

Article title	Children's Agency and Rights in Childhood (Finland)
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Glossary terms are highlighted in text. (See the end of the article)

Children's Agency and Rights in Childhood (Finland)

1. Theoretical approaches to agency

Children and childhood have had different meanings at different times in Finnish society. In earlier decades, children were seen as growing, developing and immature individuals (Alanen and Karila 2009). Consequently, childhood was approached from the perspective of protection and the child was seen as a subject of adult protection (Strandell 1995). Since the late 1980s, Finnish childhood research pioneers have contributed to childhood studies and have impacted the ideological change towards seeing children and childhood from the perspective of children's rights and agency (see e.g. Alanen and Bardy 1991). In the 21st century, the identification of children as actors became emphasized and the principles of children's participation became more systematically highlighted in both research and society. Currently, children are seen as active actors and recognized as capable of dealing with their own affairs and taking part in matters that concern them. (Alanen and Karila 2009; Strandell 2010.) Based on this, childhood is no longer seen as a mere waiting room on the way to adulthood, and children are seen as *beings* in their current childhoods (Alanen and Karila 2009).

These developments have had consequences for both research methods and the everyday life of children. With the consolidation of childhood studies, children are now more often research informants (Lehtinen 2001; Strandell 1995; 2012a). As children's rights to participate in Finnish society are a guiding principle in general, childhood institutions have developed a variety of child-oriented practices to support their participation. These participatory rights have also been explicitly embedded into several acts in Finnish national legislation (Koivula et al. 2017). For example, the Basic Education Act (628/1998, 47a§) mentions children's rights to express their views on education. Similarly, the Early Childhood Education Act (36/2016, 7b§) expresses the idea of hearing the opinion of children when planning, implementing and evaluating early childhood education (see also Vlasov et al. 2019). The Child Welfare Act (417/2007, 5§) also gives great weight to a child's own opinion.

2.Children, productivity and citizenship

Children are recognized as active citizens, especially by the Youth Act (1285/2016, 24§) which mentions children's participation and hearing their opinions on decisions concerning them. The act stipulates that municipal and state authorities should offer young people the chance to influence matters concerning youth work and the politics concerning young persons at the local, regional and national levels. In addition, according to the Local Government Act (410/2015, 26§) every municipality should have a youth council that can influence municipal decision-making. In 2017, 80 per cent of Finnish municipalities had a Youth Parliament (Nuva 2017). Some municipalities also have children's parliaments. However, not very many municipalities have set up participation systems for under 12-year-olds. (Council of Europe 2011.)

Although Finnish legislation promotes and supports child and youth participation in different areas of children's and young people's lives, the assessment of the impact and implementation of these provisions are claimed to remain quite poor (Council of Europe 2011). The policy review by the European Council (2011) on child and youth participation shows that even though almost half of the children surveyed stated that adults listened to what they had to say – and the majority of children felt that their views were taken seriously by their parents, teachers, doctors and health workers – children also feel that authorities are less likely to take their views into account. Thus, there is still room for development in children's active citizenship. Child and youth participation is taken into account in the areas of education, culture and youth activities, but that more work is required in the area of social and health issues to guarantee children's rights to participate. This needs to be especially highlighted in alternative care settings, in health care situations and in relation to play, recreation, sports and cultural activities. (Council of Europe 2011.) Some societal activities also might exclude children from adult society. For example, in some municipalities

have discussed children's curfews in order to 'protect' them (Harrikari and Pekkarinen 2011).

3. Work and schooling

In Finland, nine-year comprehensive school is universally available to all children. Education on democracy and active citizenship is included in the curricula of all grades, in their general part. Human rights education is also included in the Basic Education Core Curriculum. (Council of Europe 2011.) Children start comprehensive education at the age of seven and attend part-time pre-primary education the year they turn six. Free pre-primary education was introduced in 2000 and became compulsory in 2015. As regards childcare services and early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children under the age of seven, the state has broad interventions in the provision of these services (see Anttonen and Sipilä 1994; Eydal and Rostgaard 2011; Paananen et al. 2018; Repo 2013).

Nowadays, all children under the age of seven are legally guaranteed a place in subsidized, integrated ECEC services, in which care and education are not separated. Since 1990, children under the age of three have been entitled to an ECEC place provided by local authorities. In 1996, this entitlement was expanded to cover all children under school age. The duration of attendance was not regulated until 2016, when new legislation allowed municipalities to limit entitlement to ECEC to 20 hours per week, unless the child's parents worked or studied full time. (Paananen et al. 2018.) Although children's social and educational rights are taken seriously in Finnish society, there is another side to this situation. Finnish parents are also entitled to a child home care allowance that enables them to take care of their children informally if their under-three-year-old child does not use public ECEC services. This allowance is also paid for older siblings if they are cared for in the same way. (Paananen et al. 2018; Repo 2013) This means that some children go without regulated ECEC services.

