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# At the fringes of transitions: socio-spatial constitution of transitions within early childhood education and care institutions in Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on transitions that emerge between the child's first transition from home to early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the transition to pre-primary education in Finnish centre-based ECEC. Group-based organisation of Finnish ECEC produces transitions between groups within settings but children transition between centres also. The aim is to reach the fringes of transition focusing on other change processes children encounter during their years in ECEC. Thus, transition is defined as a relationally constituted change process framed by educational institutions and their practices. We examine how children's lived spaces of transition are socio-spatially constituted. Two analytical narratives from a longitudinal, multimethods multi-case study dataset are presented as examples of relational socio-spatial constitution of transitions. Henri Lefebvre's theory about production of social space is applied. We discuss how educational transitions within ECEC as relational processes concerns children who are not designated to move from one group or centre to another. For them, the relationality of transitions rearranges groups and centres as networks of socio-spatial relations in various, context-specific ways, constituting lived spaces of transitions.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Transition; early childhood education and care; Henri Lefebvre; relational space; socio-spatial relations

## Introduction

In Finland, children's pathways through early childhood education and care (ECEC) begin with the first transition from home to ECEC. Afterwards, pathways are moulded by various transitions between groups within ECEC centres and possibly also transitions between ECEC centres before the transition to pre-primary education. As ECEC organisation is context-specific and varies remarkably nationally and even locally, transitions take various forms in different places (Brooker 2008). In this study, we focus on transitions emerging during the years in centre-based ECEC – between children's first

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transition from home to ECEC and transition to pre-primary education. We consider these transitions educational, as they are framed by educational institutions and their practices.

Educational transition is often defined as the process of moving from one educational setting to another (Fabian 2007). Transition can happen between ECEC settings when a child moves from one ECEC centre to another, and within ECEC settings. As the way in which ECEC is organised, transitions within ECEC settings might be understood, for example, as transitions between ‘classrooms’, ‘childcare classes’ (Cryer et al. 2005; Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000) or from infant to toddler childcare classrooms (Recchia and Dvorakova 2012), between groups (Merry 2007) or age groups (Garpelin et al. 2010) or moving to a new room (O’Farrelly and Hennessy 2013; 2014). Transitions between and within ECEC settings can be difficult and negatively impact children’s well-being and identity, but they can also be unproblematic and have a positive influence (O’Farrelly and Hennessy 2013; 2014; Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henley 2022; Speirs Katherine, Vesely, and Roy 2015).

Here, transitions are understood as relational, that is, constituted in relation to other people, societal processes, practices and discourses embedded in certain social contexts (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022). For example, how ECEC is organised and in what kinds of groupings children are organised, influence how transitions are understood. Finnish centre-based ECEC is organised in groups producing transitions between groups. How these transitions are constituted and their meanings for children’s everyday lives depend on centre-specific daily practices. The elements linked to children’s and adults’ relations in the centre and beyond and how ECEC and transitions are discursively produced in ECEC policy documents intertwine and constitute transitions.

We define transition as a change process (Colley 2010, 131) constituted and framed by educational institutions and local practices. From the analysis, we omit transitions between groups and centres but instead focus on other change processes children encounter during their ECEC years to grasp something ‘that escapes easy classification and that does not make easy sense’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 4). We focus on change processes relationally produced in ECEC institutional practices and their socio-spatial relations, which are more hidden, obscure or even controversial as educational transitions within ECEC institutions.

We use a relational socio-spatial approach and Lefebvre’s (1991) theory about production of social space to analyse spatial processes of transition constitution at different levels (Schmid 2008). The aim is to think and discuss with chosen examples how these change processes, obscure as educational transitions, are ‘done’ (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022). With Lefebvre’s triad of conceived, perceived and lived space, we examine *how the child’s lived space of transition is socio-spatially constituted*.

