedagogical environments are constructed. Raittila (2013, 70–71) points out that the learning environments described in the National Preschool Curriculum are not sufficient in researching pedagogical environment which is why it is important to also refer to other theories for instance from social and environmental sciences. Learning environments should, according to the Finnish National Preschool Curriculum (2014, 23–24), be pedagogically formed, complex and flexible ensembles that enable play and diverse examination of things motivating children. This can be comprehended the way that play and active learning in the means of examining the environment is highly valued and an objective in the Finnish preschools. The National Preschool Curriculum (2014, 23–24) also suggests that the use of technology, and possibilities offered by library, cultural and sport services

should be used as learning environments. The goal is for the learning environments to form comprehensive surroundings that support children to learn actively, collaboratively and individually. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, 23–24.) The new National Curriculum, which will only be introduced to preschools 2017, goes by the same lines, yet highlighting functional learning and the use of technology even more than the current Curriculum.

Alongside the learning environments the Curriculum presents a concept of operational environment or culture of preschool (*toimintakulttuuri*). It is developed by pedagogical strategies, different solutions of environments and by active participants and their experiences of the environment. (National Preschool Curriculum 2014, 22.) The curriculum separates the operational and learning environment as the latter is seen more in a point of view of structural conditions concerning learning and teaching, including spaces, materials, communities and policies. On the other hand, operational environments, are seen more as decisions of pedagogical approaches, development of education and reforming the learning environment. Pedagogical environment can be seen to include these two dimensions of environments and to present a wider understanding of ECEC environments and how they should be organised.

3.1.2 Dutch framework for Pedagogical Environments

In the Netherlands children can start school at the age of four. The official compulsory education starts at the age of five. Ergo in the Dutch system Early Childhood Education for 6-year-old children refers to third grade of primary school. The first two grades from age 4-6, children are taught by nursery curriculum with opportunities for play and games, as well as activities to learn through discovery. Some pre reading and pre mathematic activities are also used to prepare children for formal learning in primary grade 3 (age 6), where formal instruction for reading, writing and arithmetic starts. (Broekhof, K. 2006, 3). Emphasis on academic contents increases towards going to the grade three. (Sylva et. 2015, 20). It is also suggested that almost in all of the pre-primary ed-

ucation in the Netherlands, six-year-old children are practicing literacy and mathematics. The emphasis on teacher directed education and academic approaches have been growing ever since kindergartens were emerged with primary schools in 1985. (Sylva et. 2015, 38.)

The decisions and the control of the quality of education and care of schools and care providers are regulated by the governmental policies which are controlled for instance by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OECD, 2014, 14). Fundamental right of freedom in matters of education, is defined within the contexts of institutions, that are under governmental control by the Dutch Constitutional law and its main act concerning education; Article 23 (van Oers, 2012b, 178; the Dutch Constitutional law, 2008, 8). When researching the Dutch educational institutions, it is important to know how the freedom of educational choices as well as freedom of speech and for instance religion are extremely rooted and important values in Dutch culture. (van Oers, 2012b, 179.) This can already be seen by the enormous amount of choices in curriculums and pedagogical strategies. In addition to the different curriculum approaches and the public schools, there are several religious worldviews. Approximately 30 % of the schools are public and 70 % denominational, concept based or private (van Oers, 2012b, 179). Albeit the freedom of choosing the curriculum for 5-12-year-old children, there are some targets defined by the government that should be reached at the end of the primary school (Sardes, 2006, 5). The Constitutional law states many obligations and meeting and accepting those will obtain the financial support of schools. Measures to regulate the quality are for instance the staff Establishment Decree (Primary Education Act) which relates to the funding of staff and also Primary Education Attainment Targets Decree 1998. The attainment targets define what pupils are expected to have acquired in the way of knowledge, understanding and skills by the end of primary school.

Schools are free to choose from few main curricula as well as from smaller scale programs. However, all the programs will be checked for the reliable quality of an ECEC program. van Oers (2012b, 183) lists Piramide, Kaleidoscoop,

Startblokken/Basisontwikkeling (Starting blocks and Basic Development), Ervaringsgericht Onderwijs (Experience-oriented education) and Reggio Emilia to be the most used programmes alongside with Basic Development (play-based learning). All those curriculums define their own goals and quality factors for pedagogical environments paraphrasing national documents. Some schools might also have different curriculums for different school subjects which means the definitions for pedagogical environments are even wider and ambiguous.

3.2 Learning context

In this chapter I will present the dimension of learning contexts in structural conditions of pedagogical environments. In this study learning contexts are constructed from the physical settings including spaces, materials, staff-child ratio and group size together with time structures as in day orders of the groups, planning and contents of education (see Sheridan, 2007, 2).

One of the core aspects of physical settings is the space, or more wide, the whole physical environment. The physical space can be either built or natural or something in between. It is highly due to the socio-cultural view whether the built or natural environment is appreciated and valued (Prochner, Cleghorn & Green, 2008, 190). In this study, the focus will be mostly on the built spaces indoors which is where most of the day is usually spent. Physical environment consists of places, spaces and materials that have to be organized in order for the children to be able to participate and form meanings from the surroundings (Nordtømme, S. 2012, 317). According to Doctoroff (2001, 105) how the physical environment is arranged, can support children's play and development as well as enhance their participation in play. The essence for sustained, complex play for children lays in high quality, developmentally appropriate environments. (Doctoroff, 2001, 105.)

Physical environments are always filled with values and expectations and that is why teachers have an important role in organizing the environment so

that it doesn't exclude anyone (Nordtømme, S. 2012, 317). A vital function of the physical environment is to encourage and motivate children to learn and develop, so it can be an important pedagogical tool. Physical environment can at its best inspire children to move and try different materials by directing them to appropriate doing and learning. (Nordtømme, S. 2012, 319.) As play is one of the most important developmental tools and a way of learning, acknowledged by many experts, it is crucial to take into account the effects in creating a good pedagogical play environment. Arranging the play area lighting, having defined places to play with visible boundaries, keeping the noise levels down and making sure staff has the abilities to observe should be taken into consideration. (Doctoroff, S. 2001, 105.)

Another key factor in learning context alongside forming the physical environment is the staff-child-ratio. It is an essential factor of the physical setting of the educational institutions and an important aspect of the quality of Early Childhood Education (Sylva et al., 2015, 77). Staff-child-ratio is presented to be a structural quality factor in many studies together with qualifications for staff members (Alila et al. 2014; Leseman & Slot, 2014, 317). In Finland the amount of staff and also the educational qualifications are all regulated by the early childhood education legislations (Lehtinen, 2000, 28–29). According to the regulations of day care article 6 §, there should be at least one person with the task required eligibility for eight children over three years old and in full day care. It used to be 1:7 but has recently been changed to eight children per one adult. (Färkkilä, Kahiluoto & Kivistö 2006, 22.) In Finnish preschools, for 6-year-old children, there has to be one adult for 14 children. Third of the staff in kindergarten, working with children, should have qualifications of a kindergarten teacher and two thirds should have the qualifications of a practical nurse. (Kahiluoto, T. 2014, 37; Act on Teaching qualifications 1998/986). In preschool, enactment of education department, defines the qualification factors for teachers. They have to be either primary school teachers with master's degree from education or kindergarten teachers with bachelor's degree in early childhood education. (Act on Teaching qualifications, 1998/986, 7 §.)

There were no legal enactments to be found from the Dutch system for staff-child ratio but in some curriculums such as *Kaleidoscoop* and *Piramide* the preferable ratio is 1:8 (Broekhof, K. 2006, 10). However, OECD states that the ratio in the Netherlands is one adult per 10 children, ages 4-12. It is also said that staff ratios in the beginning of primary school are higher than preferred, but have been reduced recently to 20:1. (OECD, 2014). From these facts one may conclude that the staff-child ratio varies depending on the school and can be almost anything between 1:8 to over 1:20. In the Netherlands primary school teachers are trained in Primary Teacher Training Colleges which is a higher education level and where everybody is trained to teach children from the age 4 to 12. Broekhof (2006, 7) states that according to Education Staff Qualification Requirements Decree (2005) the training focuses on the development of teacher competencies such as interpersonal competencies, pedagogical competencies, subject-related and didactic competencies, organisational competencies, cooperative competencies, and competencies related to professional reflection and development.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to discover possible similarities and differences between Finnish and Dutch educational institutions for 6-year-old children and more specifically their pedagogical environments.

1. What are the differences and similarities between pedagogical environments in Finnish and Dutch educational institutions for 6-year-old children?
 - a. How are the pedagogical strategies in the Finnish and Dutch groups and are there some differences or similarities?
 - b. How are the structural conditions in each country and are there some differences or similarities?

The aim is not to be presenting all the differences and similarities between the pedagogical environments of these two countries but instead answer to the first research question by the perspective of two sub-questions. Pedagogical environment as a topic is very wide so I had to narrow the research themes down in order to have as high-quality information about the chosen topic as possible. Consequently, differences and similarities about pedagogical environments in Finland and in the Netherlands, will be research by pedagogical strategies and structural conditions.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Qualitative Research Approach and Participants

I chose to use qualitative approach of research in this study because the aim is to deeply understand the pedagogical environments (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 66). I knew based on a pre observation that there are some differences and similarities between pedagogical environments in Finland and the Netherlands but I didn't know exactly how they are formed in the Netherlands. The fact that I didn't know the other system and how the institutions are formed, also led me to use qualitative approach. Qualitative methods can according to Newby (2010, 115) help the researcher to understand for example people, how they live and what kind of meanings they give to experiences. It can also be a tool to figure out how things happen and why they happen as they do (Newby, 2010, 116).

Qualitative methods such as observation provide an opportunity to learn within the situation, which was the main thing I was interested on pedagogical environments in the first place (Watling, 2001, 263). Wanting to learn new things about educational institutions for 6-year-old children in Finland and also in the country where I currently live. I have always been interested in cross cultural studies and comparative research between different countries and cultures. The intention was not to formulate a theory, but to gain insight into the institutional choices in education for 6-year-old children in these countries and the reasons behind them. Observation is one of the main methods of qualitative research (Patton 2015, 14; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 71) I chose to use it as the main method of this study because it allows the researcher to be open and inductive as well as to possibly see something that people in the observed setting don't see (Patton, 2015, 333). Grönfors (2010, 158) stated that getting information about children's daily life and pedagogical environments would be hard without using observation as a method. Sometimes observations are used to

support another method however, in this study it is the main data collection method as the intention is to learn new things about unfamiliar contexts. (Tuomi & Sarajarvi, 2009, 81; Grönfors, 2010, 158–159).