In recent decades, around half of children aged under three and a third of 3–5-year-olds have been cared for at home, mostly by their mothers (see KELA 2017). This dualistic nature of Finnish ECEC and childcare policies reflects the double-edged situation of Finnish children's rights. A large proportion of children is excluded from universally provided ECEC services, which consider peer cultures and provide key pedagogical elements to support children's welfare and learning. As such, public support for long home care is an equality paradox in a system that in other respects gives increasing weight to children's rights to early childhood education (Strandell 2012b). This policy also excludes small children from their potential peer groups and the social relations provided by day care centres (Standell 1995; OECD 2018).

4. Children's rights

In Finland, a central motivation for promoting children's active role in society comes from the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Children are entitled to the right to express their views in all matters affecting them. In line with the CRC, children should be heard as individuals in decisions regarding their personal lives, but also as groups of children representing the interests and needs of children in general in public decision-making (Pösö 2018). The Finnish Ombudsman for Children monitors the welfare of children and youth, and the implementation of their rights (see <http://www.lapsiasia.fi/en/>).

Despite the strong legal incentive, children's participation is not easily translated from principle into effective practice (Pösö 2018; Council of Europe 2011). The Finnish practices of children's participation have been criticized as being too institutionally focused and as highlighting statutory activities (Stenvall 2018; Euroopan neuvoston osallisuushanke 2010; Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2011). The participation structures have been seen as disregarding children's everyday lives and their own ways of acting (Eskelinen et al. 2012). According to the critics, children's participation is enabled mainly for the needs of institutional decision-making processes and educational institutions such as schools. Subsequently, from the perspective of CRC, children's own participation customs are not sufficiently taken into account in different areas of societal activities.

Finnish scholars point out that if participation is understood as only that in adult-led institutional activities, children are seen as active participants but not as active actors on their own terms (Kiili 2014; Eskelinen et al. 2012; Stenvall 2018; Bäcklund and Kallio 2012). When reconsidering the perspective of children's agency, multifaceted and different kinds of opportunities for children to influence, participate and be heard should be created (Gretschel and Kiilakoski 2012).

For example, it has been noted that the Finnish child welfare system – described in cross-country comparisons as orientated towards child-centrism (Gilbert et al. 2011) – has a gap between legislation and front-line practice in terms of children's rights to have their views heard (see Pösö 2018): practice does not in every respect include children in the way as the legislation requires (e.g. de Godzinsky 2014; Toivonen 2017; Pösö and Enroos 2017). However, there are also positive examples of children's agency. Activity groups of children and young people, experts by experience, have successfully created a platform for their views to be heard and have fought against the presumptions regarding their lack of skills and competences (see Pösö 2018). They have shaped the way of addressing child protection issues so that Article 12 of the CRC and the experiences of children are paid more attention. These children have actively influenced policy programmes and even legislative changes: their knowledge has informed recent policy and legislation. The recognition of children's rights,

views and wishes owes a great deal to the experts by experience, especially in the public arenas of policy-making. The children's activity demonstrates that they have combined the general principles of the CRC and Article 12 in particular, as well as their own wishes and needs, and more diffusely influenced the practice than the policies. (Pösö 2018.)

Glossary terms

Early childhood education and care

"Early childhood education and care ECEC refers to a systematic and goal-oriented whole consisting of education, instruction and care with particular emphasis on pedagogy. In early childhood education and care the primary focus should be on the child's best interest" (Early Childhood Education Act). "Institutional early childhood education and care is organised by municipalities, joint municipal authorities and other service providers, and it may be offered at a day-care centre, in family day-care or as open early childhood education and care" (Vlasov et. al. 2019, 18).

Child Home care allowance

"Child home care allowance can be granted when a child under 3 years of age is looked after at home. The caregiver can be the father, the mother or other guardian, married or cohabiting spouse of the parent or guardian or a hired caregiver or other person who looks after the child. Child home care allowance can also be paid for other siblings under school age of the under 3-year-old child who is looked after at home. Payment of the allowance ends at the latest when the family's youngest child reaches the age of 3 years. Child home care allowance is not available if the child is in municipal (local) day care. In order to get child home care allowance, the parent(s) must take their child out of municipal day care for example during the summer holiday." <https://www.kela.fi/web/en/child-home-care-allowance>

The Finnish Ombudsman for Children

In Finland, the post of Ombudsman for Children was established in 2005. The role is to ensure that the rights and status of children are upheld by political decision-makers and legislators. The Ombudsman evaluates how children's rights are realized and suggest for improvements. See more information: www.lapsiasia.fi/en/

Further reading and online resources [compulsory] [not included in total word count]

- Supply a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 10 suggestions
- Please write format these in the complete bibliographic style outlined in the contributor guidelines
- These suggestions must be unique from those listed in the references section.
 - Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW), <https://www.lskl.fi/verkkouutiset/lainsaadannon-laatu-kuntoon/>

- Finnish National Agency for Education page 'Education policy': https://www.oph.fi/english/education_system_education_policy
- Statistics Finland: Education statistics: http://www.stat.fi/til/aiheet_en.html#kou
- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2018), Pre-primary and basic education: <https://karvi.fi/en/pre-primary-and-basic-education/>
- Ombudsman for Children, Finland: <http://www.lapsiasia.fi/en/>
- The Society for Childhood Studies: <https://lapsuudentutkimuksenseura.yhdistysavain.fi/in-english/>

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