## **Constituting ECEC transitions: the Finnish context**

National-level policies precondition children’s transitions. In Finland, the state and municipalities are involved in ECEC governance and policy (Paananen 2017). The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and an obligatory National Core Curriculum regulate ECEC, local curricula and individual ECEC plans. Finnish ECEC is an age-integrated (OECD 2021) unified system for all children up to age seven

(Rutanan and Hännikäinen 2019) complemented by 4 h/day pre-primary education for six-year-olds. The holistic core curriculum does not separate approaches or settings for under threes and over threes (Rutanan and Hännikäinen 2019).

Finnish municipalities have much freedom in organising ECEC (Eerola et al. 2020). They must organise ECEC services to the extent and with the activities required, but they can decide the method. They can provide it themselves or subsidise private providers (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care [540/2018]; EDUFI 2022). Municipalities can customise their ECEC services by combining services from private and public providers in the way they prefer and decide how they financially provide them (Ruutiainen 2022).

ECEC in centres is group-based (EDUFI 2022). Children are quite often in age-related groups (Salminen 2017) in various combinations, depending on the ECEC centre. The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) states that the grouping structure, physical environment and their planning and use must meet ECEC aims. The National Core Curriculum (EDUFI 2022) suggests that grouping structures may be age-based or consider sibling relations or special support needs. Within the obligatory adult–child ratio, professional requirements, group size limitations and pedagogical appropriateness, centres can flexibly plan, apply and rearrange their grouping procedures and structures based on their current needs, which produces varying transitions between groups.

The National Core Curriculum (EDUFI 2022) identifies transitions between groups and ECEC centres and transitions to ECEC arranged by different service providers. The curriculum stipulates that transition phases should be planned and evaluated with parents to ensure children's wellbeing, smooth development and learning. The ECEC organiser is responsible for creating structures for collaboration and information transfer, enabling transitions from home to ECEC, within ECEC, to pre-primary education and to basic schooling to be as smooth as possible. Transition practices must be described in the local ECEC curriculum.

## **ECEC as a relational social space**

The children's transitions analysed are framed by ECEC institutions understood as relational spaces that are produced and the product of interrelations (Elden 2009; Massey 2005). These do not just exist like a predetermined reality or container (Elden 2009). Space is a social and political product (Elden 2007), never ready and always in the process of making (Massey 2005). Although space is understood relationally, it does not deny the existence of physical space (Baur et al. 2014) but takes material as one component, producing space interlacing with structures and interactions between people (Rutanan 2014).

Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space brings together different dimensions of space. According to Lefebvre (1991), social space is produced in a complex interplay of three moments of space: *perceived*, *conceived* and *lived*. In Lefebvre's theory, physical (perceived), mental (conceived) and social (lived) dimensions of space come together (Gottdiener 1993):

It is at once a physical environment that can be perceived; a semiotic abstraction that informs both how ordinary people negotiate space (the mental maps studied by geographers) and the space of corporations, planners, politicians, and the like; and, finally, a

**Table 1.** Lefebvre's spatial approach – application to ECEC (Elden 2007; 2009; Gottdiener 1993; Lefebvre 1991; Rutanen 2014; Schmid 2008).

How is space produced?	How is it manifested?	Dimension of space	What it is?	In ECEC
Perceived	Spatial practices	Physical, Concrete	Physical and material environment Real space (Elden 2009)	Perceivable ECEC environment and the centre Observable daily life
Conceived	Representations of space	Mental, Abstract	Conceptual model used to guide practice (Gottdiener 1993) Mental construction (Elden 2009)	ECEC policy documents, guidelines, curriculum Grouping structure of the centre
Lived	Space of representations	Social, Lived	Experience of inhabitant, Lived interaction (Elden 2009)	Lived and directly experienced ECEC daily life

medium through which the body lives out its life in interaction with other bodies. (Gottdiener 1993, 131)

Next, we discuss Lefebvre's (1991) three dimensions in relation to the ECEC context. Table 1 illustrates how Lefebvre's approach is understood and concretised to consider ECEC.

Physical *perceived space* is the visible ECEC environment and centre (Rutanen 2014) and its spatial practices, meaning observable daily life, what can be done and is done (Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014) – 'the interlinking chain or network of activities or interactions' (Schmid 2008, 37) within a certain physical space (Schmid 2008; Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014).

