

# Kindergarten space and autonomy in construction – Explorations during team ethnography in a Finnish kindergarten

*Mari Vuorisalo, Raija Raittila, Niina Rutanen*

*Abstract:* Children's autonomy is a cultural ideal in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). In this article we examine autonomy in spatial terms. The theoretical background is developed by applying spatial sociology. Our starting point is that space is relationally produced, thus, we understand space as continuously negotiated, reconstructed and reorganized phenomena. In this article, we investigate the production of space by different actors in ECEC and seek to show how autonomy is also continuously produced and re-produced in the negotiation of space. For this investigation we use data collected as part of a team ethnographic project in a Finnish kindergarten. The project included conducting observations and interviews with parents and educators. Our research shows that autonomy is developed in multiple ways in kindergarten spaces. Educators as well as children and parents continuously produce and reproduce the kindergarten space within which children's autonomy variously unfolds as linked to independence, freedom and responsibility in the cultural and ideological setting of a Finnish kindergarten.

*Keywords:* space, autonomy, early childhood education and care, team ethnography.

## Introduction

Children's autonomy is a cultural ideal in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC), and in this article we will examine autonomy in spa-

tial terms. We aim to show through our investigations of the empirical data how autonomy unfolds as spaces are produced in ECEC. For the purposes of this article, *space* is understood as relationally produced in social relations. Similarly, we understand *autonomy* as a controversial concept, with multiple meanings and interpretations.

Our starting point is that Finnish ECEC has been shaped historically and relationally, and carries traces of various ideals and values that have been underlined in education practices. Children's autonomy is one of these topical ideals and characteristics of Finnish ECEC. For example, Strandell (2012), in her analysis, characterizes Finnish ECEC as valuing children's independence, autonomy and agency. Being capable, independent and agentic are linked to having and showing respect and responsibility for others around us. For example, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2017, p. 17) stresses that one of the aims of ECEC is to guide children towards "acting responsibly and sustainably, respecting other people and becoming a member of society." Therefore, becoming a skilled team worker and a person with interaction skills, as is also described in the curriculum, involves valuing and taking others' views into consideration. As Broström and colleagues have said (Broström, Skriver Jensen & Hansen, 2016), in the Nordic context, autonomy is seen as a basis for educating children to develop democratic values and for fostering participation in society both today and in the future (also Vallberg Roth, 2014; Gulløv, 2011; Bennet, 2010).

To investigate how autonomy is constructed in practices we utilize relational approaches to space. We understand space in the sense that Fuller and Löw (2017) and Massey (2005) do: as continuously negotiated, reconstructed and reorganized phenomena. In this ongoing production of relational space, the physical environment, personal interpretations of physical and cultural space, and culturally and collectively shared views of space entwine (Soja, 1996; Raittila, 2008). Understanding that human action produces meaningful space (Raittila, 2012; Fuller & Löw, 2017) makes it possible to explore how children and adults produce space relationally by combining personal interpretations and shared views of kindergartens as physical and cultural spaces.

By approaching kindergarten as a relational space that contains cultural and educational ideals and values, we explore how autonomy is produced by children and adults in educational institutions. It is expressed and lived in diverse ways, and has links to independence, freedom and responsibility.

Thus, in this article we focus on how different actors construct and perform kindergarten as space, and how, as a result of this construction, autonomy unfolds in the cultural setting of a Finnish kindergarten.

In our analysis, we will use data from an ethnographic project conducted in a Finnish kindergarten. This ethnographic data generation process has involved various data collection methods with diverse participants (parents, children and educators). The joint discussions and both the theory and data driven reflections within the team of researchers has enabled us to investigate the process of constructing space from various perspectives, as an ongoing phenomenon and as a process of formation.

## **Space and Autonomy in Finnish ECEC**

In line with spatial sociology (Fuller & Löw, 2017) and with the view on relational space, we are interested in the ways spaces are produced and the consequences of that. Olwig and Gulløv (2003, p. 10) note that space can be “used as an analytical tool to understand the social life of children.” This points to personal, social and political questions of childhood. Carefully analysing reciprocal relationships in physical surroundings and in relational space-making makes it possible to discover the positions children can achieve in society (Olwig & Gulløv, 2003) and, particularly, children’s possibilities for acting and defining everyday space.

