Tracing children's politics

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Abstract: This article sets out to conceptualize children's political agency and the spaces of children's politics by addressing children's politics in official settings and everyday contexts. The study is based on research concerning child and youth policies and the politics played out in children's everyday life practices. To demonstrate how childhood policies typically seek to involve children in politics, we discuss recent legislative developments related to building a parliamentary apparatus for children's participation in Finland. We propose that not all children are able to, or willing to, participate actively in this kind of political action, and that all issues important to children can not be processed through (semi)official arenas such as school councils, children's parliaments and civic organizations. Thus, we agree with scholarship portraying children as political agents also in their everyday environments and on their own terms. To further conceptualize these mundane politics, we propose a model for identifying different modes and spaces of children's agency in terms of political involvement and political presence. We conclude by discussing the challenges of studying everyday political geographies in childhood.

Keywords: Children's politics, political agency, childhood, the political, space, socialization.

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Introduction

Underage people's political participation has become a major issue in current child and youth policies, and has respectively gained much attention in recent childhood and youth research. The interest shown in children and young people's potential to partake in political matters comes mainly from the third principle of the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, portrayed in article 12, announcing that:

> "[T]he child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law." [1]

This guideline is officially acknowledged by nearly all nation states, many of which have adopted it in their policy-making processes (e.g. European Union White Paper on Youth, 2001; Finnish Government's Child and Youth Policy Programme 2007-2011, 2008; Plymouth Children and Young People's Participation Strategy, 2006). Consequently, supra-national, national and municipal legislation and political strategies for promoting children and young people's rights to participation have been generated, and children's parliaments, youth forums and other such organs have been established to implement these strategies (e.g. Children's United Parliament of the World; European Youth Forum; Children's Parliament in India; Children's Parliament in Scotland; ECCAR Youth Forum). In line with this development, school councils in several countries have been encouraged to include more pupils in school administration and to provide them with opportunities to interact with local governments (e.g. Gallagher, 2006; Lansdown, 2006; Key *et al.*, 2006; Brooks, 2007; Tracy & Durfy, 2007). Schools, civic organizations and public child and youth work actors are also organizing projects to promote children and young people's political awareness, communality, and skills for critical thinking, both in developed and developing countries (for an overview see Darder *et al.*, 2009; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

The implementation of the 12th article takes different forms depending on the cultural context, the political system and the administrative traditions. However, in one sense the article has been adopted rather similarly across Europe, and elsewhere. As a general rule, it has been presumed that in their everyday lives children are not able to adequately participate in societal issues and matters concerning themselves, but need to be supported, empowered and educated by adults to learn how to act as political agents (cf. Dunne, 2006; Lund, 2007; Tisdall *et al.*, 2008). Laying emphasis on the state's role and school's potential in promoting political socialization, this entails that children's politics is considered more or less on a par with adults' politics (cf. Buckingham, 2000; Sapiro, 2004; Dunsmore & Lagos, 2008; Claes *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, it implies that in their everyday life practices, children do not normally act politically, at least to any sufficient or satisfying extent. Hence, there seems to be little or no place for politics in children's quotidian lived worlds – that is, in childhood.

The conception of childhood as a more or less apolitical field of social and cultural practices has given rise to some critical questioning (e.g. Philo & Smith, 2003; Katz, 2004; Brocklehurst, 2006; Kallio 2007; Skelton, 2010). How precisely do we know that children's lived worlds are *not* comprised of political processes through which they are able to participate satisfactorily in matters concerning themselves? Children's mundane politics certainly have not attracted much attention in academia, nor is this an issue commonly discussed in child policy contexts. This has brought us to ponder whether children's role as political agents in their practices of everyday life can be known at all without studying their lived worlds as potential fields of political action. Furthermore, since children form webs of power relations in their own political geographies where they, for instance, "give expression to one's own views and aspirations", "establish, recognize and contest different interests", "gain advantage over other children" and adults, and "resist defining powers over the self", as portrayed by Kearns and Collins (2003: 197), Matthews and Limb (2003: 177), Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 509), and Thomas (2009: 14), is there a risk that some children's positions in these politics is eclipsed by others who are more broadly involved in official political systems and struggles? We deem that a broad understanding of children's politics is needed to endorse their political lives equally.

One reason for the lack of theorization on this theme is that the mundane politics taking place in childhood have generally gained little attention among political and childhood researchers (cf. Ward, 1977; Sibley, 1991; Aitken, 1994; Philo & Smith, 2003; Bragg, 2007; Ansell, 2009). When young individuals and groups are discussed within politically oriented research, it is nearly without exception late teenagers and young adults whose practiced politics and evolving political understandings are studied (e.g. Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Weller, 2003; Altay, 2007; Cahill, 2007; Hörschelmann, 2008; Thomas, 2009; Kallio & Häkli, 2011a). Yet, as pointed out by Valentine (2003) and Hopkins and Alexander (2010), there are important differences between the lifecourse experiences and structural positionings of children and young people, implying that the political geographies of both generational groups deserve distinct attention. To this end we focus here particularly on young children's politics.

Besides this, there is yet another reason why children's own politics have not been studied extensively. To put it simply, it is very difficult. Both conceptual tools for analysis and practical methods for gathering empirical data on children's politics remain poorly developed. The approaches and means generally used in the study of politics are not adequate because children do not express or play out their politics in the forms and terms familiar to adults, nor identify their own action as political. This pertains particularly to very young children whose politics are studied the least. Moreover, the issues and contexts that are central to children's politics are often dismissed as apolitical by adults who are not aware of the power relations and strains embedded in them – a concern familiar to cultural, feminist and queer geographers, too (cf. Dean, 2000; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2009). Hence more work is needed to fill in the theoretical lacunae in the study of children's political agencies.