Lefebvre (1991) states that *conceived space* as abstract space is the 'space of scientists and planners', dominating how space is thought about (Elden 2009; Lefebvre 1991). These are abstractions created by officials and used by planners (Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014), like the Finnish national core curriculum is a written abstraction of Finnish ECEC. ECEC policy documents, guidelines and curricula present the conceptualised, abstract and mental space of ECEC (Rutanen 2014), representing official ECEC space and ECEC transitions, as they are constructed at the level of discourse (Schmid 2008; Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014). The centre's grouping structure is also part of the conceived space because we interpret it as a 'conceptual model to guide practice' (Gottdiener 1993) and a centre map.

*Lived space* is characterised as a space of lived interaction (Elden 2009) and directly experienced social space (Rutanen 2014). Taking account of the personal dimension, it 'overlays physical space as it is lived in the everyday course of life' (Watkins 2005). Reflected in ECEC, it refers to lived and directly experienced ECEC daily life: 'the world as it is experienced by human beings in the practice of their everyday life' (Schmid 2008, 40). Sillanpää (2021, 46) illustrates Lefebvre's idea that the physical space transforms in and through everyday actions and living to lived, experienced space.

When analysing children's daily lives and their transitions within ECEC by applying Lefebvre's theory, the ECEC centre is understood to represent an institution and a certain physical environment as part of a network of forces and relations that produce and reproduce space (Rutanen 2014) but also transitions. When transition is seen as relationally

and socio-spatially constituted, it is not an individual phenomenon but relational processes that individuals experience (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022).

## Data and methods

This study is a part of a longitudinal research project ‘Tracing children’s socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions’ that is funded by the Academy of Finland (2019–2024) and approved by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of University of Jyväskylä. All participants and/or their guardians have provided appropriate informed consent. Participants were informed in writing beforehand about the study, its potential risks, data protection and their rights as participants.

We have collected data since 2016 about five children’s transitions in Finnish ECEC – from their first transitions to ECEC to their transitions to pre-primary education. Data about transitions that emerged between the first transition and the transition to pre-primary education are scrutinised in this study. Data collection points were identified in collaboration with the educators and with our focus children’s parents. Periodically, we contacted educators to ask if transitions for the children were expected. Often, these were discussed in previous collaborations if they had plans that might affect upcoming transitions. This theme was discussed with parents and educators.

We have data for about 15 transitions (and partial data for two transitions). The data were collected through observation and interviews. The dataset includes structured observations (2016–2019) and ethnographic field notes (2019–). The first day in a new group/setting or otherwise changed situation was observed, and since Autumn 2019, one follow-up observation day one month later. The focus child’s whole day (approximately 6–8 h) was observed from arrival to departure. The aim was to write an overall description about what happened during that day focusing on the focus child’s intentions, interactions, and reactions in the new environment. The children’s reactions and expressions during and about the fieldwork were situationally sensitively observed (Rutanen et al. 2021).

Educators and parents were interviewed 1–2 times per transition. The focus of the semi-structured interviews were to discuss interviewees’ perceptions about the focus child’s experiences and their insights about the transition process. We aimed to interview ECEC teachers or carers with vocational training who had been with the child most in ECEC. Centre heads were interviewed, for example, when longitudinal data needed revision or reinforcement. The parents decided whether they both/all were interviewed. The long research relationship and collaboration with the focus families and certain ECEC centres allowed an open and discussional atmosphere and deepened complementary questions linked to the previous interviews and the case-specific knowledge the researchers gained.

## Analysis

During the data collection, generation and examination, we identified change processes linked to ECEC institutions’ functions and practices outside general categorisations of educational transitions within ECEC. To better understand these transition ‘fringes’, we used the idea of ‘Thinking with theory’ by Jackson and Mazzei (2012). We focused

on examples that ‘seemed to be about difference rather than sameness’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 4). We used Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of social space as our thinking companion. By using Jackson’s and Mazzei’s terms, we ‘plugged’ Lefebvre’s conceptualisation into our examination of the data.