Space does not simply exist, but is created in action. Children’s spaces in kindergarten are shaped in relations that go beyond here and now contexts. Relations refer to those contexts and networks from which we learn to see and interpret the built environment and the different discourses about space sedimented in the social relations and structures of our lives. Relations include power structures and individual choices, as well as reciprocity and interdependencies between actors (Pierce et al., 2011). Every child, educator and parent constructs the kindergarten space from their own position in society, with the knowledge and ‘pre-interpretations’ they have taken on in their own networks (see Pierce et al., 2011). Linked to this process is the social and cultural aspect of relational space that refers to the values, rules and symbols of culture, politics and ideology (Soja, 1996; Raittila, 2008). For example, kindergarten space is ‘determined’ as a space for education and care in society. People, including the children in the kindergarten space, have cultural and social knowledge about this space, such as how it could be organized and used (Raittila, 2012; Vuorisalo, Rutanen & Raittila, 2015).

In this article, we approach kindergarten as a relational space that contains cultural and educational ideals and values, including autonomy. We understand space as being socially constructed, interlinked and embedded in cultural and ideological frames that offer definitions of that space. Space is constructed through a continuous process, thus the ideologies, ideals and values in that space present particular constraints, boundaries and possibilities for defining that space. (Soja, 1996; Löw, 2008) When a particular process of constructing space is in focus, such as that in the kindergarten space, the cultural ideologies are intertwined in this construction. In this article, we will investigate how central aspects of autonomy appear when space is negotiated.

The concept of *autonomy* has deep roots in education. During the Enlightenment, the autonomous subject became the subject of education (Readings, 1996). The function of education was to form rational, self-governing, knowing and free subjects, who made responsible judgements in society. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) recognize that these same values guide education today. They summarize the aim of education: “the subject, in short, must be formed to be able to exercise freedom and responsibility” (p. 20). The core act of autonomy is usually seen to be a capacity to make responsible choices where relationships and interdependence between humans and things are evaluated (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Rose (1999) adds a further aspect in emphasizing people’s capacity to recognize their desires and fulfil their potential as features of autonomy. However, autonomy is an ambiguous phenomenon. The other side of the coin is control and autonomy always has its limits in society (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). A responsible participant should know these limits while acting autonomously and utilizing his or her freedom of choice.

Our interest in children’s autonomy in kindergarten arose initially from the clues in the empirical data. We combined the empirical cues with our theoretical starting point that space is imbued with ideals and ideology (Soja, 1996; Massey, 2005), and with previous research (e.g. Strandell, 2012) that understands autonomy as one of the values and ideals present in the negotiations of space. This cultural ideal and the value of children as autonomous actors enables particular negotiations but delimits others. The starting point for autonomy is that an actor that seizes the opportunities offered by the space, is active and shows initiative, and is free to use and construct that space by using the resources and opportunities it offers. However, this should all happen in a responsible way within the jointly constructed limits. For example, as we will show later, children recognize particular opportuni-

ties in the daily events and routines in ECEC. They recognize the moments for freedom and how much freedom they have to make their own decisions about activities. They also recognize and identify the moments when they are expected to follow more tightly the preplanned schedule and particular routines. These degrees of freedom alternate during the day. However, in autonomy the question is not only about freedom, but also about responsibility. In the everyday flow of events, the actors learn first the boundaries and restrictions, and then start to maneuver their way around the activities and adjust their actions to these boundaries, and even challenge boundaries. If we focus on investigating the aspect of responsibility in freedom, it becomes obvious that children themselves participate in actualizing the ideologies and ideals in ECEC (e.g. Millei & Imre, 2016). This occurs when their actions fit into the structure and routines in ECEC, but they are also able to seize their freedom in those moments in which there is no place for it. In other words, they are able to use and construct that space for their own benefit. Thus, autonomy assumes a certain independence.

In summary, we approach autonomy as an interrelated combination of freedom and responsibility, where freedom refers to an individual's independence and responsibility existing in relations as a negotiated attribute of social living. This notion of relational space has helped us in our attempt to investigate empirically the unfolding of autonomy, in terms of children's possibilities for defining space, for acting and utilizing their freedom of choice within the boundaries of the jointly constructed space. We move away from a concept of autonomy as an individual capacity, and instead investigate how autonomy unfolds as a spatial construction. Theories of space offer tools to investigate how ideologies form and shape in space and in relations. Thus, autonomy is constructed by diverse actors who have different roles and responsibilities in ECEC and in young children's lives, and also by children themselves.