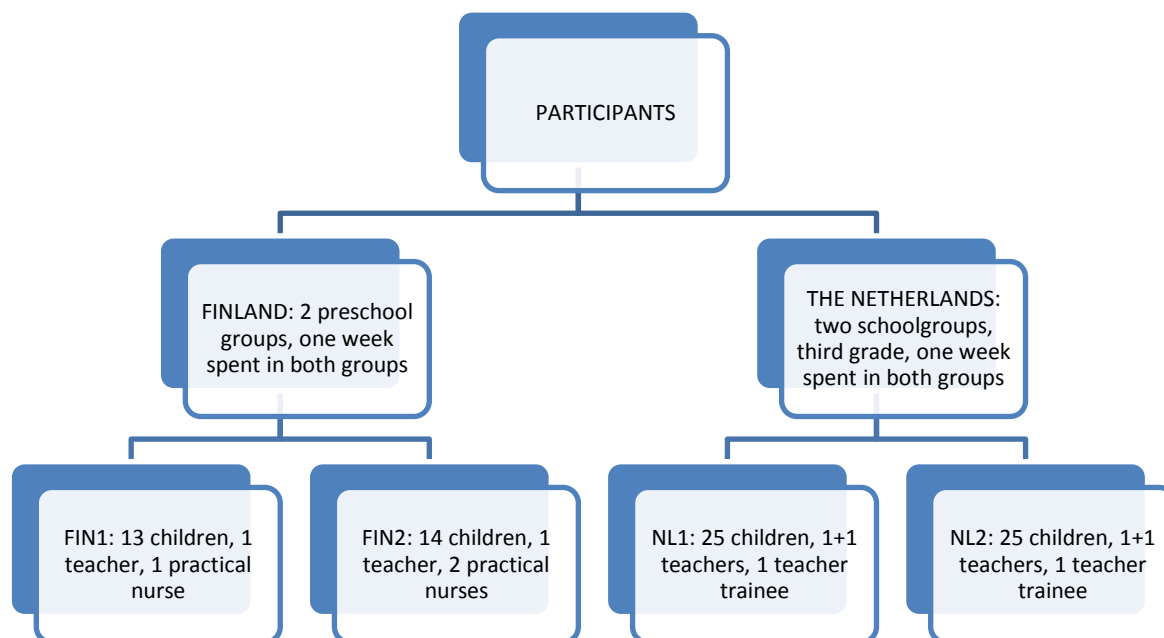


Figure 2 Participants of this study

As presented in the figure 2 the data for this study was collected in two preschool groups in Finland and two primary school third grade groups in the Netherlands. In order to differentiate the observed groups in the analysis I coded the two preschool groups in Finland as FIN1 and FIN2 and the groups in the Netherlands as NL1 and NL2. In the Finnish groups all of the children were born in the year 2010 so they were either five or six years old. In the Dutch groups most of the children were also born 2010, however, in the NL1 there were three children born in 2009, two of them repeating the third grade. In the NL2 two were born 2009 and one child was born 2011.

I chose these two preschools from a medium sized city in Finland and emailed their directors asking the permission to collect the data in one group during one week. I chose the other preschool randomly and the other because it was in a different building with the school classrooms. In this city all preschool

groups are situated in school buildings but in this specific case it is located next to the school and not in it. I wanted to include this kind of preschool in to my study because in most of the municipalities in Finland preschool groups are still located in day care facilities. When the choices about the participants are made the researcher has to be sure that the participants are willing to join and know what the study is about. The idea of the consent is also to inform participants of the research so the researcher has to consider the best way of asking for it (Farrimond 2013, 109–110; Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012–2014). I delivered the consent letters for parents one week before starting my observations so that the teachers could collect them before I started. All the families gave a consent in the first group and in the second group the only consent that I never got was from a child who was not present the whole week. More information about the consents regarding this study in Chapter 5.5 about ethical considerations.

In the Netherlands I contacted two schools by some contacts to the teachers and got the permission to do the observations. However, in both schools they said that the parents' consents are not needed as I wasn't directly observing specific children. In the other school I was allowed to give the parents an information letter of my study and in the other school the teachers told the parents about me and my study themselves. Farrimond (2013, 110–111) confirms that the consents can be oral or written. What made it a bit more contradictory in this study was that I got written consents only from the Finnish municipalities and Finnish families when in the Netherlands all consents were oral.

5.2 Ethnographic Research and other Methodological Choices

My study aims to produce descriptions and information about a community and a culture which is essential for ethnographic study (Lappalainen 2007b, 9; Emond 2005, 123; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, 1). Alongside exploring the features of each culture, it also aims to understand the practices of the observed group as well as the causes and consequences of those practices

(Alasuutari 2001, 67–70). In this study practices of the educational institutions are seen to be the pedagogical approaches and frameworks that define the environment (see Chapter 2.1). This study is based on ethnography which usually tries to answer the question “What is going on here” (Pole & Morrison, 2003, 18). The aim is to explore what is going on in different classrooms and countries. Ethnographic studies have been described to be a good and used method in researching education and especially childhood or development of children in different cultural contexts (Lange & Mierendorff, 2009, 80–81; Allison, 2010, 249).

In ethnographic study the researcher goes into the prevalent culture and tries to reveal its true character by living inside the system (Emond 2005, 124). It can be used to find or see something that cannot be reached by asking (Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009, 58). I want to get to know the pedagogical environments in the classrooms and preschool groups by observing and some ways also acting in their social and cultural daily practices which in addition to ethnography also applies in cross cultural studies. After getting to know the pedagogical environment I have to interpret the results by also making a point on my own experiences on the field. (Gordon, T. & Lahelma, E. 2004, 100.)

This study could be seen as institutional ethnography as it partly focuses on what people do and how do they talk about their actions in institutions such as preschools and schools. What is also relevant is how those institutions are regulated by ethical considerations, laws and professional frames. (Komulainen, 2014, 244.) Although I am researching the pedagogical environments and groups inside these environments, wanting to know about cultural differences, I also have to keep in mind the individual aspect. Ethnographic study tries to sort out what traits unites the individuals in one group while bearing in mind that the observed individual is always viewed as a representative of one's own culture (Alasuutari, 2001, 67–70). Ergo some generalizations can be made from groups observed in this study. In cross cultural method generalizations are often made by typology and descriptive comparison as well as in this study (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 100).

I chose to use a few methodological choices in this study because research should not be based on one narrow methodological paradigm but several choices that build the foundation for the study (Patton, 2002, 257). Ethnography can mean the spectrum of methodologies that the researcher is using. (Lappalainen, 2007b, 9). Next, I will present the essential factors of cross cultural and comparative methods in this study. *Cross cultural method* is often used in an ethnographic study based on long term observation (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 100). It means researching the same phenomenon or structures in different contexts reaching over national borders and societies. (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 99). It is stated that the countries and factors being studied should have content equivalence so that the comparisons make sense in the first place (Patel, 2006, 90). In this study the equivalence can be justified for instance by both countries being members of EU. Features of *comparative method* come visible especially when analysing the data. Gordon and Lahelma (2004, 99) claims that cross cultural and comparative methods are often used as synonyms because there are duplications in these research approaches. They actually define that cross cultural method can even be one way of producing comparative study (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 107). The difference between these two methods is that cross cultural study is usually qualitative when comparative studies usually opt for quantitative approach. (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 99–100.) In this study, paraphrasing comparative method, the aim is to view institutions of a similar nature in two different societies but unlike what is usually inherent to comparative studies, without specifically laid down hypothesis (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 99). Ethnographic, comparative and cross cultural methods doesn't exclude one another but rather complement each other (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004, 100).

5.3 Data Collection

5.3.1 Semi-structured observation

This study is mostly implemented with semi-structured observation also using some features from highly structured observation. Having the research

questions and observation frame ready before collecting the data implies to highly structured observation, although it doesn't exclude finding new relevant aspects from the data. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 305.) I used the research questions and the theory frame of this study to guide and support me in the beginning of the observations but during the data collection the initial delimitations and focuses matured and changed into new more interesting views. The researcher can't always predict what happens and what the consequences are so flexibility is important for the researcher (Lappalainen 2007a, 83). Although the original plan might change during the observations, it is still very important for the researcher to be prepared and ready to observe systematically (Patton, 2015, 413).

Observation can be very time consuming and it requires a lot of work why the use of it as a method is important to justify (Grönfors, 2010, 159). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, 303) formed a list based on Morrison's (1993) studies about the possibilities to gather data by observation. Those are the physical, human, interactional and programme settings. The observations of this study follows many of those settings and were mostly concerning the activities carried out, following the staff-child ratio, counting times used for transitions between activities, some conversations or interaction between adults and children and some discussions with teachers about the things that the teachers wanted to share about the pedagogical environments. I was first a bit worried if I would get the same kind of data from the Dutch school groups as my language skills are not fluent yet. As I wasn't allowed to record conversations, I talked a lot with the teachers and always made sure that I understood the system and what happened. The teachers were also very helpful and always came to ask if I had any questions.

5.3.2 Data

The research data was collected through observation and it consists of field notes, field diary and pictures from two Finnish preschool groups and two Dutch third grade groups. I used pen-paper method when collecting the observations and after each day, I transcribed them to the computer. I spent one week in each group observing the pedagogical environments. As I wanted to make sure I understand everything correctly my research journal also consists of some unofficial interviews or talks with the teachers of these groups. By writing down some conversations I also wanted to give the teachers the possibility to be heard. The following figure shows the data of this study and the hours used to collect it.



Figure 3 Collected Data

In the figure 3, all factors of which the data consists of, are mentioned. I used 101 hours in total to collect the data from which 49h 45 minutes in Finland and 51 h 15 minutes in the Netherlands. In that amount of time I collected all together 50 pages of field notes and 12 pages of research journal notes with font size 12 and line spacing 1,5. I also took 96 pictures, 24 from each group, to analyse the physical spaces of the groups.

Field notes. As my main method, I observed pedagogical environments including all daily activities in two preschools in Finland and two schools in the Netherlands by using pen-paper method. I spent two weeks in the Finnish preschool groups in September 2016 and two weeks in the Netherlands in October 2016. I spent every day from 4 to 7 hours in the groups observing all activities. First two days in each group I wrote almost everything down and tried to get an overview of the functioning of the group so that I wouldn't restrict the area of study too much and instead being able to observe broadly which is very important in ethnographic study (Alasuutari 2001, 69). Below one can see a short sample from the field notes first in Finnish (original language of the field notes) and then translated into English.

13.15 alkaa varsinainen lepo vaikka lapset ovatkin jo hetken makoilleet sängyissä ja jutelleet. Lepo loppuu 13.48, jonka jälkeen lapset siirtyvät pöydän ääreen piirtämään tai askartelemaan, 1 lapsi jää vielä nukkumaan

13.15 the actual resting time starts although the children have already been lying down in their beds talking for a while. The rest ends at 13.48 and the children go by the tables to draw or to do crafts, 1 child stays in bed sleeping.

Field diary. The point of the field diary is to write down theoretical ideas as well as thoughts and understandings of the researcher. It can also be used to examine the impact of the researcher in relation to the environment (Edmond 2005, 132). Writing a research diary also helped me to understand and differentiate the effects of subjective thinking from the actual data. I wrote the journal notes interleaved with the notes but always marked it, and when transcribing, separated it from the rest of the notes. I also talked with all the teachers about the situations or certain methods used. Sometimes they wanted to explain

something and sometimes I wanted make sure I had understood everything correctly. That really helped me especially in the Netherlands where I couldn't always be sure if I understood as my Dutch is not fluent. All above mentioned things I also wrote in my field diary. Here is a sample of some of my own reflections concerning the observations in the field diary first in Finnish and then translated into English.

Mitä Suomessa voitaisiin ottaa opiksi täältä (Hollannista)? Laadun tarkkailu opettajien keskuudessa! Opettajat saavat palautetta team leaderilta (tiimin vetäjältä) ja toimintaa suunnitellaan yhdessä.

What could we learn from here (the Netherlands) in Finland? Quality monitoring among teachers. Teachers get feedback from the team leader and they always plan the activities together.

Visual data. I decided to take pictures of all the physical environments to reduce my work with transcribing. Some aspects of culture are essentially visual (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, 825) and show more accurate and broad information about the physical spaces than just written notes. The pictures are not meant to be separate from the social settings of the phenomena but instead integrated in this study. I collected the data mostly from the inside spaces and decided to leave the outdoor spaces out of this research.

5.3.3 Role of the observer

In this study I mostly used direct observation, as in purely watching and writing notes from the surroundings and activities, not participating in the activity under observation (Angers & Machtmes, 2005, 778). The main advantage of direct observation is that the researcher can possibly learn things which people are unwilling to talk about in an interview (Patton, 2015, 333). The role of the observer can be somewhat participant even though direct observation is used (Patton, 2015, 331). The range between participation and nonparticipation is wide and cannot be seen in black and white. Although I was mainly in the back and not participating to the activities, I still talked and sometimes even played with the children as well as asked them and also the teacher's questions while observations. (Patton, 2015, 336.)