Specifically, we used the conceptualisation to choose ‘data chunks’, i.e. data that (1) we found to illustrate the socio-spatial constitution of these change processes and (2) seemed to be challenging the discursively produced mental construction of transitions within ECEC, that is, the conceived space (Lefebvre 1991) of this phenomenon. It also constituted something new by examining the data while thinking about Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of social space (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). The ‘data chunk’ included transcribed interviews with parents (3), educators (3), and centre heads (2), and field notes and observations (2 days/case), with additional data utilised to complement the content. The whole longitudinal data set has been used for verification and as a supplement, for example, if a particular occasion was further reflected on in other interviews.

First, analytical questions were drawn from Lefebvre’s concepts and how they have been applied to ECEC (Table 1). Thinking with Lefebvre’s theory and data led to additional questions. Table 2 illustrates the process by which analytical questions evolved on the *threshold* (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) between data and theory. Transitions in general are linked to the centres’ grouping structures; hence, grouping structures were chosen, becoming the centre-specific representatives of *conceived space*, but also lenses to *spatial practices* (Lefebvre 1991). During the analysis, links and mingling between how space is produced and how it is manifested were scrutinised, for example, connections between ECEC policy and grouping structure and the interlinkage of the physical environment and how the grouping structure is applied.

To illustrate our analytical process, analytical narratives were created, aiming to represent the child’s lived space and aggregate what happened to the child: what changed in the child’s daily ECEC life, how the child reacted and how conceived and perceived moments of space unfolded, intertwined and mingled, constituting these change processes.

**Table 2.** Examples of analytical questions and how they evolved during the analysis.

Lefebvre’s concepts	What does it mean in ECEC?	First analytical question	Examples of questions that emerged during the process
Conceived / Representations of space	ECEC policy documents, guidelines and curriculum Grouping structure of the centre	Which ECEC policy documents, guidelines and curriculum are present? What kind is the grouping structure of the centre?	How are ECEC policies linked to the grouping structure? What kind of spatial Practices, ECEC policies, grouping structures and physical environments are produced?
Perceived / Spatial practices	Perceivable ECEC environment and the centre Observable daily life	What kind is the physical environment of the ECEC centre?	How are these spatial practices linked to the lived spaces of the children?
Lived / Space of representations	Lived and directly experienced ECEC daily life	What do we know about what happened to the child? What changed in the child’s ECEC life in this particular example? What was the child’s reaction?	



## Riku's case: the Elfs group is not the same anymore

*Riku returned to his familiar ECEC centre, Fairytale, after a two-month summer holiday. His third term in Fairytale is about to begin. Fairytale has two organisational groups: Elfs and Goblins. Riku is still designated a member of the Elfs group for under three years, like last term. He is part of a older Elfs subgroup of five children. Elfs' composition has changed: Riku's best friend, Luka, and his other most familiar peers transferred to the Goblins. Now, only two or three children familiar to Riku remain in Elfs. Familiar carer Mirja is assigned to work with a subgroup of four smaller Elfs. The new ECEC teacher, Milla, is now working with Riku's subgroup.*

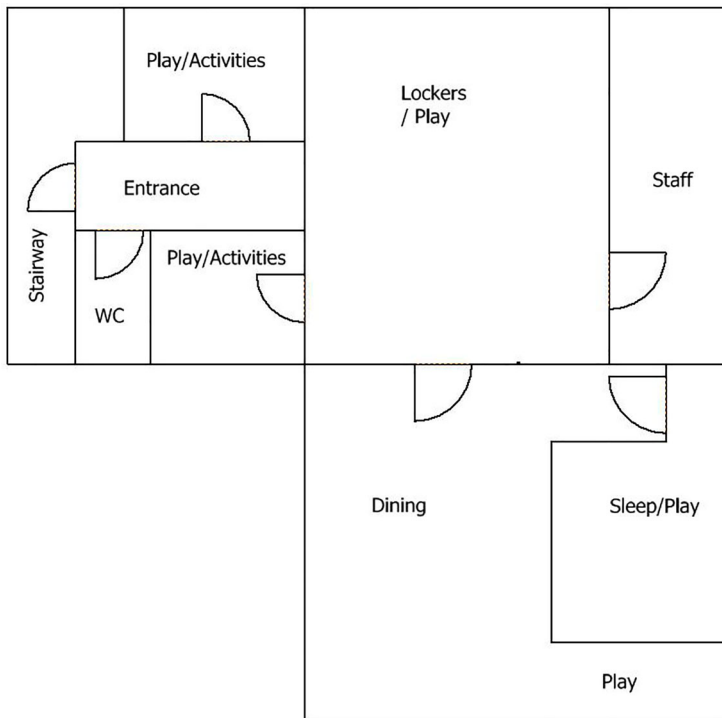
*In the first weeks, group division was not used because most children were still on holiday. During the observed first day, Riku played only with Luka. Educator Mirja felt it was still hard to say what would happen and how Riku would react when the group division was applied. We met a pedagogical leader from the centre after their group division was put into practice, who said there was a clear change in Riku's behaviour. He didn't want to do what was asked; his behaviour was resistant. His parents had also noticed a change: Riku was angry and didn't want to go to ECEC.*