## **Ethnography and the Analysis**

This article is based on team ethnography (e.g. Lahelma, Lappalainen, Mietola & Palmu, 2014) conducted in a kindergarten in Finland. The broad focus of the project was to investigate how daily practices, culture and pedagogical spaces are constructed. All three authors of this article and one research assistant collected the ethnographic data in the same kindergarten (see Rutanen, Raittila & Vuorisalo, forthcoming; also Paavilainen, 2017). Over a period of about half a year (2–3 days a week), we followed the everyday activities in the kindergarten, in three groups, one consisting of under-

threes and two groups of three to five year-olds. In addition to the observations and our written notes, we also made video recordings of selected events during the day and conducted interviews with educators, children and parents. Throughout our team ethnography, we held regular meetings to discuss the data collection and our individual observations. The data were handled confidentially and only shared within the research group. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The data are examined in light of the perspectives on autonomy described above, including, particularly, the aspects of freedom and responsibility in action, which are also related to independence and the individual's 'opportunities for choice-making. After a preliminary reading of the data, the analysis focused on episodes that offer rich events where these central features of autonomy could be interpreted. In analysing the observational data, we focused on, on the one hand, children's free choice and independence, and, on the other hand, how children negotiate or even exceed some of the boundaries set by their physical environment and adult expectations. In the data from the interviews with educators and parents, our analytical gaze focused on negotiations of autonomy as expectations related to the child's independence. With these different gazes on the diverse data, we shed light on how autonomy unfolds in the process of negotiating kindergarten space and everyday life in ECEC.

## **Autonomy Unfolding in Kindergarten Space**

In our illustration we start by discussing a selected episode. Our analysis of an indoor morning session after breakfast demonstrates that the foundations of children's spaces are constructed at the crossroads between the (pedagogical) practice of daily life and the free flow of children's action. This episode is followed by accounts from educators and parents that illustrate how the construction of space and autonomy is also linked to their views and accounts of the children's independence and distance from the parents.

### *Autonomy as negotiated within pedagogical practices and children's freedom*

The institutional starting point structuring the actions in the daily practice in this kindergarten is guided by a schedule determined by the educators. The schedule is presented to the parents and children in many ways. In this particular setting, the daily (Figure 1, on page 52) and weekly timeta-

bles and pedagogical programme were displayed on the wall in the entrance hall. The basic structure of the day was presented in picture form for the children (Figure 2, on page 52). Timetables and pedagogical programmes are agreements between educators about how the (pedagogical) practice of kindergarten is organized; these indicate the order of the events and how long each activity is planned to last. This general time structure is crucial for directing children's actions and explicitly indicating some of the spatial boundaries regarding their freedom. At the same time, the children have their own opportunities to select and 'shape' their spaces. This is illustrated by the following extract from an observation of a morning with a group of three to five year-olds (10-17 children) and three educators:

At 8:50 ten children and Niilo (educator) come back to the classroom from the dining room after having had breakfast. Niilo asks who would like to do arts and crafts with him first. Elsa, Aino and Satu are keen to participate and they go to sit at the table the educator has prepared for arts and crafts. Other children freely choose different activities. Roni, Olli, Aimo and Ossi mark off their play area in the corner of the classroom with chairs. Eerik shows the Batman print on his t-shirt to Olli, while the other boys construct their play corner. After getting the corner ready Roni, Olli, Aimo and Ossi start to browse through a Lego catalogue and to chat about their favourite things in it. Eerik peeps into the boys' corner every now and then from under the table, but does not get invited to join the group. Sanni sits alone at the desk and starts to arrange Hama beads following a pattern. Vilma remains on her own at first, but then Anu arrives and they start to build a mermaid's hut. At 9:35 Roni, Olli and Ossi start building something with the Lego blocks and Aimo continues reading books. These four boys continue playing together for over an hour.

At 9:40 Annette (educator) comes and asks some of the children to join her for a painting workshop in the dining room. Anu, Vilma, Erkka, Eerik and Reko follow Annette and they paint a post box for the children's group.

While I was momentarily watching the painting workshop, Robin and Joonas came into the classroom and started playing together. I continued to observe in the classroom where Erja (the third educator) came in at 10:15 and immediately began to finish the Hama bead pieces by ironing them. By this time, three children had joined in to make things with the Hama beads. At 10:30 Roni said he was bored. Niilo replied

saying that sometimes life is boring and suggested that Roni go and lie on the big cushion and read books. Roni didn't take up the suggestion.