In this article children's political agencies and the places of their politics are traced by exploring how children participate in matters concerning them in adult-led policy-making processes on official arenas, in contrast to how they may address matters important to them in everyday practices. The discussion is empirically grounded in Finland, the first country in Europe to launch a semi-official parliamentary mechanism for involving children extensively in national and

municipal politics. By means of first looking at official arenas provided for children's political participation we illustrate the possibilities and limits of these kinds of procedures, and highlight that they by no means exhaust children's political agency. We then move on to looking at the many alternative modes that children's politics may take, and propose a conceptual model as a tool for making sense of this diversity grounded in different social, cultural and geographical contexts. Hence, while we use Finnish examples to illustrate certain aspects of children's participation in official politics, we are not introducing a case study. Instead, our aim is to develop tools for tracing children's politics not bound to certain (western) geographical locations, cultural contexts or political societies (cf. Kallio & Häkli, 2010, 2011b).

We lay the basis for the analysis by briefly introducing Finnish child policies and the parliamentary apparatus for children's empowerment. Then, we shed light on how children participate in matters concerning them in these official arenas and reflect on how this action differs from the politics taking place in children's everyday environments. Our point is to show that there are considerable differences between the two modes of children's political agency: one based on political awareness, mobilizing in various forms of involvement, and the other grounded on political presence and practiced as part of mundane action. From these starting points, we conceptualize children's political agencies in more detail and conclude by sketching a conceptual model for addressing different kinds of political geographies in childhood.

Towards empowered membership in political communities

While a topical issue in contemporary child policies, children's right to participation is actually not as novel a matter as it may first seem. In fact, this right was formalized as early as in the 1948 United Nation's *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*. The declaration states that everyone in the world has the right to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 18); the freedom of opinion and expression (article 19); and the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his/her rights and obligations (article 10). Since there is no age limit to these rights, the motivation of the 12th article of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (henceforth the UNCRC) can be understood as an endeavor to underline and spell out these civil liberties in the context of young individuals.

Thomas H. Marshall's (1950) well-known classification of citizenship into civil, political and social rights was formulated right after the proclamation of the human rights declaration and has since been employed as one major interpretive frame to human rights (Somers & Roberts, 2008). From the participation point of view this reading of citizenship means that fully empowered members of a political community have the opportunity to participate in matters of their concern through representative and direct action alike. In principle, any issue significant to its introducer can be politicized and brought to debate. According to this understanding, political agency is thus not restricted to certain preconditioned means, modes, matters or arenas, but can come about in diverse forms and places. In the past sixty years or so, numerous supra-national and national legislations have been sketched to interpret, formalize, contextualize and mobilize these rights, carving space for all people to act as full participants in their communities and societies, in ways and places accessible to them. The legislation and policy-making concerning children now follows this tendency, striving to extend full citizenship to them.

After the ratification of the UNCRC in 1991, Finnish child policies started to pay special attention to the participation principle, alongside the other two main principles of the convention (protection and provision). The participation principle was first introduced as an aspect in decrees that were under preparation or modification. For example, the *Child Custody and Right of Access Act* (186/1994) and the *Finnish Constitution* (731/1999) were completed with amendments acknowledging children's right to be heard in matters concerning them (for Finnish legislation see Finlex). These first motions, however, were careful not to overemphasize children's active role.

A more thorough policy reform commenced at the beginning of the 2000s when the *Youth Act* (72/2006) was revised. The act declares that all people under the age of 29 have the right to be heard in matters concerning them and to participate in local and regional youth work and policy. It follows faithfully both the UNCRC and the policy line outlined in the *European Union White Paper on Youth* (0681/2001), diverging only in that the act sets no minimum age on 'youth'. This means that in Finland the official right to participation extends to young children, which has been welcomed by those addressing children's rights. Moreover, the act puts the Ministry of Education and the municipal governments under the obligation of establishing concrete strategies for the development of youth and child policies, which are to be updated every four years.

The Youth Act was followed by the reformation of the *Child Welfare Act* (417/2007), which details how children's (0–17) and young people's (18–20) will, views, opinions and wishes are to be canvassed and taken into account in all situations in which their well-being is considered. Altogether 20 sections of this statute mention that children have a right to be heard in matters of their concern, and that their voice must be noticed in decision making that affects them. Also, this act appoints the municipalities to formulate strategies for the development of children's well-being.

The third major guideline for the current child policies in Finland is outlined in the governmental *Policy Programme for the Well-Being of Children, Youth and Families* (2007). The program emphasizes the importance of children's rights and explicitly considers how participation, democratic skills and communal competences are to be supported in Finland. It was launched to monitor and support the implementation of the *Finnish Government's Child and Youth Policy Programme 2007–2011* (2008) established in accordance with the Youth Act, and prepared by the Ministry of Education Youth Unit in collaboration with a number of parties.[2]

In accordance with the substantial law reform and the policy program, both the state and municipalities are presently in a process of thoroughly remodeling their child policies. Local strategies have been formulated and plans of action created to build apparatuses for involving children comprehensively in all matters concerning them, both individually and through representatives. Similarly, schools are required to enhance their curricula and council systems to meet the new criteria, and created practices for listening to students' opinions, collaborating with municipal actors and building connections to civic organizations. The pre-school and day care systems have also developed their own processes for hearing and involving very young children.

Moreover, as a practical means for the implementation of the new child policies, a parliamentary mechanism for children's participation was introduced by the Ministry of Education Youth Unit.

Together with other national and regional actors, the Unit has designed and prepared a system which aims at giving all children equal potential to exert their voice in planning, administration and policy making concerning them. In consequence, municipal children's parliaments and youth forums are being established around Finland as the key intermediary actors between school councils, civic organizations, communal participation projects, national actors, and other significant quarters. On the national level, the *Finnish Children's Parliament* was founded in 2007 to serve as the most important national channel for children between 7 to 12 years of age, whereas the already functioning *Youth Parliament* provides a corresponding forum for older children. Given that the legislation concerning early education and childcare is currently being revised in participatory spirit, it is presumable that in the coming years children below the age of seven will also have their own path to the parliamentary system.