As a concrete physical, perceived space, Fairytale is a small private centre for 20–24 children located in an apartment-like environment that was not originally planned as an ECEC centre. Children are organised into two groups: Elfs (for 0–3-year-olds) and Goblins (for 3–5-year-olds). Based on this grouping, children transition from Elfs to Goblins. The group division into under threes and over threes possibly links to age-based adult–child ratio limitations that change from 1:4 to 1:7 when children turn three (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care [540/2018]). This is a quite typical group division in Finland with historical roots (Salminen 2017). Spatial practices and local representations of space in the form of the centres' grouping structures are shaped by law and the core curriculum through guidelines on how to organise groups and the physical environment, in addition to ratio.

In Fairytale's apartment-like physical environment, organisational groups do not have designated group rooms or areas (Figure 1). Regardless of the child's group, the child's daily life happens in the same physical environment in familiar indoor and outdoor spaces.

As a spatial practice, rooms are designated for specific activities: the biggest room is for sleeping and indoor sports, the dining area and its tables are used for handicrafts, one room is for the morning circle, etc. The groups do not use indoor spaces simultaneously during group-based morning activities: after collective breakfast and free play-time in the morning, Elfs' day begins indoors, Goblins play outdoors, and then they swap around.

Here, we see how perceived space manifests itself in spatial practices and defines what can be done and is done (Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014). Alternation as a spatial practice is needed to enable pre-planned pedagogical activities and use the available physical space. At the same time, this spatial practice signifies that membership of a specific organisational group attaches children to a particular timetable and organisation of the day with a designated group of children. Due to the perceived physical space, the centre's size and layout and the fact that it was not intended as an ECEC centre, the group division and membership of the organisational group are produced in spatial practices:



**Figure 1.** Fairytale layout.

the daily rhythms and schedules. In the children's daily life, the transition from Elfs to Goblins means that their daily routines occur in a different rhythm with more children because of the changing ratio.

Riku's age and mandatory ratio alignments as representatives of the conceived space of Finnish ECEC became a crucial constraint in his transition process. Riku was some weeks younger than his friends, which the educators explained was the main reason why he remained in Elfs. Riku's educator stated that the child's age is a crucial factor when planning transitions and group compositions, but she also hinted that not all three-year-olds could be in the group for bigger ones and that some are left in the smaller ones' group. This situation is linked to the ratio as a representative of the conceived space and to the perceived physical space of the centre and its spatial practices. These strands of conceived and perceived space materialised in Riku's lived space, leading to social discontinuities that re-organised Riku's daily life in ECEC.

In Fairytale, how group division is applied as spatial practice denotes the differentiated daily schedules between the groups. When Luka, Riku's best friend, transitioned to Goblins and Riku remained in Elfs, their opportunities to play and be together diminished based on their groups' different timetables. Alternation of indoor/outdoor spaces as spatial practice enables daily activities in the physically small centre, simultaneously confines the groups, supports relationships between children in the same group, but hinders relationships across group boundaries. The educators were aware of this spatial practice's consequences, because the friends' separation was pedagogically justified by stating that separation from Luka might benefit Riku's skills to play with

other children, although the educators do not purposefully break friendships. Overall, from the perspective of the grouping structure as a strand of conceived space, there was no transition for Riku; he was still part of Elfs, like before. Instead, Riku was relationally involved in the transition process of his best friend and peers: ‘the life of one person affects and is affected by other people, especially the most central and intimate of relationships’ (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022, 6). Transition in his best friend’s life constituted a transition for Riku, too.