The role of the researcher is very much affecting the study and the data collection process. There are some aspects that has to be taken into account when doing an observational study. Every researcher has certain unconscious and experiential burden that affects the observations and brings different perspectives into the study (Cohen et al. 2007, 150). Gould (2016, 11–12) calls it reflexivity and suggests it is a key factor in ethnographic research because it can raise questions about how the data is produced and what is the role of the researcher in the process. He claims that ethnographic data is actually formed by means of social communication.

According to Gould (2016, 27–33) reflexivity can be divided in three different dimensions. Firstly, he mentions the experiential reflexivity which describes how the researcher sees the research environment. It includes the whole personal history of the researcher and how those experiences affect the way of thinking. In my case one of these aspects is that I have worked in a preschool as a kindergarten teacher so I already have knowledge of the culture and environments of the preschool groups in Finland. The previous knowledge is here being stated as a strength but it can very well be a weakness as well as one might not see all the same things from the environment if they are already used to it. Second form of reflexivity is the relational reflexivity which is associated with relationships between the participants and researcher and possibly some unbalanced power relations. It is almost impossible for the researcher to stay completely neutral in the research field balance of power. (Gould, 2016, 30–31). In this study relational reflexivity is essential because the research involves children. I talked with the children about my study always when they asked. At the end of the observation I also sometimes helped them with small things but all the time reminding that I am not the teacher. I had to guide the children several times to ask the questions from the teacher and not from me. Some days I also left my notebook for a while and said that I will take a moment now to play with the children when they asked me which I believe helped to equalise my role with the children instead of the adults (Strandell, 2010, 102). That happened few times during the observations mostly when being outside where I wasn't

meant to observe. However, doing the actual observations I always tried to situate myself somewhere where I wasn't part of the activities and also not disturbing. A few times during the observations I got into a situation where I had to question my role as an observer when children were doing something not allowed or hurting each other. I chose to intervene on these situations as I saw that someone could be hurt. Although not intervening is a basic precondition in achieving a confidential relationship with the children, I chose to act as a responsible adult and protecting the children by talking with them or intervening the situations in another way (Strandell, 2010, 101–102).

Lastly, Gould (2016, 32–33) mentions the post-colonial reflexivity which is a sort of intersection point for the previous two dimensions of ethnographic reflexivity. Post-colonial reflexivity includes aspects from historical, cultural and political reflexivity. It means sensitization to those aspects but at the same time trying to get rid of any stereotypes that are naturally established. One essential factor also related to the role of a researcher is self-criticism at each step of the process (Pole & Morrison, 2003, 28–29; Scott & Usher, 1996, 33–50). After every day of observations, when doing the transcriptions, I reflected the day and my own actions wondering if something I did, possibly affected the situations observed.

5.4 Content Analysis of Data

In ethnographic research the data analysis usually consists of interpretation of different human actions as well as institutional practices. These interpretations and actions are implicated in contexts such as pedagogical environments of two different countries. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, 3.) Content analysis is one of the most typical method of analysis in qualitative research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 91; Payne & Payne, 2004, 52; Graneheim & Lundman 2004, 105). It can refer to any qualitative data reduction and trying to identify consistencies and meanings in the data, as I am aiming to do in this study (Patton, 2015, 541).

This study implies inductive analysis which purpose is to generate new results, theories or explanations from the data collected (Patton, 2015, 541).

I made one pre-observation in a school in the Netherlands in order to get to know the education a little bit better. I also emailed a primary school teacher working now in kindergarten to ask her several questions about the school system and organising the education for six-year-old children. Reading about pedagogical environments I found out that children's participation is highly valued, and it is seen as a quality factor for education. All this information, got me to form two preliminary aspects -children's participation and transitions between activities- to focus on, which were however later obviated. Instead I decided to raise other interesting topics from the data to the analysis.

In order to have all the essential information from the observations and having them as accurate as possible, I decided to do the transcriptions right after each observation day. After finishing the observations, I started immediately going through the transcripts of the data. Analysis of the data starts with reading it repeatedly and then thinking, thematising, comparing and making interpretations (Rantala 2010, 113). The ideas of certain sub-themes about the differences and similarities in pedagogical environments, already noticed during the observations, caught my attention at this stage of exploring and getting to know the data. For example, differentiating learning contents was so strongly present in the observation in the Dutch groups that it formed to be a point of focus. Decisions, definitions and notes made on the field already start the process of analysing when researcher is trying to understand the actions of the participants and target group (Palmu 2007, 141; Alasuutari 2001, 74). Although I tried to keep an open mind while observing it is obvious that the researcher has to make choices about who, when and which situations they observe so that the delimitations of the theme starts to form. It is a very complex question how to delimit the data but in ethnographies, essential to justify (Palmu 2007, 141). Figure 4 shows some of the normal phases of content analysis and how it is implemented in this study.

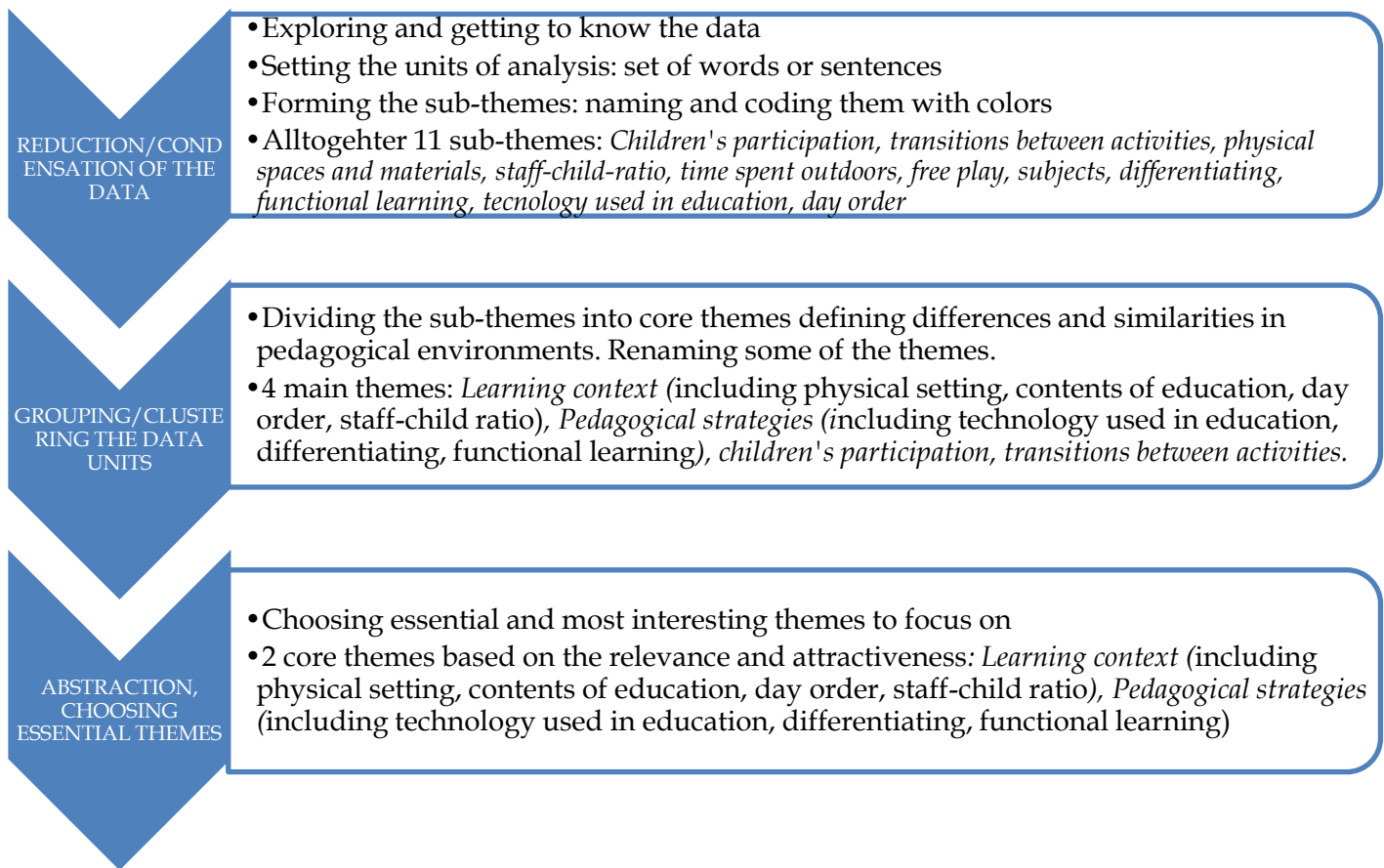


Figure 4 Content analysis in this study

Data-driven content analysis is a three-phased process where the data is first reduced, then clustered or grouped and finally general concepts are formed (abstracted) Miles & Huberman 1994, 10). When starting the process of reduction, I first needed to clarify what kind of units of analysis I am looking for in this data (Graneheim & Lundman 2004, 106). Units of analysis are determined by the research assignment and the type of the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 110; Cavanagh, 1997; Polit & Hungler 1997). I decided to use units of words or sentences with similar content which are referred as meaning units (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 110; Burns & Grove, 1997; Polit & Hungler 1997). I selected a few sub-themes based on the pre-observation, theory and ideas formed during the observations, and wrote them down with colour codes, concurrently naming them. Those first sub-themes were *children's participation (1), transitions be-*

tween activities (2) and physical spaces and materials (3). Then taking one theme at a time to focus on, I read the data again and coloured all suitable units for that theme. When going through the data I started to notice units of analysis, which strengthened the ideas about new sub-themes of focus, which I had also pondered in the field diary. Units of analysis were set of words or sentences that repeated several times in the data for instance starting the language lesson or going outdoors. I invented new names and colour codes for those new sub-themes and ended up having altogether 11 different sub-themes. The rest of the sub-themes were *subjects (4), differentiating (5), functional learning (6), staff-child-ratio (7), technology used in education (8), time spent outdoors (9), free play (10) and day order of the groups (11).*

The next step after reduction of the data, is to find the core themes defining the research questions which in this study meant finding themes with differences or similarities in the pedagogical environments (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 175; Patton 2002, 453, 457; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 108.) I decided to divide the sub-themes into four different main themes based on similar content that could be analysed under same headlines. Those main themes were *learning context* (physical settings, staff-child-ratio, day order, contents of education), *pedagogical strategies* (differentiating, functional learning, technology used in education), *children's participation, transitions between activities.* In the observations, structural conditions are only seen in the point of view of the learning context as the societies part in forming the structural conditions is seen in the theory framework (see table 1). Some sub-themes were hard to set in the chosen themes so I had to make a lot of decisions whether certain units can be taken into the certain theme or if it is irrelevant information. I decided not to divide those four themes into different files as some relevant information might disappear related to the context. I thought it would be better to have all the themes in their chronological and contextual order in the observations so that they are possibly easier to interpret and analyse. The coloured codes separated and highlighted the units, sections and themes well enough from the data.

After having the data clustered, as in categorized and grouped, I started abstracting the data which means observing the themes and choosing the most essential and interesting ones (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 111–112). I decided which groups and themes seemed to be relevant and interesting for this study by contemplating which themes had most units of analysis and which themes already showed differences or similarities between the observed groups and countries. I limited the data and started analysing the chosen themes. Making delimitations and boundary conditions for the matter being research is also challenging and time consuming, yet very necessary for understanding the study theme profoundly (Pöntinen, S. 2004, 43). Quite a lot of transcript text was also left out from the sections and were found irrelevant considering the themes. In the end I chose to describe the results of two of these core themes based on the relevance and what seemed interesting in the point of view of the pedagogical environments. Those two themes were *learning context and pedagogical strategies*. I had so much interesting data that I had no choice but to concentrate on few selected topics as the thesis would otherwise swell into enormous measures.