Hence, the 12th article of the UNCRC has been taken very seriously in Finland. Children's opportunities to participate in matters of their concerns, both individually and through representatives are currently rather advantageous. Upon completion of the reform concerning childcare and early education, every child living in Finland – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, residence, citizenship, disability, or other status or characteristic – has the chance to voice her or his concerns and to be heard by the authorities. This is the official goal, but it begs the question of what kinds of participation and places for politics the parliamentary mechanism is actually able to provide children.

Children's participation on adult-led arenas

The Finnish parliamentary system for children – consisting of the school councils, municipal parliaments and forums, and national parliaments – works more or less in line with the general democratic system in Finland. This is not a coincidence since one of the essential goals is to educate children into active citizenship and to make them more familiar with democratic institutional practices. Following national guidelines, the procedure endeavors to promote children's political socialization and their engagement in official politics (cf. Buckingham, 2000; Sapiro, 2004; Dunsmore & Lagos, 2008; Claes *et al.,* 2009). The system aims at establishing for children a new societal position that is 1) attainable to everyone through school, child care and public activities; 2) anchored at municipal government; 3) directly connected to national and supra-national policy-making. This is noticed explicitly also by the Finnish Children's Parliament (2008: 25), which states as its central objective to: "[…] promote the establishment and continued activities of local Children's Parliaments. Local Children's Parliaments can drive local initiatives for consideration by the local government and authorities."

The parliamentary action follows the suit generally employed in liberal democracies (cf. British youth council system, Matthews & Limb, 2003). Children vote their candidates to the representative bodies and can bring out their concerns through their representatives. These representatives participate in the work of school councils, municipal parliaments and national forums as 'politicians'. The other children, instead, act as 'civic participants', taking part at web-based discussion boards, in organized discussions and through specific questionnaires. Those belonging to administrative boards follow the official protocol by attending meetings and plenary sessions, taking the initiative, making statements, consulting experts, voting, discussing with other board members, creating strategies, making decisions on topical issues, and so on. In so

doing, they work in cooperation with their child, youth and adult counterparts (schools, local and national children's parliaments and youth forums, local governments, civic organizations, the national parliament and its working groups, the national government and its ministries, the European Parliament, the European Youth Forum, the World Parliament of Children, etc.). This parliamentary work is guided by adults, and its outcomes are envisioned to be relatively comparable to those of adults' democratic apparatuses.

The foremost purpose of the Finnish parliamentary organism for children is to provide means for empowering children as members of their political communities. It is a channel through which children can act as political agents in one meaning of the concept: By gaining awareness of communal and political issues that concern them, and participating in planning and decision making on these matters through political *involvement*. The system is extensive and its principles are democratic, which basically assures that all children come under it, can act through it, and may further all kinds of issues via its practices. Yet, the parliamentary apparatus does not provide means for all kinds of political agencies and can not operate as the only forum of children's politics. To be more exact, it can not function as the main political channel for children. The reasons for this are familiar from critical assessments of children's participation (e.g. Francis & Lorenzo, 2002; Kjørholt, 2007; Mannion, 2007; and the special issue in *Children, Youth and Environments*, 2006).

First, the parliamentary organism beckons certain kinds of children and disinterests others. A minority of children is drawn by official politics and chooses to spend their free time within policy making. This means that the system can acquire children's experiences, ideas and opinions only partially: Select voices get heard. Second, even if the parliamentary work is organized in a child-friendly manner and the official practices are facilitated in a number of ways, it follows the modes of action created by and for the adult society. For this reason children can not act in these politics on their own grounds – making use of the knowledges, tactics and means that they, as children, possess and know best – but can participate only as 'little adults'. This condition disqualifies and subjugates many of the children's experiences and views as 'naïve, hierarchically inferior, non-scientific, or otherwise not acceptable knowledges', and thus placing them in a structurally weaker position in regard to their adult counterparts (Foucault, 2003: 6–8). Third, the parliamentary apparatus only works with adult support. Therefore the children who participate in it are, at least to some extent, 'recruited' in the meaning proposed by Venn (2007, 122): "[G]overnment of conduct now operates through institutions and apparatuses of disciplinarity and security that have recruited mechanisms of resistance […] so that these oppositional or dissident forces are made to participate in stabilizing the norms of 'good conduct'." This recruitment hinders their potential to resilience and resistance (cf. Katz, 2004).

Venn's notion of recruitment follows Foucault's idea of governmental rationality, or governmentality, which identifies a form of power that works 'not simply by forcing people to obey the will of the governor, but rather by balancing between techniques that assure coercion and those processes through which the individuals themselves modify or construct self' (Häkli, 2009). This conception of bio-power forms the basis for Foucault's (2007) theory of governmental population control and helps to explicate why children's political action can not situate merely in official arenas (cf. Kearns & Collins, 2003; Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie,

2006; Cradock, 2007). It thus offers one potential methodological starting point for in-depth study of children's politics.

While providing children with opportunities to have their say on matters of their concern, parliamentary participation engages children with a system that is dedicated to governing them (Bragg, 2007). Therefore, it binds children to systemic norms, morals and knowledges. The particularities of children's thought and experience that are relevant and justified in their lived childhoods are often not communicable with the rationalities of these social orders. Hence, we argue, children's self-governing political agencies can be mobilized through official channels only if they follow 'good conduct'. This substantially limits the scope of the politics that children can pursue when involved in representational forms of political participation.

The limitations to children's politics in official arenas can be identified from the work of the Finnish Children's Parliament (henceforth FCP). In the following section, we briefly introduce issues that were discussed by the parliament in its first years, so as to reveal how the propositions it made reflect the prevailing child policy lines and promote selective conceptions of normal and good childhood. We seek to show that political socialization can indeed be furthered effectively through these kinds of systems, at least with those children who are willing to participate. But we also wish to demonstrate that, inasmuch as children involved are invited to regulate their political conduct, the Foucauldian perspective to such systems as conducive of governmentality is rather fitting (Foucault 2007). Moreover, it becomes clear that children's ways of thinking and acting on the grounds of political awareness differ notably from those taking place in their everyday lives. This conclusion paves the way for looking at the politics children practice in their mundane environments.