From the institutional point of view, Riku’s change process occurred within the group and does not fit with the definition of transition as moving from one group to another, which in Fairytale entails transitioning from Elfs to Goblins. Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualisation that conceived abstract space, produced by planners and scientists, suppresses lived experiences (Milgrom 2008) is visible here in the way that, from the structural perspective, Riku does not transition, although we argue that he experienced one linked to his best friend’s transition.

Riku reacted to the change with anger and resistant behaviour. After some months, when one extra adult came to Goblins and Riku had turned three, Riku was moved to Goblins because of his frustrated behaviour in Elfs. The educator interpreted Riku’s frustration, conversely, that Riku was ‘too competent’ for the under-threes group, but also that it resulted from the separation from his soulmate and lack of matching friends. It is possible to interpret Riku’s action and behaviour as resistance to transition, constituting differential space and re-appropriation of space (Milgrom 2008; Rutanen 2014).

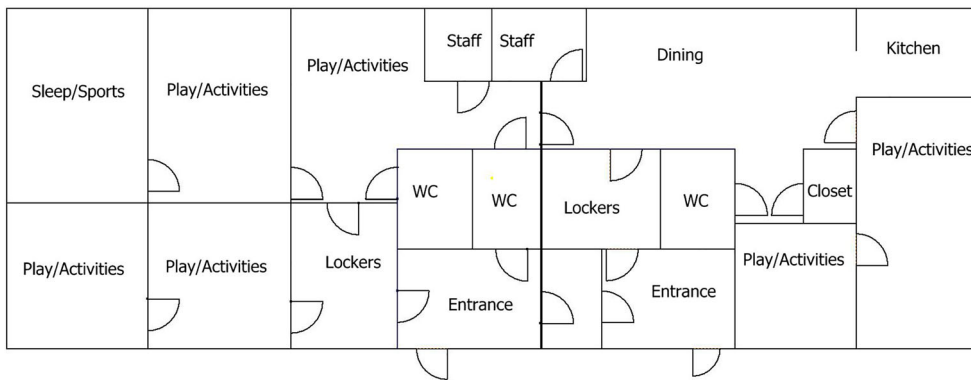
Riku’s age, linked to the ratio, initiated a whole change process. The educators played an important role as gatekeepers at the centre level, assessing children and interpreting institutional prescriptions (Walther 2022). However, finally, how Riku’s own active role changed the situation reveals the relational nature of the socio-spatial constitution of transitions.

### **Senja’s case: Berryland turns into Tinyland**

*Senja’s summer break is over. She has returned to Berryland. Berryland has two organisational groups, Strawberries and Raspberries, including a Viskari subgroup of five-year-olds. Senja transitions to the Viskari subgroup based on her upcoming fifth birthday. Her closest friends transition to the same group. Her subgroup leader is Emilia, who has been Senja’s educator for three years. Senja’s daily life in ECEC takes place in the same group area and familiar facilities as before the summer. Senja’s transition to Viskari happens alongside another transition: the ECEC owner and provider changed because the previous provider could no longer maintain this centre.*

*Thus, an organisational transition process was happening, during which the familiar physical ECEC centre building was renamed ‘Tinyland’. New ownership also entailed a new leader and new educators for Senja’s group. Many new children enrolled in the centre, resulting in the formation of a completely new group, Blueberries, for the new children. A little later, some children already in the centre were moved to Blueberries also. Some of those moved to apportion the group sizes were from Senja’s Viskari group, including Senja’s close friend Mia.*

*Tinyland’s new provider and professionals entail new pedagogical practices and rearrangements and renovations of the physical space. Senja’s mother said in her interview*