I collected the data mostly in Finnish but when doing the observations in the Netherlands, I sometimes felt it was easier to write some words or short sentences in Dutch or in English as that way I was faster in writing the notes. When doing the transcriptions, I translated some obvious words into Finnish but then yet left some words in Dutch. I used only Finnish describing the sections and themes and then translated those into English when writing about the results.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations of the research are closely attached to the trustworthiness and evaluation criteria (Kuula, 2006, 34; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2013, 127). In this research I have decided to separate ethical considerations and trustworthiness in two different chapters. Considerations of trustworthiness of this study

will be presented in Chapter 8.2. I have thought about the ethical questions at every step of the way when implementing the study, making sure that the decisions made for instance in collecting the data are ethical. (Kuula, 2006, 1; Varto 2005, 49). Ethically good research is conducted by following the conduct of research offered by Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012, 4–7). It includes directives for the researcher about what to consider when implementing the research such as honesty and accuracy in each step of the process. It divides the ethical considerations in respecting the self-determination, avoiding causing any harm and ensuring the privacy and anonymity of the participants.

The most optimal way of ensuring anonymity is to have the collected data unidentifiable (Farrimond, 2013, 129). In this research the anonymity of the participants is secured with several measures. The cities nor the names of the schools and preschools are not mentioned. For referring to participants only codes and fake names are used in the field notes. The data is solely analysed by the researcher and out of reach for anybody else. Participants should be able to trust the promise of anonymity in the study. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2013, 131; Kuula, 2006, 112.) This study was an overt observation which means the participants knew about the research. Overt observations don't always capture what is really going on because the people know they are being observed which might change their behaviour (Patton, 2015, 339–340). On the other hand, covert observations are often regarded non ethical as they can't have the consents of the participants for the exact study subjects. In some cases, the participant doesn't even have the knowledge that they are being studied in the first place. (Patton, 2015, 340.) Although I was not directly observing children in this study, I had to keep in mind the ethical issues in research involving children. One of the main factors in ensuring the ethicality of the study involving children, is building a confidential relationship with them (Vehkalahti, Rutanen, Lagström & Pösö, 2010, 16). Obtaining informed consent from the children differs to getting it from the parents because with children it means letting them know everything they want to know about the study. The consent is in a manner of speaking present at all times. (Strandell, 2010, 97.) I did my best to answer all

the questions that the children had concerning the study and always letting them know about my observations if they wished. As my observations were totally overt, I made sure that children always knew when they were being observed and when not and asked their permission for that. I made it clear that the children had the opportunity to refuse from being observed (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009, 286–288).

Research permits are essential in the ethical considerations of the research (Strandell, 2005, 29; Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012–2014). In this case that the research is implemented in two countries, quite a lot of issues had to be confirmed before starting the research process. In Finland I got permits from the participant municipality, directors of two kindergartens, staff members of the groups, parents of the children and of course the children themselves in the observed groups. Getting the consent form the guardians is described to be an important issue in research involving children (Strandell, 2010, 96). I got all the consents of participation from parents in Finland. In the Netherlands, directors of the schools, where the observations were implemented, told that the parents' consents are not needed in this case. Signed consents are not necessarily needed if the participants are informed sufficiently about the research (Kuula, 2006, 99–108). In the other Dutch school, the parents were given an information letter about the study and in the other one, the teachers informed the parents and children personally about the study.

When the research includes children, it is very important to define the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Children need protection and care, so the researcher has to ponder her own position and status among the children (Lappalainen 2007b, 71). My aim was not to act as a staff member in the group, which was occasionally difficult. The children are used to having different adults in the group and they know they can always ask the adults but in this case I tried to always guide them to ask the real staff members of the group. I had to emphasise to the children, that I am not the teacher, several times during the observations. Especially at the end of the week when the children got used to me being there, they started asking help for some assign-

ments and altogether were seeking for more attention. In those situations, I sometimes guided the children when I saw it wouldn't risk or affect my observations anyhow. Non-intervention can be problematic because the influence of the researcher might not be neutral and they have to consider when to intervene in situations involving children where for instance some harm could happen (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 315).

In addition to the general ethical considerations there are some ethical issues that might have affected this study especially because it follows the ethnographic approach of research. Firstly, the presence of the researcher might have altered the data because the participants might want to impress, deny or influence the researcher. Secondly, the researcher might be too familiar with the situation or participants that they neglect certain aspects of the observations. Thirdly, the importance of social contexts might be either over highlighted or excluded from the study and lastly, the issue of generalizability which refers to contexts of the study, should be recognised. If observed situations are unique, to which context will the findings apply? (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 156–157.) In this study all these aspects have been taken into account but for example the actions of participants cannot be foreboded. Similar considerations will be also presented in the trustworthiness of this study in Chapter 8.2.

As mentioned earlier when contemplating the role of the observer, reflexivity is a core aspect of ethnographic research and especially the ethical considerations. In this study the main concern in ethical reflexivity is the information and the power positions. (Komulainen, 2014, 244–245.) During the observations there were two situations when a teacher asked me to watch the children for a while or to tell them if they are being too loud. I explained that I am trying to keep a researcher role where I cannot tell the children what to do. I didn't want my role to change in the eyes of the children from a researcher to being one of the adults and staff members who have power over the children. These situations, where I was expected to behave a bit different than what I wanted my researcher role to be, were the most difficult moments during the observations concerning ethical issues. However, I understand that my role was to be an

adult instead of a pure researcher but I had to pay much attention in not acting like a teacher or a responsible adult in the group.

Values and all the information that the researcher has about the subject being studied affects greatly in the actions and choices made concerning for instance methods and theory. That is why all points should be taken into account and acknowledged so that ethicality of those would not be contradictory. Ethical considerations should always be closely attached to the research process in every step of the way which is highlighted especially when researching with children (Komulainen, 2014, 254–255).

6 DIFFERENCES IN PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

In the following chapters, the results will be described by answering the research question. This chapter will concentrate on the different pedagogical approaches used in the Finnish and the Dutch groups observed. Firstly, I will present differentiating as a pedagogical strategy in the Dutch groups and secondly, how functional methods are used in the Finnish groups. Finally, I will describe how technology is used as a pedagogical strategy in these observed groups.

6.1 Differentiating as a pedagogical approach in the Netherlands

Differences that appear in the results of this study concerning pedagogical strategies could already be seen in the two curricular approaches (pre primary approach and social pedagogical approach) in Europe. (see table 2). According to Bennet (2005) the main aspects of pedagogical strategies in pre primary approach are the mix of instructions here referred as differentiating and thematic work which were also seen in both groups in periods of six weeks. Thematic work means dividing the school year into sections with a theme. I will concentrate on the aspect of differentiating educational contents and the ways of learning because of the frequency of extracts in the collected data. Knowledge and skill levels were the usual reason for differentiating and it was used as a pedagogical strategy every day in both groups NL1 and NL2 especially during the lessons of language and mathematics. Next table will show the methods for differentiating during those lessons.

Table 3 Methods of differentiating in the Dutch groups

Subject	Methods of Differentiating
Language	NL1: separate group for advanced readers (6 children), “language positions” -> reorganised table groups due to the level of language skills, different exercise- and textbooks (2 children) NL2: different exercise- and textbooks for advanced readers (6 children),
Mathematics	NL1: separate group for more advanced in mathematical skills (8 children), NL2: One child to a higher level group, different exercises (few children)

In the NL1 during language lessons 6 children left the classroom to a next door open area space and 19 children stayed in the class observed. Those 6 children were, regarding to the teacher, more advanced in reading and language than the rest of the children. The school has three third grades and fourth group is formed every day by taking a number of more advanced children from each group and having an additional teacher teaching them. At the time of math lessons the same thing is done but there are two more children going from the observed group to the additional one.

In the classroom of NL1 children had different seats for different lessons. They called them “language positions” and they formed new small groups inside the classrooms by sitting next to other children with similar level of learning. In addition, few children were always situated in an extra table with the teacher sitting next to them and being able to help more. There were two children who were doing the third grade again so they had their own practice- and textbooks and they were always doing their own assignments during language lessons. Sometimes they were also taken out of the classroom to read with the teacher trainee or the teacher depending on who was giving the lesson. In the NL1 the assignments for lessons were usually explained at the same time for

everyone and then after finishing those assignments children were directed to different kind of activities. On language lessons NL1 used a board with pictures of activities and children's names. The teacher had always placed some children on certain activities such as playing learning games on the computer and then the rest of the children could choose their activity by placing their name tag on a picture of a chosen activity.

In the NL2 the observational data shows several situations of differentiating. Like in the first school, differentiating in this group was most obvious during language lessons. Six children had different, more advanced, text- and practice books than the rest of the class. They had similar assignments but more reading skills were required. There were one or two mothers who came every day into the small room of the group to do assignments with children learning to read individually. They used a computer program to do "flitser", which meant flashing familiar words and children having to read or know the words as fast as possible. One day a mother also came to read with few children at a time. During math lessons one child from the observed group and another from the fourth-grade group changed places. Also, two to three children were mostly doing different and more difficult math assignments than the rest of the group. Other smaller scale differentiating strategies were used for instance during writing lessons. Three children could already write so well that they were learning English with the help of computer games every day when the rest of the group were doing calligraphy. This might change as the year progresses and it didn't come clear if all children will be practicing English at some point or not.

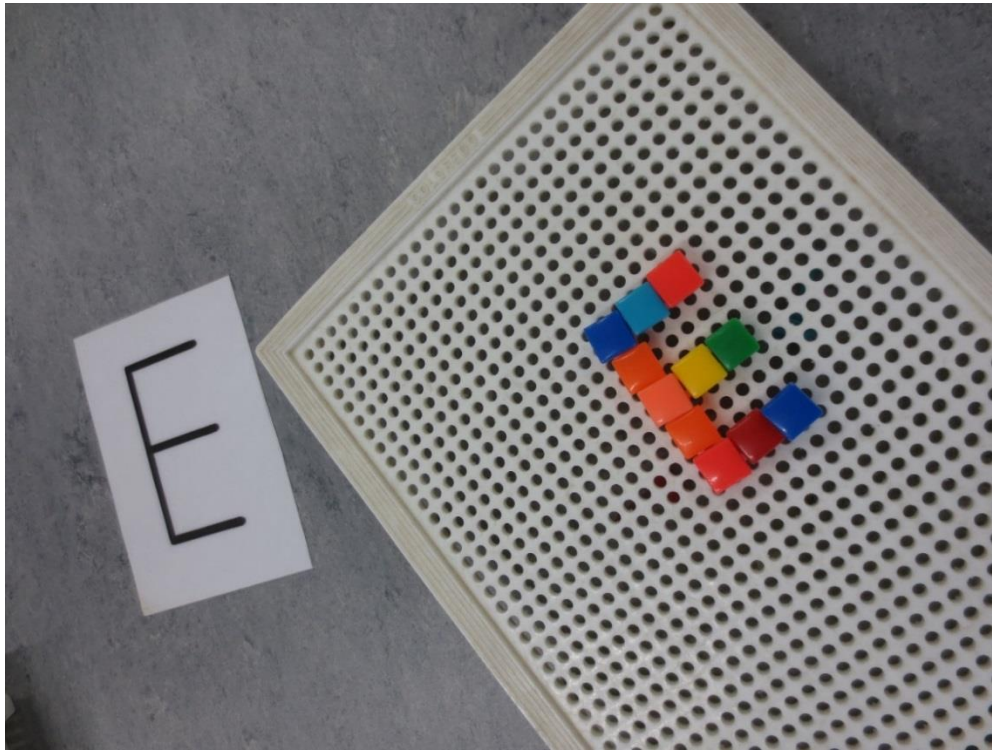
Many of the characteristics of pre-primary approach were found in the observational data and that can explain the need of differentiating. Focus of education in both of the Dutch groups seemed to be learning and skills as well as achieving curriculum goals. The institutions of ECEC are seen to be places for learning and instructions. If on the one hand it can be said that differentiating is used a lot as a pedagogical strategy in the Dutch groups, the same was not seen in groups FIN1 and FIN2. The only extract in the data about differentiating concerning learning and contents was when one child from the group was taken to

a small group called *Finnish as a second language* for children with multicultural backgrounds. It consisted of four children from different preschool groups and it was held by the teacher of the observed group. This group was supposed to be held once a week. Finnish groups emphasised functional learning as a pedagogical strategy which will be described more in the following chapter. The lack of differentiating in the Finnish groups could also be explained by the different curricular approach. According to Bennet's (2005) social approach, used in Finland, focuses on life experiences and development goals rather than skills and knowledge.