At 10:35 Annette comes back from the painting workshop with the children and the finished post box. Now, there are 17 children and 3 adults in the room and the children are doing different activities. Reko starts reading books. Anu and Vilma go back to their mermaid's hut. At 10:40 Erja (educator) takes seven children to the other room for gym. Niilo chats with Reko who is reading alone. At 11:05 the gym group comes back and Niilo starts to organize circle time for the whole group.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

The description above shows what happened over two hours and 15 minutes. In general, the description gives a very dynamic picture of early childhood education: there is a wide variety of activity going on. The morning is usually the time for planned pedagogic activity in Finnish kindergartens. The space is at least partially pre-designed and controlled by the educators and children often have less freedom than during other moments of the day. However, this example shows that these pre-structured activities, and the

more controlled spaces relating to them, can also be optional. All three educators, Niilo, Annette and Erja, openly invited the children to participate in more structured activities and the children had the freedom to decide when and if they wanted to take part in adult-led or suggested activity.

During that particular morning, the children who did not join the adult-led activities were free to move from one child and activity to another at their own will. Some children, like Vilma and Anu, used this opportunity to independently and repeatedly reconstruct their spaces during the morning without educators' influence. The space frames varied in terms of physical space, the participants in the space, or the activities performed in space and the nuances of those. Some children moved between an adult-led pedagogical space and a more clearly self-constructed space. The varied aims of the different activities also led to the construction of separate spaces and the variation in autonomy discussed below.

Some of the activities organized by the educators were clearly structured from a pedagogical orientation. For example, the arts and crafts workshop and the painting workshop were both aimed at developing children's hand and fine motor skills, creativity and concentration. However, pedagogical goals and spaces also appear when the children are allowed to construct activities following their own interests. That morning, Sanni chose to work on her own with the Hama beads. This kind of work demands good concentration skills, especially in a room where more than ten other children are working. This is an example of how children are able to create pedagogical spaces without intervention by an educator or through adult-led activities. In this kind of situation children also utilize their freedom in a responsible manner.

The length of time the children's freely chosen play spaces can exist for is limited by the predesigned schedule (Figure 1). On that particular morning Roni, Olli, Aimo and Ossi succeeded in constructing and maintaining the same play space for an hour. The boys had extensive freedom to organize their physical and social space. They marked their physical space out by separating it from the rest of the room using chairs. The social space changed as the boys decided to do two different activities: Aimo read a book and the other boys built things out of Lego. The boys' autonomy was actualized in the relational space where social and physical spaces intertwine. Eerik tried to enter their play space by peeping in now and then, but they paid no attention to Eerik's efforts. In this way, they defended their play space so that it was just for the four of them, and they kept their distance from the others.

Thus, the children's autonomy is not something that is total or absolute, that either exists or does not. In this example, the children had opportunities to negotiate the timing of the individual activities and the pedagogical work. They could also organize their own participation in the different activities and groups. This freedom is linked to current pedagogical thinking. In the 1980s and 1990s it was still customary for adult-led activities to be organized for large groups of children. More recently, one pedagogical principle and approach has been to teach children in small groups (Raittila, 2013). Also the emphasis on children's participation as a foundational principle has changed the spaces, and now they are more open for children to use at their own initiative. Children are given and take more responsibility for their own activities, and they plan their activities as a group together with the educators.

The increasing self-management of children in kindergarten is seen as one aspect of autonomy. It has also prompted criticism, raised questions and even been challenged by childhood researchers. Strandell (2012) has drawn attention to the fact that aspects of this freedom and self-organization can be seen as new ways of controlling and governing children. Control has become more indirect and implicit, and participation is based more on the child's individual ability to manage in different situations than was previously the case when education was more teacher-oriented. Millei (2011) has described how guidance and teaching practices aimed at children's autonomous action are perhaps even more value-loaded than outward control. The latter was only targeted at changing children's behaviour, while the former are about attempting to influence children's minds. Thus, we should not assume that autonomy is a self-evident value in kindergarten. It is accompanied by new demands and (more insidious) forms of control over young children's lives.

Trust is one aspect present in the construction of space presented above and it is also related to autonomy. In the kindergarten, because of the freedom given, taken and spatially constructed, children gradually get used to working independently. The children are allowed to play without adult supervision, even in a room with no adult present. As our description of the morning activities shows, although most of the children were allowed to freely choose an activity (cf. Rutanen, 2004), they were expected to be responsible and adapt their activity to the physical space shared with the other actors. The educators showed they trusted the children in their decisions and judgements on the appropriate activities. Following on from this, the children's independence was also expressed in their ability to find suit-

able tools and toys, and to select an appropriate physical space and good company. The children utilize their freedom, but they also have to show that they do so responsibly and align their activities with the pedagogical spaces and ideologies supplied by the educators.