**Figure 2.** Berryland layout: left side under threes end (Strawberries), right side over threes end (Raspberries).

*that Senja said that she does not like it that new children came to the centre and that she does not want to go to the centre in the morning. Senja's mother, in turn, reflected that she senses tensions between the educators and that the centre's atmosphere has changed.*

Berryland, as a perceived physical space, is a purpose-built private centre for approximately 50 children. The building has separate group areas for Strawberries (under threes) and Raspberries (over threes) with their own entrances (Figure 2). Groups are essentially located in their own group areas but share a common dining area and a sleeping room. In Berryland, which was planned as an ECEC centre, the conceived space of ECEC, politics, guidelines and curricular aims materialise in its perceived space. The centre's group division actualises the mingling of perceived and conceived moments. It seems to be linked to ratio and possibly historical influences, but it is also supported by the centre's physical layout, whose planning, in turn, has been influenced by ECEC guidelines, policies and ideals.

From the organisational perspective, leaning on Berryland's grouping structure as a representation of space, children transition from Strawberries to Raspberries. This entails movement between differentiated group areas: children use a different entrance and a new location for lockers, toilets, etc., and daily activities mainly happen in the Raspberries' group area. Membership of a certain group in Berryland attaches the child to a particular spatial area indoors and outdoors, but likewise to certain daily schedules that stagger the use of a shared dining area.

However, the Berryland's previous head highlighted that the groups' boundaries waver. As a spatial practice, they live daily ECEC life as one big group, even though groups and group areas are nominally separated. All children and adults collaborate across group boundaries and may use all the rooms, depending on the activities and the number of children and adults present.

Berryland's spatial practice of 'one big group' is partially linked to the local ECEC policy that the centre head described as favouring public ECEC centres, meaning that children are primarily enrolled in public ECEC centres. If places are insufficient, children attend private centres. This local, conceived ECEC space as a conceptual model to guide their local practices created by municipal planners led Berryland to situations in which children come and go, depending on how crowded public centres are. Thus, the number of children and needed groups in the centre vary temporarily, demanding

tractability to how ECEC is organised here. The previous Berryland head explained that because of the centre's location, they have difficulties getting substitutes, so occasionally they have to move and reorganise children and adults to meet adult-child ratios (Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000). The centre's location was intertwined in their created 'one big group' – spatial practice from two directions: as perceivable physical location but also local politics representing conceived space.

Senja transitioned to Viskari, a separate subgroup with slightly differentiated pedagogical aims for five-year-olds within the over-threes group. Senja's transition included only minor changes in her daily ECEC life. However, another transition emerged simultaneously, namely the organisational transition that rearranged this centre's perceived and conceived spaces. The first notable change was that Berryland was renamed Tinyland. Although the building was the same, the new provider started to build a new centre with different practices within its walls. Also, the perceived physical environment was renovated to represent and support the new provider's insights about the conceived space of ECEC, ergo ECEC guidelines and the curriculum, and to allow the spatial practices the new provider wanted.

The conceived space related to the grouping structure changed. Many new children were enrolled, and a new group, Blueberries, was established and located in the under threes' end. Tinyland now had three groups: Strawberries, Blueberries and Raspberries. Simultaneously, the borders between the groups became stricter. They no longer had a shared dining or sleeping room, and daily activities happened distinctly in separate group areas. Other new pedagogical and spatial practices introduced by a new leader and staff entailed a more structured way to organise daily activities and life in ECEC. One educator stated that she missed her colleagues from the other group because the distinction between the groups had become so strong. She reflected, 'Nowadays, this is a compartmentalised centre'.

The change in spatial practice from 'one big group' to 'a compartmentalised centre' that diminished interaction over group borders turned into this educator's lived experience, which she expressed by noting that she missed her colleagues. If the new practice diminished interaction between educators, we can assume that Senja's lived experience, which she expressed by saying that she did not like it when new children came, had something to do with this new spatial practice, especially because her close friend Mia from the Viskari group moved to the Blueberries to balance the group size. Possibly, Senja had similar feelings to her mother, who sensed tensions between educators and changes in the centre's atmosphere.