6.2 Functional learning in the Finnish groups

Whilst in the Netherlands, differentiating learning contents was used as the main pedagogical approach, in Finland the key strategy was functional learning. Similar methods were seen in both Finnish groups and they are also essential part of the new National Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2017). Functional learning could also be referred as play based learning but in this study I decided to call it functional methods of learning as it describes the phenomena more widely. As earlier mentioned (see chapter 3.1) Finland can be seen to follow the social pedagogical approach which also mentions learning through play as a pedagogical strategy.

In the groups FIN1 and FIN2 functional learning was used more than in the Dutch groups. In FIN1 learning a letter was done by using several workstations where the children could try to form the letter in different ways. The following pictures 1 and 2 show some of these stations.



Picture 1



Picture 2

Teacher had set up the stations before the class and showed what should be done in each station. Then the children of the small group (7 children) could choose one spot and start doing the letter in the guided way. They were free to

change whenever ready and begin with the next station. The teacher was there to help and to supervise how the children were doing. Educators scaffolding and child-centred work can be seen alongside play based learning in these activities all which are referred in the social pedagogical approach.

In FIN2 functional learning was seen for instance when learning numbers. The children built up numbers from building blocks but then also wrote the numbers on an assignment. Another example from functional learning in FIN2 was when learning facts about trees. The teacher talked with the children about different trees and what happens to them in different seasons. Then several leaves of two different trees were thrown all over the room and the children had to pick them up one tree at a time. That is how the children were learning to differentiate different leaves of the trees. After getting to know the trees and their leaves, children were guided to another room to paint the leaves and press the pattern to another paper in order to make their own tree together with the group. This example shows how different functional methods were used to carry out one learning activity.

In the groups NL1 and NL2 some functional learning methods were used during the observation. Children were learning numbers, sequences, letters and reading through games and playing. Most of those games were teacher oriented and included rules. Both NL1 and NL2 had for instance big soft dices and other concrete articles to demonstrate and strengthen the learning in math lessons. However, most of the teaching was instructor-led using the help of academic skills such as reading and writing. A big difference between these observed Finnish and Dutch groups were that in the Netherlands most of the day was spent sitting on their own desks when in Finland that was seen only a couple of times during the observed weeks.

6.3 Using technology as a tool for learning and teaching

Based on the framework of Finnish and Dutch educational institutions and curriculums it could have been suggested that technology is seen a lot in Finn-

ish education for six-year old children and not as much in the Dutch education. Several references of using technology as a tool for learning are made in the new Preschool Curriculums of different Municipalities (see for example Preschool curriculum of Kotka and Jyväskylä). In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for pre-primary Education from 2014 it is only stated that technology may be used to improve the communication with parents and that the use of communication media should be introduced to children (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

In FIN1 they had one tablet for the group which they could use to play educational games. The teacher had a list of names of the children and how much time they spent on using the tablet. During free play time, the children could ask to use the tablet and most of the times teacher gave the permission. If there were several children who wanted to play at the same time, the device was given to a child who had played the least. Only two out of four preschool groups in the same building with FIN1 had smart boards in their classroom. The teacher explained that they could sometimes use other groups' smart board but now at least one of them was broken and out of use. During the week of observation smart boards were not used by the group of FIN1. Another example of using technology was when the teacher of the group was testing a new coding device with few children. They were exploring how it works and the children were allowed to try it. That coding device called Bee Bot was in common use for all four preschool groups. FIN2 also had Bee Bot for their use but the teacher explained that they didn't have time to get to know its functions and prepare it yet so they were unable to use it with the children. In the FIN2 no technology was used during the week observed and they didn't have a tablet or a computer in the classroom.

NL1 and NL2 used technology daily as a tool for learning and teaching. Both groups had a smart board in the classroom and NL1 had two computers and NL2 three. Computers were used daily by the children to play educational games. The smart board was used by the teacher during almost all of the lessons for showing and guiding the exercises as well as for videos, games and

other educational material. Almost all of the teaching material of the curriculum for mathematics and language education were online. Groups NL1 and NL2 had the same curriculums for those subjects.

In conclusion, although not much references for using technology in education in the Netherlands were found, it was seen much in the observations and the teachers said that it is a very common method of education everywhere and not only in these two groups. Smart boards have been used in education for years and are an important tool of teaching. In Finland the use of technology in education is just starting to take its place. Teachers said that they are struggling with having enough training and time to include technology in teaching.

7 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

In the next chapter I will present the learning contexts of the observed groups reflecting them to some of the policies in the two different societies. Learning contexts are an important part of the structural conditions alongside the laws and curriculums which have already been presented in the Chapter 3. As described earlier (see table 1), learning contexts in this study consist of physical settings including staff-child-ratio, day order of the groups and contents of education. Firstly, I will present the physical settings and sort some possible similarities and differences. Secondly, I will display the time structures in form of day orders of the groups and thirdly, describe some contents of education.

7.1 Physical Settings

This chapter will focus on the physical settings of the pedagogical environments including the consistence of the groups, staff-child ratios and physical spaces of the groups. All these aspects are important points of view to the pedagogical environments as they form the basis and the possibilities for pedagogical activities. The following table will present the *consistency of the groups* FIN1, FIN2, NL1 and NL2.

Table 4 Assemblage of the group

	Number of Children	Number of Adults	Explanation
NL 1	25	1+1(+1)	Only one teacher present in the classroom at a time, (+1) refers to the teacher trainee who was present two days a week
NL 2	25	1+1(+1)	One teacher present in the classroom at a time, (+1) refers to the teacher trainee who was present two days a week
FIN 1	13 (14)	2	Kindergarten teacher, substituting practical nurse
FIN 2	14 (18)	3	Present during the observations: Kindergarten teacher, practical nurse and another substituting practical nurse

The amount of children in the table show the maximum amount of children one day during the observations and the numbers in the parenthesis show the usual consistency of the group. During the observation week FIN1 consisted of maximum 13 children, kindergarten teacher and a substitute practical nurse. FIN2 had maximum 14 children, kindergarten teacher and two practical nurses one being a substitute. In the Dutch groups there were maximum 25 children in both observed groups and one teacher plus one teacher trainee present at a time. Both school groups in the Netherlands had two teachers working part time so the other one was always present two days a week and the other one three days a week.

Staff-child ratio became a theme due to the pre-observation where I noticed that the ratio seems to be higher in the Dutch educational institutions for 6-

year-old children than in Finland. I decided to pay attention to the ratios during the observations. The staff-child ratio was remarkably lower in Finland than in the Dutch groups. The highest ratio during the observations in Finland was 1:14 when in the Netherlands it was 1:25. However, most of the observed time the staff-child-ratio in Finland was lower when in the Netherlands it was most of the time the above mentioned maximum ratio. Following examples are a few units of analysis from the field notes.

FIN1: Monday 19.9 at 11.00; 1 teacher, 1 practical nurse, 13 children

FIN2: Wednesday 28.9 at 9.00; 1 teacher, 1 practical nurse, 11 children, 12.50 1 practical nurse, 9 children

NL1: Monday 10.10 at 8.48; 1 teacher, 1 teacher trainee, 25 children, (6 parents still present)

NL2: Tuesday 18.10 at 13.56; 1 teacher, 24 children

Alongside the staff-child ratios and consistency of the groups, I paid close attention to the *physical spaces and the materials* used during the observations. I made a choice not to write all the details of the physical spaces on my notes but instead take pictures of them to get the most accurate information. There were some differences between the physical spaces of these observed groups. However, the differences were between all of the groups and not only between the spaces of Finnish and Dutch groups. I am using steps to describe the approximate sizes of the room. The step size is not specific but could be assimilated as one meter being one step. I used the same meter for all of the groups. The social pedagogical approach defines the outdoor and indoor spaces to have equal pedagogic importance when the pre-primary approach see outdoors as more of recreational area and beneficial to motor skills development. It was easily seen in the observations how in the NL1 and NL2 indoors was the primary learning space whilst in FIN1 and FIN2 some educational content was implemented dur-

ing the time outdoors. (Bennet, 2005, 12.) Ergo in this study I will be only focusing on inside spaces and places.

In the two Finnish preschool groups a factor that made the physical spaces a bit different comparing to each other was that the other one was located in a school classroom in the same building with school groups and the other one in a separate building owned by school but formerly used as a kindergarten. In some municipalities in Finland preschools are mostly located in schools when in other cities they are in kindergarten buildings. I made the choice of observing these two preschool groups, knowing their differences in physical spaces.

FIN1 was located in a school building in a former school classroom. The group mostly used one room which step size was approximately 10,5 x 8. Room was divided into different areas by furniture and textiles. FIN1 occasionally used the space of another preschool group for small group activities and some other spaces in the school such as the library and the hallway play corner and the dining area to eat. The use of those other spaces were determined by the adults and not the children. The following pictures show the main room used by FIN1.



Picture 3



Picture 4

As seen in the first picture (picture 3), the other side of the room consists of mostly tables, chairs and the whiteboard. The other side of the room is divided in two sections (picture 4). One part is the morning circle corner, where the children and the teacher always gather in the beginning of the preschool day. The other corner of the room in picture 4 is where the adults have their important papers as well as children have their own files on the table. There are also closets and a drawer for materials. There are three chairs seen in the right corner of the second picture, which are for adults only. Next to the chairs one can see another shelf for storing games, toys and other playing materials.

FIN2 has two rooms (pictures 5-8) for their group and to use daily. Functions of the rooms were quite clear. The other room, sized 6 x 7 steps, had tables and chairs for everybody and was used mostly either at the time of the breakfast or snack or for preschool activities that required writing. The other room was used for free play, morning circles and rest plus some music lessons. Size of the room was 5,5 x 6 steps plus a small storage space. The door between

these two rooms was usually open and there was free access to both of the rooms. During rest and small group activities the door was closed.



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7



Picture 8

In addition to these two rooms seen in the pictures (5-8) FIN2 used the hallway area to get dressed and for some play, other preschool classrooms to have for example music lessons, gym hall of the school for gym lessons and for lunch they went to the school cafeteria. FIN2 had several carpets on the floor and had all the play material in the other room which was mostly used for play.

NL1 had one big classroom where they spent most of the day. During free play and differentiating the hallway in front of the classroom as well as the space next to the room was used. The size of the classroom of NL1 was 10x11. The following pictures 9-11 present the classroom space of group NL1.