Children's political agency in parliamentary work

In its first two years, the FCP set out to forward several issues of importance (Finnish Children's Parliament, 2008: 12–24). The topics were brought up by municipal children's parliaments, school councils, individual children and the members of the FCP. Remarkably, without exception, the viewpoints taken by the FCP follow the lines of current child policy, are easily acceptable to adults, and do not discord with the prevailing political trends. The FCP has concentrated on issues that are not prone to rouse discrepancies between children and adults any more than among peer cultural groups. They have skirted politically delicate or controversial issues and focused on the mainstream concerns related to childhood. Among the issues discussed were matters concerning the parliament itself, children's rights and especially their opportunities to participate formally. The FCP realized that there is still much to be done to get the system running in every municipality, school and classroom, and to engage it with adults' policy-making processes. Besides these, a number of more substantial issues were discussed, such as bullying in schools, school lunches, environmental issues, leisure time, health, physical exercise, and school life in general.

The FCP made a number of resolutions already in its first term. It decided to establish rules for the national and local children's parliaments; to propose to those municipalities that, as yet, have not elected their representatives to the FCP to do so; and call upon all municipalities to organize means to hear children and establish local children's parliaments. Moreover, as their initiative for

the jubilee year of the UNCRC, the parliament stated that, besides the school council, all schools should have a separate pupils' representative body, *Student Government*, which would be heard in matters concerning the school and the pupils. All these initiatives clearly support the plan to establish the new parliamentary apparatus as an extensive structure in Finland.

While this development clearly supports the goals of political socialization, it also has a less advantageous side to it. In Venn's (2007) words, the responsibilization of children by the representative system strips their voices from dissidence and instead recruits them in stabilizing the norms of 'good conduct'. In line with the latter, all substantial issues commented on by the parliament follow official policy lines. Hence, bullying must be stopped at schools; the quality of the food served at schools should be high; the lunch breaks are to situate conveniently in the school day; campaigns for promoting social interaction among all students should be established; children need more physical exercise at schools; school yards should be improved according to the pupil's preferences; more health care staff are needed at schools; more paved cycling lines are needed; environmental issues in general should be stressed; and so on. The parliamentarians had modest but firm ideas regarding these issues. The 'good school' list (Fig. 1), formulated by the parliament at the end of its first term, sums up well the spirit of the FCP's policy making. Altogether 96 per cent of the child representatives supported the enclosed listing.
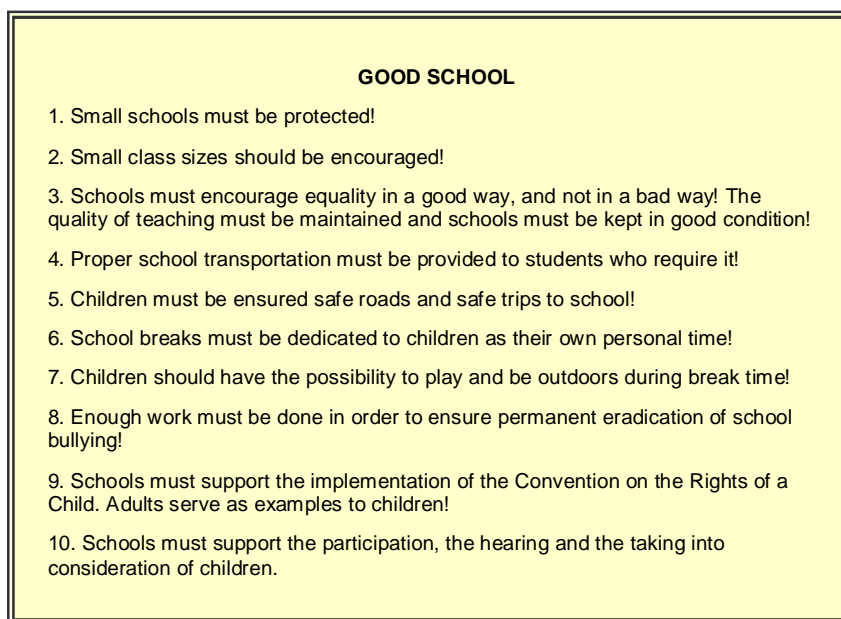
GOOD SCHOOL

1. Small schools must be protected!

2. Small class sizes should be encouraged!

3. Schools must encourage equality in a good way, and not in a bad way! The quality of teaching must be maintained and schools must be kept in good condition!

4. Proper school transportation must be provided to students who require it!

5. Children must be ensured safe roads and safe trips to school!

6. School breaks must be dedicated to children as their own personal time!

7. Children should have the possibility to play and be outdoors during break time!

8. Enough work must be done in order to ensure permanent eradication of school bullying!

9. Schools must support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of a Child. Adults serve as examples to children!

10. Schools must support the participation, the hearing and the taking into consideration of children.

Figure 1: The terms of a good school, according to the Finnish Children's Parliament (2009: 22).

The good school list reveals that the FCP advocates very much the same things as the other political actors defending children's rights and well-being on the basis of the UNCRC in Finland and elsewhere. Anyone evaluating the operation of the parliament would conclude that these issues are important to children and that they should be promoted in the realms of possibility. The list thus proves that children can make responsible and reasonable proposals through official

channels, and are able to act alongside adults in policy making, verifying the points made by Such and Walker (2005) and Skelton (2007). At the same time it is nearly obvious that these proposals are not very original. The selected issues dominate the current media and policy discussions in Finland. Moreover, the approaches that the parliament took on these matters are not especially innovative.

Hence, it comes to mind to ask why the FCP chose to proclaim these topics and not some others that are relevant in Finnish children's lives. Children's wishes to spend their after-school hours on their own and not in organized afternoon care could, for instance, easily be included in the list, were the children eager to press such issues through their own parliamentary system. Yet this does not happen, probably because the proposal would conflict with the prevailing child policy discourse that stresses the importance of institutionally arranged before- and after-school activities (see endnote 8; Basic Education Act 628/1998). Also, the importance of animal rights and environmental values might have surfaced with demands that schools should favor vegetarian diet and ethical choices in their food supply. However, such views are not in line with national health policies (National Nutritional Council, 2008), and would probably be dismissed by the municipal food supply in charge of providing school lunches. Yet these very issues, and many other similar views, have recently been brought up by Finnish children as important matters to them (e.g. Autio & Wilska, 2005; Forsberg & Strandell, 2007).