Senja's lived experience was constituted in how conceived space, in this case national ECEC agreements and regulations and great municipal autonomy to apply those, interlinked and materialised through perceived space and its spatial practices to children's daily life. In this example, a national agreement and regulation permitting private companies to operate in ECEC while allowing municipalities to decide how to organise ECEC services to cover local needs mingled. National agreements allow municipalities to structure their own service provision, combining public and private services. In Senja's case, local policy led to unpredictable changes, e.g. in the number of children Berryland had and how many teachers they needed. This might have influenced the fact that Berryland could no longer maintain its services and transition to Tinyland emerged.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how a child's lived space of transition is socio-spatially constituted. We chose to think with theory (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) of the production of social space (Lefebvre 1991) change processes at the fringes of transitions. Our examples are at the fringes because they do not meet the definition of educational transition as the process of moving from one educational setting to another (Fabian 2007). They represent difference, not sameness (Jackson and Mazzei 2012).

Our examples illustrate processes where the group, centre and service provider rearranged themselves around the child. Conversely, previous studies have focused on children moving between classes/groups (Cryer et al. 2005; O'Farrelly and Hennessy 2013; 2014; Recchia and Dvorakova 2012) or their perspectives from a structural point of view (Cryer, Hurwitz, and Wolery 2000; Garpelin et al. 2010). Riku and Senja instead were relationally involved in transition processes around them. In Riku's case, perceived space and spatial practices and relations intertwined with national regulations, so that the Elfs group was no longer the same for Riku. In Senja's case, local ECEC policy implementation and ways to organise ECEC services appeared to be one promoter of a process in which a new ECEC centre was created in the old one's shell.

One of Lefebvre's (1991) main points is that conceived space dominates. The homogeneity of abstract space created by planners and scientists suppresses the difference in representational space (Milgrom 2008). In the context of ECEC and transitions, it means that discursively produced abstractions, e.g. in policy documents, produce a baseline of what kind of transitions emerge in ECEC. In the Finnish case, transitions from one group or centre to another or a move to ECEC organised by different service providers (EDUFI 2022) and at the same time dominate what is considered a transition. This kind of definition sees transitions as individual processes. With our examples, we stand with children, 'the inhabitants' of ECEC, by discussing the fringes of transitions and highlighting the relationality and complexity of the socio-spatial constitution of these change processes.

The Finnish twofold governance (Paananen 2017) of unified ECEC with locally autonomously implemented guidelines and policies makes transitions within ECEC somewhat obscure, at least when transitions emerge within ECEC centre. That is why reflection on overall changes in a child's ECEC daily life (Harju et al., 2023) seems a more valid indicator for identifying transitions than merely the lenses the grouping structure offers. We have discussed examples that these lenses do not reach but that illustrate how weaving national, local and centre-specific policies and practices relationally come together with the centre's physical space in the child's lived space of transition. Thus, transitions should be understood as relational processes (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022) linked to a network of socio-spatial relations.

Other ways to interpret these described examples and children's reactions than considering them as transition experiences may exist. Our informants were adults who discussed these changes from their adult perspective, offering certain views and interpretations of Riku's and Senja's reactions, especially to these socio-spatial changes. Analytical case narratives, as discussed here, are produced through 'adult filters' (Babic 2017), acknowledging their limitations. Also the limited number of interviews and observation days constrained possibilities and the depth of analysis of these

change processes. We focused on examples in which the child's daily life was rearranged locally within the same physical centre. Transitions between physical centres or changes in childcare, as conceptualised (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henley 2022), need analysis in future research.

Diverse transitions mould children's paths in ECEC. Some are straightforward, directly guiding individuals 'forward' on the learning path, but relationality as a starting point broadens the perspective to consider that transitions are 'deeply interwoven with others' (Walther, Stauber, and Settersten 2022, 6). Then, we can see the fringes of transitions: relational socio-spatial change processes framed by educational institutions. They are produced within a certain physical educational environment and its spatial practices that both mingle with local and centre-specific interpretations and applications of ECEC guidelines, the curriculum and regulations in relation to individuals' lived experiences and social interactions.

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