Picture 9



Picture 10



Picture 11

The classroom space of group NL1 was divided in few smaller sections. In one corner of the room there were three computers that were divided from the rest of the space by a shelf for toys and learning games (picture 9 behind the self, next to the window). In one corner there was an orange table which was used for small groups guided by the teacher (see the above picture 11). The opposite corner from the orange table had another self with board games and a table for things involved with the current theme. In front of the classroom there was a teachers chair and a big smart board which was used daily during lessons.

NL2 had more of an open concept space without having a wall to separate it from the hallway. On the other side of the space there was a wall separating it from the next group and on the other side they had a small relaxing or silent

room which was also used for small groups, differentiating or free play. This space was hard to measure by steps due to its odd shape but it was the biggest classroom space from all the four classrooms observed. Pictures 12 and 13 will demonstrate classroom space of NL2.



Picture 12



Picture 13

Although the idea of an open concept classroom space seemed first like a totally different solution of environment, it didn't differ as much as assumed physically nor functionally. NL2 had all the same sections and functions in the room as NL1. They had one smaller room for small group or individual activities or for play and calming down for children needing privacy and quiet space. One corner was the teachers' corner with a table and a drawer for their personal and teaching materials. There were also small tables and chairs in groups for all children and some play and learning materials in shelves. The computers of the group were situated on the hallway but it felt like part of the classroom.

As a conclusion, concerning the differences and similarities in physical frameworks for pedagogical environments in the observed Dutch and Finnish groups, more differences were found between all of the groups than between these two countries. There were several *similarities* found in the physical spaces of the observed groups. The spaces were divided to have some personal space for everybody in the group including the children and the staff members. Every group had personal drawers for each child where the children could keep their books, drawings, assignments, pens etc. Children also had racks outside the classroom to hang up their coats and backpacks. All these four groups had a small space, usually a desk, for the adults only and their important papers and belongings. Another similarity was having some kind of soft space in use in all of the groups. Two groups (FIN1 and NL2) had arm chairs and two groups (FIN2 and NL1) had a couch either in the room or next to the room. All groups had tables and chairs for each child although in the Finnish groups they were used a lot less than in the Dutch groups. Division of the rooms into different sections was used in all four groups. Separated areas in the classrooms were for instance morning circle areas, play areas etc. Tables and chairs in all of the classrooms were children's size as in smaller and lower with the exception that some of the tables in the Finnish groups were higher but the chairs were designed for children for those higher tables. In all of the groups most of the materials were at hand for children. Playing materials, games and for instance books were at children's reach. Only some of the teaching materials were in locked

drawers and only usable when asking the teachers. Availability of materials was very similar in all of the groups although in the Finnish groups children had more time to use those materials than the children in the Dutch groups.

The basic function of all the physical spaces of the observed groups were very much alike. The *differences* found were not affecting the teaching as much as the contents of education. FIN2 stood out from the other classrooms by having two small rooms for daily use of the whole group whereas NL2 was different from the other classrooms because of the open concept space. In the data it is not seen very clearly how the open concept space affected the teaching or the pedagogical environment. The only aspect was the noise coming from the hallway and the next door classroom and some occasional people walking by and distracting the attention of the children for a while.

In NL1 and NL2 the ways of teaching were seen in the physical environment. The smart board was the centre point of the classrooms and almost all teaching was executed with the help of it. In FIN1 and FIN2 the morning circle area with small benches for children and a carpet in the middle and a bulletin board with calendars etc. were the centre points of the rooms.

7.2 Day order of the groups

In this chapter I will present some time structures of the observed groups as a structural condition for forming the pedagogical environment. Day orders of each group will be presented in the following tables. Table 5 shows the day order of the first observed group FIN1. Although observations were done also before and after preschool hours, here I will only demonstrate those preschool hours. In Finland preschool lasts four hours a day and is mostly implemented from 9 to 13.

Table 5 FIN1 order of the day

Time	FIN1	Explanation
9-10	Preschool activities	Music, crafts, language, mathematics etc.
10-11	Outdoors	
11	Lunch	
11.30-12	Joint activities /free play	
12-13	Outdoors/free play (depending on the weather)	

As seen in the table above, the day doesn't include many transitions between activities. However, when dividing the group in two smaller groups there is usually one more transition in the morning when the time for activities is divided in two parts. During the first hour of preschool, the activities vary based on the day of the week. This group also had a week order to show which subjects or contents are done each day. The preschool activities acted out in the morning from 9 to 10 and always started with a morning circle. All the children and staff gathered in one corner of the room, where they checked the calendar, how many children are present and talked about the upcoming activities of each day. Some days they sang or played some games together. On Friday, the children were allowed to take a toy from home, which they then introduced to everyone else in the group. After the morning circle the group started the activities of the day mostly on smaller groups with about 6 to 7 children per group. During the observed week, those activities were talking about feelings, getting to know the letter E, and how to write it with different functional methods, free play, crafts and singing. FIN1 spent a lot of time outdoors. Always an hour in the morning, and four days during the observed week, they went outside also from 12 to 13. Outdoors the children had time for free play in the backyard of the school except on Friday when they went to the nearby forest. FIN2 had a similar day order comparing to the previous group. The table below shows the usual order of the day of the second group observed.

Table 6 FIN2 order of the day

Time	FIN 2	Explanation
9-10.30	Preschool activities	Music, crafts, language, mathematics etc.
10.30-11.45	Outdoors	
11.50-12.30	Lunch	
12.30-13.00	Joint activities/free play	

In FIN2 all the actual preschool activities were done during the first hour and a half of preschool. The day was always started with a morning circle, as in the FIN1, going through the calendar and the activity of the day following the introduction to a new topic or different kind of preschool activity such as music lesson. This group spent every day about an hour outside just before the lunch break. After the lunch break there was about half an hour before the preschool ended and when some of the children went home and some stayed for day care. During that half an hour, children were either allowed to play freely or they had some joint activities such as talking about something together and staff member telling a story or playing some games together. Some days children could wish for certain plays or activities to be done.

NL1 had more changing factors and lessons during the week than the other groups observed. They had a different day order for each day. Only the times marked red were done the same time every day.

Table 7 Day order of NL1

Time	NL1	Explanation
8.45	School starts, games and movement/world orientation/crafts	Different activities.
9.30	Language	
10.15	Outdoors break	
10.30	Snack (on Wednesdays at 10.05)	
10.45	Free play/social safety/storytelling/crafts	Different activities.
11.30	Mathematics	
12.15	Lunch break (school day ends on Wednesdays)	
13.30	Language/older students come to read together in pairs (on Fridays)	
14.15	Writing	
14.30/15.00	Theme work/free play/sports in the gym hall (on Thursdays)	Different activities.
15.30	School day ends (Except on Wednesdays)	

In both of the observed Dutch groups, the school days were longer than the Finnish preschool days. In NL1 school started every day at 8.45 and finished at 15.30 except on Wednesdays, when the school was finished already at 12.15. However, there was a lunch break every day (except Wednesdays) in the middle of the day which was not considered school hours. Lunch break was an hour and fifteen minutes and most of the children were taken home for lunch. Some children stayed at school and were taken care of by the staff of day care.

This last table represents the order of the day of NL2. They had similar day structure every day of the week. The group started between 8.40 and 8.50 every day and school ended at 15.30 on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Wednesdays and Fridays were shorter and the school already ended at 12.30 (Wednesdays) or at 12.15 (Fridays).

Table 8 Day order of NL2

Time	NL 2	Explanations
8.40, 8.50	Entry, starting the day	
9.00	Technical reading circuit-> learning activities	circuit= Activity board which tells what each group should do, changes every day
9.50	writing	Writing words with calligraphy
10.15-10.30	Break and snack outdoors (depending on the weather)	Two days the children stayed inside because it was raining outside
10.30	Mathematics	
11.30	Free play/ social activities/independent work/video /music	Activities vary depending on the day
12.15/12.30(Fridays)	Lunch break/end of the day	Day ends on Wednesdays at 12.30 and Fridays at 12.15
13.30	Technical reading	Repeating the words on the book and then reading together all at the same time
13.45/14.00	Gym/circuit	Gym lessons on Thursdays, other days different activities
15/15.30	Core concepts (music, crafts etc)./ independent work/free play	Activities vary depending on the day

In NL2 for instance, language, writing, reading and mathematics lessons were held every day at the same time. Varying subjects such as gym, free play, music, social activities and crafts were done just some days a week. In between most of these lessons the teacher held a short break with some games or plays.

7.3 Contents of Education

Interesting difference in the pedagogical environments of the groups observed in Finland and in the Netherlands, were concerning the contents of education for 6-year-old children and also the ways of learning. When contemplating the curriculums and national documents for each country and school, it could have been assumed that the contents and the way of learning is relatively similar. However, the observational data shows that there were differences be-

tween the countries in this matter. Although the subjects of education were similar, the level and content of those subjects differed. I am only able to scratch the surface on this topic and describe the most obvious differences and similarities on the contents of education for 6-year-old children in the Finnish and Dutch groups. I think the contents can help to define the pedagogical environments. Firstly, I will describe the contents of education in *language* and *mathematics*, following with *crafts*, *music* and *gym*. Lastly, I will shortly present the *time spent outdoors* and for *free play*.

The contents of *language education* based on the observations were more demanding in the Dutch groups NL1 and NL2 than in FIN1 and FIN2. Although all groups in both countries were learning single letters and numbers during the observed week, NL1 and NL2 were also learning to read three letter words and sentences with three letter words as well as write calligraphy. In both of the groups same curriculum for language education was used which was "*veilig leren lezen*" translated as learning to read safely. In addition to the learning materials of the curriculum, the Dutch groups also used a lot of educational board games as well as some play based material for learning. The most used method for learning in NL1 and NL2 was repeating and writing.

The way of learning language in Finnish groups was very functional and based on play. For example when FIN1 was learning a letter, they used several functional methods to learn also mentioned in chapter 6.1. The teacher had set up stations where the children were drawing the letter in sugar, forming the letter from big puzzle pieces, following an example on the whiteboard and drawing the letter on a sample etc. As a conclusion, the main focus of language education for the Dutch children was learning to read whilst for Finnish children it was more to get to know the letters and how to write them. *Mathematics* was taught with similar methods in both countries as language education. The observed Dutch groups had actual math lessons every day whereas in the Finnish groups it was one preschool content among others taught approximately once a week by functional methods.

In the two Finnish groups FIN1 and FIN2 *gym* lesson were held once a week which is very common in Finnish preschools. NL1 had the gym hall for themselves two times a week, other time for teacher directed play and the other time for free play with the hall being full of gymnastic racks and materials for the children to use, play with and climb. NL2 had gym lesson once week in the sports hall nearby held by a school gym teacher. In addition they had a bit smaller gym hall next to their own classroom to use minimum once a week for social teamwork activities or play.

During the weeks of observing I found out a difference between the Finnish and the Dutch groups *music education*. In FIN1 no specific music lessons were held during the observed week. However, on few days during morning circle some songs were sung. On Friday the group sang several songs and played games including music. Music was also used as a help to direct some games in the gym lesson. In FIN2 music was much more present in the education. During the one week observed, two actual music lessons were held, one with all three preschool groups of the house and one among their own group and another preschool group. Some songs were sung almost every day during the morning circle. The teacher used several musical aspects in the music lessons such as playing the piano, singing, listening to different kind of music from CD and letting the children play spanners.

There was not much music used as a teaching method in the Netherlands and no music lessons were held during the observed weeks. When asked from the teacher, they said they have a music lesson every two weeks in NL1 and in NL2 it was said to be the same. In the NL1 they had one song about the good sitting position that they sang few times during the week at the beginning of the writing lesson. NL2 were supposed to have one music lesson during the observed time but the CD player wasn't working so most of the time went to trying to fix that. The group ended up singing one song two times together in the gym hall and then going back to the classroom.