The lack of 'dissident' perspectives arising from outside the prevailing childhood discourses, child policy trends, and public discussions on 'the best of the child', brings up the question of whether the issues discussed by the FCP are grounded on children's experiences, views and 'local knowledges' (cf. Foucault, 2003). Further, the absence of topics that typically divide children's opinions suggests that the children involved share an inclination to subscribe to the dominant understanding of what good/bad childhood is like. This implies that the children participating in the FCP form a select group who have committed to maintaining and furthering the prevailing norms – a scenario also familiar from the operation of youth forums (Matthews & Limb, 2003: 189). On the other hand, it can be noted that, as an apparatus based on governmentality, the FCP has succeeded in quickly passing on the predominant child policy trends to the children involved and thus including them in the present political debates as empowered participants. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, in official arenas, children's right to participation tends to translate into opportunities to plead for their causes alongside adults, and their views concerning themselves and childhood appear, paradoxically, rather similar to those of adults.

In sum, the Finnish child policy strategy succeeds in providing tools for participation in official planning and decision-making processes for those children who are interested in political involvement. It also manages to introduce the basics of the Finnish parliamentary system to most children, thus promoting desirable political socialization. These results further children's right to full citizenship in a liberal democratic sense and improve their civic capacities. Yet children do have views, attitudes, experiences and feelings that are not articulated in the political vocabulary and are not mobilized through official political system. Next, we discuss how and where these politics may take place.

Children's political agency in everyday environments

Children's agency in different kinds of everyday environments has gained plenty of attention in childhood studies in the past 20 years. In particular, the sub-field of *children's geographies* has emphasized the importance of paying attention to children's mundane practices in their lived spaces and places (e.g. Aitken, 1994; Winchester & Costello, 1995; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Kesby *et al.*, 2006, but see also e.g. Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996; Kjørholt, 2002; Forsberg & Strandell, 2007). However, as we have pointed out elsewhere, the political potentials of children's everyday activities are rarely sought for (Kallio, 2007, 2008, 2009; Kallio & Häkli, 2010, 2011b). While the political aspects of young people's commitments in personal and communal matters are increasingly recognized (e.g. Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Cahill, 2007; Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2007; and the special issue in *Area*, 2010), the politics of young children's everyday lives remain to be discussed (Habashi & Worley, 2008; Kallio & Häkli, 2010, 2011b).

Yet there are some studies where the meanings of children's everyday practices have been considered in terms of politics. Firstly, the work of scholars such as Cindi Katz (1991, 2004) focuses on recognizing children's roles and positions in global economies (for related work see e.g. Stephens, 1995; Kjørholt, 2007; Bühler-Niederberger and van Krieken, 2008). Through her long-term case studies situated in Howa, Sudan and New York, USA, Katz offers interesting insights to children's roles in political matters. Besides revealing how the geopolitics directing these economies relate to children's everyday lives, she also elaborates children's own ways of encountering their changing environments, and their capacities to deal with large-scale issues commonly conceived of as 'adult things'. Katz's approach has been appreciated in geography and socio-cultural childhood studies for discussing geo-economic issues and cultural politics of childhood. Similar methodological insights have been employed particularly in research concerning inequalities in the global South (e.g. Robson, 2004; Abebe, 2007; Ansell, 2008; Benwell, 2009).

Secondly, a segment of studies addressing armed conflicts has paid attention to children's political agencies and positions. For instance, Helen Brocklehurst (2006) explores children's ways of participating in war and other violent conflicts, recognizing them as actual participants in these events. In her varied case studies situated in Germany, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Mozambique, she finds that children are often employed at armed conflicts as soldiers and combatants; sex slaves and prostitutes; human shields; killed, maimed or captured targets; minesweepers; the 'consequences' of war rape; stakeholders; moral and political agitators; and peacemakers (cf. Goodwin-Gill & Cohn, 1994; Honwana, 2006; Wessells, 2006; Hyndman, 2010). Nakata (2008) notices children's roles in unarmed racial struggles in a similar manner. Another original example of children's agency in political conflicts is portrayed by Janette Habashi (2008), who studies children's everyday lives in the present Palestine. She emphasizes that Palestinian children's political socialization and politically significant action mostly takes place in their everyday environments, and is played out in banal practices, such as jokes, graffiti writing, music and theatre.

From children's political agency point of view, these multi-disciplinary research areas have one thing in common: The geo-economic questions concerning the global South, issues related to

children's position in armed conflicts, and their engagements with civic movements are all generally appreciated as self-evidently *political* issues. Thus, to anyone familiar with political (geographic) thinking, it is fairly easy to accept that, alongside other individuals or groups, children hold political agency in these contexts. Yet, if we choose to study less obviously political issues and contexts – for instance, schools, homes, streets, work places, refugee camps, neighborhood parks – the political aspects of children's agency are more difficult to identify. This can be demonstrated by setting the above introduced research against a study that sets out to locate children's agency in a seemingly 'apolitical' context.

The study of Finnish children's domestic environments provides a suitable point of comparison. In their recent ethnographic research concerning children's after-school hours, Forsberg and Strandell (2007) reveal that, contrary to the common conceptions and 'care talk', Finnish children do not generally suffer from insecurity and loneliness when spending their afternoons without adult supervision at home.[3] Instead, they claim that children use their homes in particular ways to serve their own ends, and even actively carve space for this by choosing not to attend the organized after-school activities available to them.

> *"In particular, when there were no adults at home, children seemed to be able to use the whole space available and all the objects and appliances, as resources for their activities. In this way, the children appeared to have a personal and direct ownership of the home during their after-school time. The home-space accessible to the children was not limited only to the flat or the house, but also essentially included outdoor space, such as the garden or grounds and occasional outbuildings."* (Forsberg and Strandell, 2007: 397).