Another obvious difference in the contents of education was the *time spent outdoors* and the time for free play. In the Finnish group FIN1 and FIN2 time

spent outside was on the average an hour and a half when in the Dutch groups NL1 and NL2 it was mostly fifteen minutes a day. Time spent outside was free play -time in both of the countries but I decided to count the time for free play indoors separately. *Free play* is considered very valuable mean of education as it develops children's thinking skills, help in social relationships and support emotional growth (Prochner et., 2008, 197). The organisation of the environment as well as the adults should support free play or free learning activities in order to create a culture that promotes development through play. What was interesting to notice was that the differences of the time used for free play weren't as big as I originally expected. In this study I delimited the free play to concern only free play where they can choose themselves from different play materials. I left out the times when staff members restricted the possibilities to concern for example only activities where you have to sit at the table. This was used a lot in the Dutch groups. The average time used for free play during one day was in the Dutch groups 2 hours 50 minutes when in the Finnish groups it was 3 hours 4 minutes. However, one influencing factor is that the school hours vary between the countries and also the groups. In Finland preschool hours are 20 hours per week and in the Netherlands in NL1 22 hours 45 minutes and NL2 the school hours per week were 20 hours 45 minutes.

8 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will first introduce the main findings of this study following with conclusions and discussion. I will ponder the methodological choices as well as discuss how the results can be used in the field of early childhood education. Then I will describe the facts related to trustworthiness of this study and lastly, present some ideas for further studies.

8.1 With different pedagogical environments to similar educational culture of ECEC?

This study observed pedagogical environments in educational institutions of two European countries. The aim was to find differences and similarities in pedagogical environments in education for six-year-old children in the Netherlands and in Finland. The subject was mainly observed through aspects of pedagogical strategies and structural conditions. Albeit similarities were discovered, I found the differences more engrossing. The pedagogical strategies of Dutch and Finnish education in the observed groups differed the most. The Dutch groups used differentiating educational contents as one major pedagogical strategy when in the Finnish groups the most used strategy was functional learning. Some aspects of structural conditions such as curriculums and day orders showed obvious differences when others such as physical settings were fairly similar or with differences among all the observed groups instead of the countries.

As Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, 28) suggested, pedagogy and pedagogical strategies can differ between classrooms because of different teachers and teaching techniques. On the other hand, for example Sheridan (2009, 256–257), Raittila (2009, 246) and Prochner et al. (2008, 190) claimed that pedagogical strategies are always related to objectives and standards on education in societal level. It was clearly seen in the results of this study that the effect of society

and current policies were visible as there were more similarities inside the groups in the same country and furthermore more differences between the groups in two different countries. In the results, specific subject or municipal curriculums were seen to affect greatly on the pedagogical environments. Both Dutch groups had the same curricula for example in language education which formed the foundations for day order and contents of education. The curriculums also defined the pedagogical strategies for the teacher which was seen as a similar set of techniques in both Dutch groups. The Finnish groups were both in the same Municipality ergo implementing the curriculum of the city. That could also be seen to reflect the results in similarities and differences in pedagogical environments. However, the teaching techniques of the two Finnish groups differed more between each other than the techniques used between the two Dutch groups.

The two curricular dimensions pre primary and social pedagogical approaches (see Chapter 3.1 and table 2) seen in Europe described by Bennet (2005, 12) reflected the pedagogical environments of these two countries in observation. Especially the pedagogical strategies and assessment goals were in line with the data collected. It is interesting to see how such broad curricular dimensions can be presented in such small group of participants even though the freedom of choice of curriculums was very much highlighted in the Netherlands. In Finland there is also Municipal curricula alongside the National guidelines and yet also the Finnish groups observed presented many aspects from the wider European curricular dimension.

In the pre primary approach described by Bennet (2005, 12) thematic work was one of the main pedagogical strategies. The Dutch groups observed used thematic work to divide the school year into periods when Finnish groups concentrated on learning through play and relationships which were on the other hand mentioned as the main pedagogical strategies in social pedagogical approach by Bennet (2015 12). As mentioned above the Dutch groups also used differentiating as a pedagogical strategy. Differentiating enabled the children to work with assignments of their own level of knowledge and skills. It seemed

to motivate the children to learn. Functional learning or also referred as play based learning is emphasized in the Finnish curriculums for preschool education as well as Bennet's (2005, 12) social pedagogical approach and was assuredly seen in the observations.

The idea of letting children learn by activities and experiences is not new. As Murray (2015, 1716–1717) stated pedagogy is leading children to the right direction and not necessarily teaching them. He highlighted the view of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Vygotsky and Piaget who claimed that children learn best by playing. This is what the new Core Curriculum of Pre-primary Education in Finland (2017) is trying to enforce and support. These results of the use of different pedagogical strategies in Finland and the Netherlands follow Sheridan's (2009, 256–257) view of how teachers impact and educational goals and objectives together form the basis for pedagogical strategies.

What I found engrossing from the results is how in the Dutch groups, children's families were very involved in the daily school life. There was some kind of co-operation with parents at least once a week in NL1 and in the NL2 almost every day. In the Finnish groups co-operation was restricted to talking with the parents when bringing and getting the child from preschool or occasional days when parents can come and visit the group. This remark doesn't fit with Bennet's (2005, 12–13) different curricular dimensions as social pedagogical approach used in Finland is the one that mentioned working with the whole family as a focus point of education. In pre-primary approach, there are no such references as involving the families.

All classroom spaces of the observed groups were similarly constructed with tables, chairs and drawers for games and toys. Yet the use of these spaces was what differed as the Dutch participants spent most of the day at their tables doing assignments requiring reading or fine motor skills whilst the Finnish participants spent only a fraction of time at the tables. Finnish participants spent more time outside and in circle areas sitting on benches. I was surprised how the children in the Dutch groups were able to sit down doing assignments for so long besides having longer school days. They were also doing math and lan-

guage exercises of higher level than the Finnish six-year-old children. Yet Finland has always succeeded on the PISA results and is recognised as one of the best countries considering education level. Could it then be suggested that demanding less when the children are young is actually more beneficial than futile. Or maybe it could be understood from the results that different pedagogical strategies and structural conditions can work equally good. The pedagogical environments can be different and yet also have many similarities and nevertheless succeed in raising educated children to the society. Therefore it could be stated based on the results of this study and other research about education in Finland and the Netherlands (see OECD, PISA) that although pedagogical environments are somewhat different, it can still lead to similar educational outcomes.

Alongside Bennet's (2005, 12) two dimensions of curricula, holistic approach is seen to be the main pedagogical philosophy in whole Europe. EPPSE, the largest study in Europe on the effects of ECEC, suggests that an academic philosophy is arising alongside it. Academic approach means orienting the pedagogy towards cognitive objectives to promote child's reading skills and readiness to learn different subjects which were seen more in the Dutch groups observed. (Sylva et al. 2015, 7.) I firmly believe that, because of this more academic approach, differentiating is more needed in the Dutch schools. The level of knowledge and skills such as reading and writing are expected to be more advanced in the education of the observed Dutch groups why it is presumable that not all the children can reach that level yet. In education for 6-year-old children in the Dutch groups the lessons and subjects were more defined and goal oriented whereas in the Finnish groups the goals were mostly presented in social skills rather than academic reading and writing skills. If I were to study the first grades of Finnish schools where the children are 7 to 8-years old, I could imagine the teaching methods being a bit more similar between these pedagogical environments. Or on the other hand, observing two countries from for instance different continents or otherwise with totally different cultural backgrounds, the differences would have surely been greater. However, in this

study the main focus was to concentrate on pedagogical environments in the educational institutions of two countries and particularly the same age group.

When observing these groups of six-year-old children I couldn't help but to ponder the equality questions. Could differentiating children's contents of education by the level of their knowledge and skills be making the gap between students even bigger? I think that if differentiating by the skills is done in early childhood education, it can have positive outcomes based on the children getting positive learning experiences. However, if differentiating continues in throughout the whole basic education system, as it does in the Netherlands (see CITO), it can lead to unequal future possibilities for children. Ergo, although differentiating seemed like a very functional and effective pedagogical strategy, can it totally fulfil for instance the demands of the Convention on the Rights of the Child about equality in Early Childhood Education

One aspect that wasn't discussed in the results of this study but that I consider an interesting point of view and something to hold on was the positive feedback given to the children. A lot of positivity, praising and encouragement was seen in the education of both countries. The teachers gave a lot of compliments and positive feedback to the children when they did well in something. In the Dutch schools, there were reward systems where the children were gaining points during the day and then got something nice for themselves together as a group (for instance a price cup in the middle of the group table). In Finland children got to for example play more when they behaved well. I think the ways and levels of assessment, rewarding and punishing would be a very interesting topic to study further.

The main focuses of this study, structural conditions and pedagogical strategies, were formed from the quality standards of ECEC. Nevertheless, it should be recognized whether international comparisons can be made in the first place by using quality standards as UNESCO (2014) stated that universally agreed criteria for quality in ECEC doesn't exist. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, 6) partly agree with that statement by saying that quality of ECEC is a philosophical and cultural issue of value that can't be measured. However, as

Britto, Engle and Super (2013) suggest, there is an international joint consensus of the importance of ECEC and its policies which should draw the lines for the international quality qualifications.

What more comes to the quality qualifications of ECEC addressed in this study, it could be stated that all groups observed show some of these qualifications in their pedagogical environments. Finnish groups had very low staff-child ratio comparing to the Dutch groups observed. Dutch teachers used differentiating as a pedagogical strategy which can be seen as appreciating children's individuality. All four classrooms resemble Prochner, Cleghorn and Green's (2008, 195-196) description of a typical physical setting for ECEC. They present the western classroom to have a great amount of material concentrating for example skills or interests and that are accessible for children. Essa and Burnham (2001, 70) claim according to research high quality ECEC environments include a lot of materials such as toys and other equipment in a portioned environment rather than a large open space per child which can also be in line with the description of the physical settings observed in this study. Consequently, these observed physical settings in two different countries could be seen as universally high quality environments according to some research only they didn't show as much cultural unity as it could have been contemplated. As Prochner et. (2008, 190) suggested pedagogical environments are influenced by for instance understandings and interaction, not only the political, historical and social backgrounds.

Although physical settings didn't show high cultural similarity, the results of this study states that cultural context still pose an important role on the pedagogical environments. Overall, similarities and differences in pedagogical environments could be partly explained based on the cultural perspective. The future oriented view of Kessler (2010, 33) about forming the curricula could be taken as a good example about the cultural differences of the pedagogical environments. He highlights the question, *who do we want our children to become* which is mainly defined by the society and the culture. It is the main focus in teaching and hence also in pedagogical environments.

This study could be seen as an overview about the possible similarities and differences in pedagogical environments in two different cultures. It presents differently organized pedagogical environments that are leading to similar culture of Early Childhood Education on the surface. This study produced some new information about the pedagogical environments and can act as a stepping stone for further research and highlight the importance of careful planning of pedagogical strategies and structural conditions. It should not be forgotten, what the quality qualifications of pedagogical environments should be based on. The significance of this study for Early Childhood Education can be justified as ethnographic and comparative studies can have great value in planning the education and its goals. Ethnographic observation proved to be a suitable method in this study dealing with international comparisons. Although the chosen methods proved to work well in this study, the view of the pedagogical environments might have lacked profundity. The idea of this study was to form a wider vision of the pedagogical environments but it can only show it through the lenses of the researcher. Interpretations and choices the researcher makes during the research process have a big influence on the results of the study. The concept of pedagogical environments could be later deepened by other methodological choices such as interviews, questionnaires, and wider scale observations. More about the further study possibilities will be presented in the Chapter 8.3.