What this critical examination reveals is that the studied children do not usually feel lonely or incompetent when they are at home on their own or with their siblings and mates – even though they are *assumed* to (cf. Mayall & Hood, 2001). They are not thrown back to excessive digital media usage or 'idling' either, as lamented in scenarios favoring adult supervision during after-school hours (cf. Pulkkinen, 2002; Mahoney *et al.*, 2005). In all, Forsberg and Strandell want to show that, when being home alone, Finnish children do not usually fall victims of an 'empty home' but, quite the contrary, are often more than happy about the situation in which they can regularly master their home-spaces safely for a limited period of time. Sometimes they even go to great pains to gain such time-spaces for themselves. In terms of political analysis we are proposing, these children practice autonomy by refusing to adopt the subjectivities that are being offered to them by the prevailing childhood policy discourses. Moreover, they do not simply employ 'symbolic politics of protest' – the tactic that is sometimes portrayed as the only politics alternative to adult-led participation (Roche, 1999: 479; Weller, 2003: 164). Instead, they are capable of eluding 'good conduct' by challenging their families and the child care system in ways that are found *acceptable* by them. In such processes they rehearse their 'political selves' as self-governing actors who are able to resist dominating power structures and uncomfortable orders.

This brief example illustrates how children can engage with matters important to them in their everyday lives by, for instance, negotiating free-time and making use of extraordinary time-spaces for their own purposes. Similar examples of children's self-governing action in various geographical contexts have been presented by Winchester and Costello (1995), Hyams (2000),

Barker (2003), Kearns and Collins (2003), Morris-Roberts (2004), Wridt (2004), Van Ingen and Halas (2006), and Thomas (2009), to mention a few. Importantly, children can employ these kinds of tactics nearly anywhere: At school, at work, on streets, in parks, in public and private vehicles, in shopping centers, at refugee camps, in virtual communities – that is, *in* childhood. This 'usage', borrowing de Certeau's (1984) concept, is self-directed activity which questions, negotiates, exploits and 'ruses' different kinds of power relations and orders context-specifically, be they peer cultural, familial, hierarchical, institutional, racial, or gendered. In a relational political reading, this kind of activity is understood as one form of political agency (e.g. Dean, 2000; Rancière, 2001; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004: 6; Isin, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2009: 5).

Looking critically at Finnish children's after-school hours as a potential space for political action discloses how any children's mundane practices situated in their everyday environments may contain political aspects. Most importantly, these politics are significant to the development of children's subjectivities and 'political selves' which direct their political behaviors as children as well as young people and adults. This action also influences children's immediate communities and may have an impact on a wider scale, too. For instance, Barker's (2003) and Kearns and Collins' (2003) studies concerning children's school transportation imply that children's mundane political practices and struggles may have a notable influence on environmental and traffic policies both in the present and in the future.

Depending on the context and focus, a variety of aspects in children's lived worlds can thus be politicized and analyzed as such. This said, the politicization of 'apolitical' childhood issues or events is far from simple. It is more difficult to politicize children's agency in peaceful societies than in cases where children's activities take place in self-evidently political contexts, such as Palestine, Afghanistan or Northern Ireland (cf. Kallio, 2008, 2009). Also, concerns that are not transparently political, such as videogames and dating, are not as easily seen as political as, for instance, work, prostitution, animal liberation or green consumerism. Yet if it is accepted that politics is context-specific, and 'the political' is fluid and constantly re-defined in complex and multivalent struggles involving actions and behaviors in both formal and informal spaces, as portrayed by Staeheli & Kofman (2004: 3), then every environment and matter central to children's lives forms a potential arena for their politics. To recognize political aspects in such seemingly apolitical environments and situations from children's points of view, more conceptual work on children's political agency and the banal politics of childhood is required. Some tentative starting points are introduced in the remaining part of this paper.

Locating children's political agencies

The previous sections introduce three distinct ways in which children can be found to act politically. In the first case, children's political agency unfolds in planning, decision-making and policy-making processes. In these contexts children are empowered by educating them for democratic exercise and active citizenship, involving them in official and semi-official politics, and offering them opportunities to voice their concerns publically. Secondly, children are engaged in events and issues known to have political significance in their quotidian lives, such as war, political economy and racial struggles. The study of these does not usually approach children as political actors *per se* but rather as social and cultural agents who influence and are influenced by political matters. Hence the children are typically not assumed to be aware of the

political dimensions of their action. Lastly, children practice politics in their seemingly apolitical everyday environments by exercising a degree of autonomy in their mundane practices, whichever they may be. Within this kind of politics children's empowerment may be based on, for instance, their willingness to challenge positions and subjectivities offered to them by adults or peers, or their opportunities and abilities to negotiate and occupy unsupervised space. Thus, herein it is not known in advance which issues and events are, or are not, politically significant in the children's lives – even by the researchers. Teasing out the political aspect of such agencies is therefore an inseparable element of their study.