8.2 Trustworthiness of this study

In this chapter I will present the issues of trustworthiness in this study. In qualitative research evaluating the trustworthiness concerns the entire research process (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008, 210). Good scientific practises should always be applied when implementing a qualitative research. In this study, I have paid special attention in being honest, open and careful as well as making ethical choices. (Kuula, 2006, 34–35.) Justifying the choices made and the influence of those choices in the research is important, so that the reader can follow the pro-

gression of the study (Varto, 2011, 15) Reporting all factors in the study is a major concern when assessing the reliability of the study (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2003, 135). In my study I have made all the possible measures to make my study as understandable and transparent as possible so the reader can constitute clear and accurate understanding of how the study is implemented. I presented different phases of the research as accurately and truthfully as possible. (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 300.) I honestly described the aspects that might effect on trustworthiness. I committed ethically to this study by making sure that the research plan was accurate and realistic, the design of the study fit the subject and the reporting was done carefully (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011, 126–127). The researcher makes many choices during the process of research ergo the main criterion for trustworthiness is the researcher herself. Interpretations, creation of research settings and decisions about the descriptions of the study are all influenced by the previous knowledge and lenses of the researcher. (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008, 210; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011, 136.)

Many researchers still refer to the criteria of trustworthiness described by Guba and Lincoln (1985). There are four questions for the researcher to ponder when doing research which are truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Having truth value in the study means that the researcher has to make certain activities to increase the number of credible findings in the study. It can according to Guba and Lincoln (1985, 301–303) be increased by investing time to get to know the context of the study as well as possible and getting familiar to the culture. As I am a kindergarten teacher myself and have worked in several day care centres in Finland, it might have influenced on my lenses as a researcher. Tauriainen (2000, 113–114) agrees with Guba and Lincoln (1985) that it can add trustworthiness if the researcher is familiar with the context of the research. Albeit the possible benefits in knowing the context, Tauriainen (2000, 114–118) points out that it is important to describe all the situations exactly as they were despite the presuppositions in order to be objective and honest. Not knowing the context and culture of the Dutch educational institutions as profoundly as the Finnish might have influenced the trustworthiness of this study.

I stayed in each group for one week and thought it was sufficient time in getting the data for this study. If I chose to use longer period of time in each group, I may have gotten more implicit and tacit information as the participants would have gotten more used to my existence in the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 304). I also chose not to use triangulation of methods in this study as I wanted to focus on observation in order to get to know the environments as well as possible. Guba and Lincoln (1985, 308) claim that the triangulation of methods, sources, theories or multiple investigators increase the credibility. Despite the lack of triangulation of methods, multiple sources and theories were used to improve the credibility.

Second question for the researcher defined by Guba and Lincoln (1985, 316) is the criteria of applicability or transferability. Although qualitative study is never easy to transfer to a different context, some aspects of reproducibility or transferability can be estimated by the adequacy of the quantity and quality of the information given from the research process. (Tauriainen, 2000, 115–116). I have tried to give all the possible information from the entire research design such as participants, methods used in this study and data collection process. Thirdly, Guba and Lincoln (1985, 319) address to the question of consistency or dependability which can be closely attached to the fourth criteria of confirmability. These both refer to being able to trace all the tracks heading to the results of the study and trying to notice also the factors that can't be seen directly. In this study I have tried to make the research process visible, consistent and confirm by review and audit as well as being accurate as possible with all information (Guba & Lincoln 1985, 318–319).

In comparative study, important aspect is to make the meter, and in this study especially the concepts, understandable for both cultures (Pöntinen, S. 2004, 41). Finland and the Netherlands are both part of the European Union and they both have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The education in these countries can be said to be somewhat comparable and similar as they are both based on the European standards and theories (Sylva et. al. 2015). It is stated that the countries being observed should be somewhat similar to

each other so that the possible comparisons make sense and the results are not artificial (Allardt, E. 2004, 27). In this study, my intention is not to make generalizable comparisons between two countries but to view the pedagogical environments for 6-year-old children in Finland and the Netherlands and to see if there are similarities and differences. The observations are implemented in two groups in both countries, which is not yet enough for generalizations to be made.

What may have also affected the trustworthiness of this study is that my Dutch language skills are not fluent which means I might have misunderstood some situations. I kept this fact in my mind the whole time and did a lot of effort not letting it affect the collected data. Before starting the observations I was a bit concerned whether I would get observational data with the same level of quality from the Finnish and the Dutch groups. My concerns proved to be unnecessary as I did understand more than I had expected. Every situation or sentence that I doubted if I completely understood it right, I asked the teacher to explain it afterwards. I talked a lot with the teachers in the Netherlands to confirm that everything I had written on my notes was understood right. All the teachers had very good knowledge of English which helped a lot with the language issues. I wrote all the concerns and questions about situations down in my field diary. Guba and Lincoln (1985, 327) suggest that writing a reflexive journal or field diary as I have called it here, can enhance the trustworthiness of a research. In this study I used this technique to write down ideas and considerations from the observations. I also had another journal which I used to write questions, thoughts, remarks and annotations related to the whole process of research.

8.3 Further studies on Pedagogical Environments

This study offers many ideas for further studies. There is a vast amount of aspects connected to pedagogical environments that could be studied further. In this study I was only able to pick a few factors which I considered most im-

portant when defining the pedagogical environments. Yet there is much more to it such as the interaction between participants, children's participation and the use of materials that are all connected to the concept of pedagogical environments.

Pedagogical environments could be studied nationally when it would produce important information about the current situation of educational institutions and curriculums. However, I find cross cultural and comparative study extremely compelling and I think that they can bring up very valuable findings allowing for instance some common quality standards to be generated covering whole Europe or even the entire globe. Study about pedagogical environments could also be implemented with several different methods besides observation. This study could be for example continued with interviews, some quantitative data collection methods or using already existing documents in order to get more profound and wide information about the subject being studied. Another interesting method would be to research children's experiences on the pedagogical environments. As Raittila (2013, 73) suggests the point of view of children and adults can be totally different ergo the environments could get different interpretation when for instance interviewing children.

Another focus for further research could be widening the concept of pedagogical environments or turning the focus on other aspects of those environments. Curriculums should have an important role in forming those aspects of research as they are implemented as a tool and basis in planning the education. Inquiring deeper understanding of the Finnish and the Dutch curriculums would make the conversation and research of the pedagogical environments even more interesting. A case study of implementing for instance Finnish curricula in the Netherlands or the other way around could possibly also reveal more information about the role of the cultural background in education.

As mentioned above in chapter 8.1, further studies could research the pedagogical environments in educational institutions for the whole age range from for instance 4- to 12- year old children in the Netherlands and in Finland. Ergo it would be possible to see which pedagogical environments of school

grades match the most despite the age. After getting more research information about the pedagogical environments overall we could start researching the effects of these environments into learning outcomes and that way get very valuable data in order to develop education. Research is very necessary as ECEC should be evermore renewed and reconceptualised (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014, 97).

This research has revealed many interesting viewpoints into how pedagogical environments are and how they maybe should be organised. However, what characterizes research along with this study is that it is never ready but instead a passage to many further studies. Questions can produce some answers but also plenty of new questions. (Alasuutari, 2011, 278.) I hope this study can raise knowledge about pedagogical environments as a concept and grow interest in researching them from different viewpoints. Pedagogical environments could be seen as a key towards the highest possible quality of Early Childhood Education.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1. Application for the Research Permit from the parents (Finland).

7.9.2016

Hyvät vanhemmat!

Olen Outi Schumilov ja opiskelen Jyväskylän yliopistossa varhaiskasvatuksen maisteriksi. Teen opintoihin kuuluvaa pro gradu -tutkielmaa aiheenani pedagogiset toimintaympäristöt ja niiden erot 6-vuotiaiden lasten varhaiskasvatuksen instituutioissa Suomessa ja Hollannissa. Pedagoginen toimintaympäristö on laaja käsite, mikä kattaa muun muassa fyysiset tilat, lasten osallisuuden, vuorovaikutuksen jne. Teen laadullisen tutkimukseni havainnoimalla kyseisiä ympäristöjä ja tilanteita. Saatan ottaa ympäristöstä myös kuvia, joissa lapset eivät näy.

Suoritan osan havainnoinnista lapsenne ryhmässä aikavälillä 26.-30.9.2016. Tutkimukseni ei sisällä tunnistetietoja lapsista. Lapsella on oikeus kieltäytyä havainnoinnista tutkimuksen aikana. Lapsen henkilöllisyys ei tule ilmi valmiissa tutkimusraportissa, ja käsittelen kaikkea lapsesta saatua tietoa luotamuksellisesti. Tutkimusaineistoa käytän vain tämän tutkimuksen tarpeisiin ja säilytän saamiani tietoja huolellisesti. Pyydän teitä ilmoittamaan tällä lomakkeella saako lapsenne osallistua tutkimukseen.

Jos mieleen herää minkäänlaisia kysymyksiä tai ajatuksia, vastaan niihin mielelläni. Minulle saa lähettää myös sähköpostia osoitteeseen oumaschu@student.jyu.fi.

Ystävällisin terveisin Outi Schumilov 0503401167

-
Viimeinen palautuspäivä perjantaina 23.9.2016

Lapsen nimi: _____

Lapseni saa osallistua havainnointitutkimukseen. Kyllä/Ei

Appendix 2. Information letter to the parents (the Netherlands).

Dear parents,

My name is Outi Schumilov and I come from Finland. I study in the master's programme of Early Childhood Education in the University of Jyväskylä. I am currently writing my thesis about the pedagogical environments for 6-year-olds in Finland and in the Netherlands. Pedagogical environment is a broad concept including for example the physical spaces, interaction, children's participation etc. I am doing my qualitative research by observing those environments and situations. I might also take some pictures of the environment not including children in them.

I am interested in the cultural similarities and differences between these two countries because I moved from Finland to the Netherlands a few months ago. I am not very good in Dutch language yet as it feels quite difficult so that is why I am approaching you in English. However I will have this translated also in Dutch.

I am doing part of my observations in the class of Your child on 10.-14.10. My research will not include any identification information about the children or any participants. The child also has the right to refuse the observations at any point. The data that I will be collecting will be only used in my thesis and I will be the only one analyzing it. It is totally confidential and the people taking part in it, schools and even cities won't be mentioned in the study.

Kind regards,

Outi Schumilov

oumaschu@student.jyu.fi

Geachte Heer/Mevrouw, Beste Ouders,

Mijn naam is Outi Schumilov en ik kom uit Finland. Op de Universiteit van Jyväskylä volg ik een master programma in educatie voor kinderen. Voor deze opleiding ben ik bezig met het schrijven van mijn eind onderzoek over pedagogische omgevingen voor 6 jarige in Finland en in Nederland. Hiervoor ga ik onderzoek doen naar de fysieke ruimtes, interactie en de participatie van kinderen etc. Dit doe ik doormiddel van Kwalitatief onderzoek met het observeren van deze omgevingen en de daarbij horende situaties. Mijn interesse gaat uit naar de culturele verschillen en overeenkomsten tussen deze twee landen omdat ik een aantal maanden terug ben verhuisd van Finland naar Nederland.

De school van uw kind heeft aangegeven om mij te willen ondersteunen in mijn onderzoek. Mijn onderzoek gaat plaatsvinden in de klas van uw kind op 10-10 t/m 14-10. Mijn onderzoek zal geen gebruik maken van identificatie van de kinderen. Ook wordt de informatie enkel en alleen gebruikt voor het uitvoeren van mijn thesis(onderzoek) en ik ben de enige die deze informatie analyseert. Alles wordt onder embargo uitgevoerd en de mensen, scholen en steden worden niet benoemd in de studie.

Met vriendelijke groet,

Outi Schumilov