These three ways of acting politically overlap but are not indistinguishable. They may concern similar issues and intersect but may just as well unfold around totally dissimilar questions. They may be practiced like-mindedly or divergently, further similar or opposing interests and ideas, and be mobilized individually or collectively. Moreover, these modes of the political may all be consequential in individual children's everyday lives, but they may also result in effects that are relevant on a larger scale (cf. Philo & Smith, 2003; Aitken *et al.*, 2007; Ansell, 2009). However, the basis for the politics and the means that are used to further particular causes differ from each other noticeably. Therefore, when talking about children's political agency, it is useful to make a conceptual distinction between *political involvement* and *political presence* (Fig. 2).
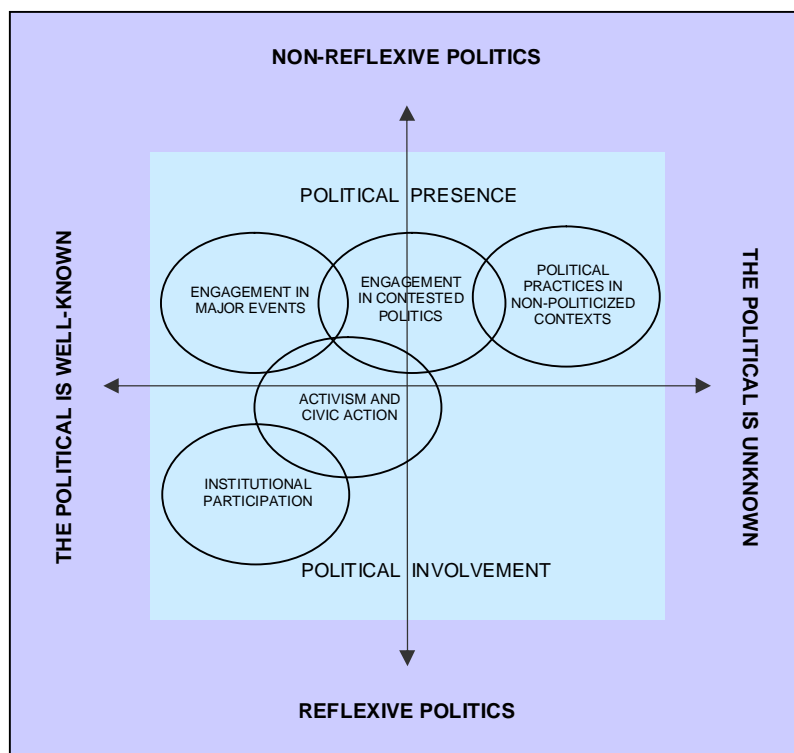

Figure 2: A model for distinguishing different modes and spaces of children's politics.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 2 approaches the political from children's (as political actors), adults' (as perceivers/interpreters) and researchers' (as interpreters/politicizers)

perspectives. The level of reflexivity, forming the vertical axis, conveys how aware children are of the political aspects of their action when performing politically. By foregrounding children's perceptions, it underlines that political agency is not bound to rationality and formal know-how but extends beyond this type of reflection. Children's resistance to 'docile subjectivities' offered by the school is a case in point (Bragg, 2007). The ramifications of this agency relate not only to the role of school as an institution of socialization, but also to struggles that may bring about changes in subjectivities allowed within its remit (Thomas, 2009). While such agency may be regarded as politically significant by the researcher, other adults as well as the children themselves may rather address it in terms of (bad) behavior (O'Toole, 2003: 74). Hence, politics of this kind is situated high on the vertical axis.

The horizontal axis exposes the degree to which 'the political' is readily identified and defined in different contexts, particularly by the adult members of a political society. Since academic and lay discourses and understandings of politics are 'double hermeneutically' intertwined (Giddens 1987), it is not feasible to clearly separate between the two. Yet they do not fully overlap either. For example, a line of research, such as feminist analysis, may identify political aspects in issues or events that are yet to be politicized in the broader society (Staeheli & Kofman, 2004). The contested nature of 'the political', often revealed by such discrepancies, grows stronger towards the right end of the horizontal axis. Respectively, towards the left the meanings of the political are less commonly discussed or debated because 'the political' is more established and agreed upon. When considering the above example, undocile performances have been politicized in some scholarly works but not recognized as political in policy or everyday life. On the horizontal axis this agency could thus be placed on the right side of the figure.

When locating the above-mentioned three ways of acting politically in the conceptual model, it is evident that institutional participation is best characterized as *political involvement* (cf. Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This action is directly or vicariously connected with high politics; it concerns issues that are commonly perceived as political, and implies that children are more or less reflexive about their agency as politics. Children are typically involved in certain ongoing political processes where they have a chance to have their say and act in one way or another. In addition to this, semi-formal civic action and political activism that only remotely touch upon young children but may form important political venues for youth also fall into the category of political involvement (e.g. Pallotta, 2008). Hence a broad spectrum of political action is included here, ranging from school parliaments to anarchist operations, and from participation in urban planning to virtual peer support networks. However, what all these have in common is that the children involved, the adults working with or against them, the media and the broader public, as well as researchers studying them usually have no difficulty in recognizing their political aspects.

The latter two ways of acting politically are better characterized as *political presence*. This presence may be consequential in spaces and contexts that are readily known to have political significance, such as war, economy, or forced migration, and thus be located at the top left corner of the conceptual field. In the middle part of the field, we can situate those forms of children's agency that are recognized as political by researchers and (some) adults but which the children do not usually perform reflexively as politics. These include issues and practices where the meanings of 'the political' are contested and may be examined with relation to more clearly

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defined politics (e.g. Barbie and Bratz dolls as play-things; McDonald's and vegetarian diet as eating preferences; war games and violent films as entertainment).

On the top right corner of the conceptual field, we can place children's mundane environments and practices that do not tend to manifest their political aspects. Here we refer to purposive, oriented and intentional action that unfolds in the mundane practices of everyday life. This action need not be interest-driven or reflexive in a sense that the children themselves or anyone else would readily identify it as politics. But, reading this agency as mere behavior or socio-cultural actorhood loses sight of critical aspects that constitute its meaning and significance for social change. Gambetti's (2005: 426) conceptualization of political action as "the (re)grounding of the social" comes close to what we mean by this type of politics. In her assessment such politics does not primarily strive to emancipate the subject or to promote the freedom of choice but is, rather, about "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given". Thus, through political presence children relate to the world that is structured by prevailing circumstances, but they do this as political selves. This does not necessarily imply "a self-understanding or reasoned action, but it does imply a commitment to a certain construction of public self […] whose content, form, and consequences are not entirely foreseeable by anyone" (Gambetti, 2005: 435). In relating to subject positions offered to them, children never simply adopt or reject them but rather appropriate them to redefine their worlds in novel ways.

Somewhat similar approaches to political agency and change have been advanced in the study of citizenship and national identities. For instance, Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen (2006) explore the daily reproduction of ethnic differentiations by looking at the embodied and sensuous geographies of 'practical orientalism' that mobilize in banal, unreflexive practices of everyday life. Another example is Lazar's (2010) work on civic education in Bolivia. In her study she finds that some teenagers respond to civic education in an undocile manner, thus overtaking the schools' process of political socialization and impacting on their own (political) subjectification.

With our conceptual model we do not wish to suggest that forms of political agency and the study of children's politics would neatly divide into two, three or five categories. Quite the contrary, in our view children's political agencies are fluid and dynamic, and we see that innovative research concentrating on children and politics often operates at the interfaces of these areas. For example, Skelton's (2010) work discussing young people's 'politics' that articulates into 'Politics' in adequate circumstances, and a number of action research projects that seek to promote young individuals' political awareness, traverse the borders of political involvement and political presence (e.g. Ataöv and Haider, 2006; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; Cahill, 2007). This line of work strives to reveal unreflexive politics and bring them to the reflexive political debate. Other examples can be found from discussions on cultural citizenship and subject formation where unreflexive political processes and the conditions in which these are practiced are studied in their own right (e.g. Hyams, 2000; Mitchell, 2006; Gallagher & Gallacher, 2008; Thomas, 2009). Within these studies children's agencies are rarely theorized as political even though the political geographies of their lived worlds, and the subject positions offered to them, are explored in very interesting ways. We argue that these political geographies are of particular importance to the children themselves and to the development of societies, and therefore merit scrutiny as a form of politics.

The conceptual field introduced in Figure 2 aims to provide starting points for theorizing children's agency in political geography research, and, importantly, to help appreciating forms of children's political agency hitherto dismissed as apolitical. To uncover new political aspects in childhoods and to map children's quotidian political geographies, we propose that systematic attention is paid to practices through which children relate to subject positions offered to them by their authorities, peers, media and other forces of socialization (Kallio & Häkli, 2010, 2011b). In contrast to other mundane practices, political presence is thus clearly related to social power relations and driven by dynamic forces that mobilize its political aspects.

Topics of interest and debate that this approach could inform include, but are not exhausted by, issues such as social and spatial identities, (political) socialization, forms of participation, geo-economic inequalities, transnational change, geopolitical conflicts, children's well-being, and performed citizenship. When children's lived worlds are questioned, pluralized, and contextualized in these debates, their agencies, too, are politicized from distinct perspectives (cf. Dean, 2000: 3-4). In consequence, the meanings of 'the political' are opened, revised and extended. In focusing on the formation of (political) subjectivities, the theorization of children's politics has much to give to political geography in general.

Conclusion

The contemplation of children's political agencies and geographies is valuable for the implementation of children's rights. Simply put, it is impossible to ensure children's right to participation in matters concerning them if we do not know *which* matters children find important to them and *how* they participate in such matters at length. Thus it is essential to be aware of the ways children act politically not merely in official arenas but also in more mundane contexts. It should also be acknowledged that children have many kinds of political orientations, and they practice a variety of politics, whether endorsed or not. Therefore their politics may not, or rather *cannot*, be agreeable with all policy-making or consistent as 'children's politics'. This fact ought to be taken seriously and given due weight when promoting children's participation in any form.

'Children' are not a group any more than 'adults'. Moreover, children's mundane power relations should not be bypassed when involving certain children in policy making or political activism since these involvements may have unintentional consequences for the political geographies of children's everyday lives at large (see also Bragg, 2007). Thus, political geographers and others interested in the spatial aspects of children's political agency should acknowledge that the place of this kind of politics is practically everywhere. In this paper we have argued that while children's involvement in adult-led politics is relatively easy to pinpoint and assess, this is not the case with children's political presence. To study children's politics in childhood, it is important to develop methods for capturing children's particular feelings and experiences of 'the political', and ways of reframing these expressions into analyzable forms. Since everyday life politics is often carried out in non-reflexive embodied and performative manners, this challenge of translation requires much additional methodological work on the formation of political subjectivities.

Children's socialization processes and their active roles in shaping their worlds and subjectivities are vital to understanding broader geopolitical situations and processes. Being aware of the power

relations within which children are accustomed to operate and the tactics they use to negotiate their positions, defend their identities, and further their interests, provides salient insights for studying social change, cultural transformations and spatially grounded identities, for instance. The particularity of children's politics is that, besides political *beings* children are also political *becomings* – a fact that has been largely disregarded in childhood studies for more than 20 years due to the paradigmatic change accentuating children's present lives (Fielding, 2007; Uprichard, 2008). The political dynamics, strategies and practices that children learn and rehearse in their mundane political practices today are mobilized in various contexts also later on, producing and reproducing particular kinds of lived worlds.

Lastly, the study of children's political agencies contributes to the wider debate on the contested concept of 'the political'. Since childhood is generally appreciated as the most apolitical field of life, and children are considered to be the least likely political actors, they form a critical and therefore a particularly fruitful case for politics. Stagnant understandings of politics can be shaken and the vague ones clarified by introducing these conceptualizations in various childhood contexts. The challenges that this theoretically motivated, empirically grounded work presents, we trust, will intrigue political geographers.

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Endnotes

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[1] The first article of the convention states that "… a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."

[2] Various civic organizations, municipal workers and researchers participated in the strategic work together with the Ombudsman for Children in Finland, and the Ministries of Labor, Defence, Finance, Environment, Transport and

Communications, Agriculture and Forestry, Social Affairs and Health, Foreign Affairs, Interior Affairs, Trade and Industry, Education (Science and Pedagogy Unit), and the Prime Minister's Office. Leaning on the principles depicted in the Youth Act and the Child Welfare Act, the program points out the need to develop children's potential to participation and communality in nine specified areas and practical goals to be reached by 2011 (for details, see The Finnish Government's Child and Youth Policy Programme 2007–2011, 2008: 36–43).

[3] For instance, the Finnish Basic Education Act (628/1998, section 48) ensures all first and second graders (6-9-year-olds) the right to before and after school activities under the supervision of a competent person suitable for the task.