In summary, the joint construction of children's spaces in everyday activities in kindergarten takes place at the crossroads between pre-planned and adult-led pedagogical practices and the free flow of activities. The children gradually embody the rhythm of the pedagogical work prescribed by the adults and use all the available moments to make their own choices, that is, the freedom to construct their own spaces and take responsibility for their own activities. Children need time to learn and commit to pedagogical practices when starting kindergarten. They have to learn what responsibilities they have, and how to responsibly use the freedom that is offered and allowed in this particular setting. Autonomy is actualized through the negotiation of these two elements, freedom and responsibility, in ECEC. This view gives children the opportunity to utilize the widest range of spaces that encourages and supports their activities and autonomy. At the same time, when schedules and pedagogical practices require the involvement of the autonomous child, the children produce the relational space of autonomy within the pedagogical spaces of the kindergarten.

*Autonomy as a characteristic of the 'perfectly fitting child' in kindergarten*

In the educators' verbal accounts, the themes of independence, freedom and responsibility were evident in their spatial constructions. From the analysis of the educators' interviews about everyday practices, we see how educators participate in the construction of space and *the ideal independent child* becomes visible. Starting from their first days in kindergarten, or even before, during preliminary visits to the kindergarten, their expectations concerning autonomy unfold. A 'perfect newcomer' is described in the following example:

Interviewer: So what is it, could you describe in more detail what it is about him that is so perfect or [inaudible]...?

Educator 1: He is social.

Educator 2: Yes and, well, all this, this daily rhythm, and all this feels, that it kind of works. When we go to sleep, so since his first days here he has fallen asleep there, and he goes to sleep very nicely by himself. He doesn't have that sort of panic about a situation that this is strange or odd or anything like that.

In their accounts of the child who ‘fits in perfectly’ in the kindergarten, the educators list various aspects regarding their evaluation of the child in relation to the kindergarten space. A child who fits in perfectly is social, follows the routines easily and does not require much assistance despite his or her young age. The child is able to fall asleep and follow the daily pedagogical practices and rhythm of the kindergarten. Thus, in these accounts, autonomy is not assumed in the sense of being independent of adults, but in the sense that the child is able to use the structures provided for her or his benefit or for a specific purpose from early on. The educators also believe that the child is able to do the required things; thus freedom is linked to the child’s responsibility for following the routine and structures provided. In their descriptions, the educators discussed very specific aspects that they thought indicated the child’s autonomy and independence: the child’s behaviour, skills, initiative and competence when pursuing different tasks and activities, such as eating or getting dressed without assistance. However, while the educators were evaluating the child and her or his competences and knowledge about the setting and the routines, as represented in the child’s actions and nonverbal and verbal behaviour, the educators were also taking into account the child in his or her relational context, acknowledging the environment and what it enables. A competent and autonomous child is one that is able to identify the possibilities provided and to act freely, and “easily”, to use the term one of the educators used. An autonomous child makes the educators’ work easier.

Continuing this description of a ‘perfectly fitting’ child, in another example, an educator constructed autonomy as an ideal that is also expressed in this instance through distance from the mother.

Educator 2: Well, I had, based on the home visit and that one day when they were visiting, that sort of feeling, that, most likely, we will do well. That she was really interested in everything, and the mother said her child likes to sing, and to read, and to be outdoors, and indoors. The sort of active child that likes to help, and then sort of having basic trust and being positive. And that sort of feeling I got, she laughed easily and was already moving a bit further away from her mother.

In this account, the physical distance from the mother is interpreted and reported as a sign of emotional wellbeing, initiative and as an indication of potential autonomy within the boundaries of the kindergarten space as expressed and observed in its routines and structures. Thus, in this example autonomy emerges as the ability to be distant (emotionally and physically),

not independent, but interdependent. The child exhibited the abilities and agency to use her or his freedom within these boundaries and interdependencies.

In summary, the educators' accounts construct the 'perfectly fitting child' at the point where the normative space of the kindergarten intersects with the cultural ideal of autonomy. These accounts include assumptions about children who observe and adjust to the structure of the day and other constraints, have knowledge and resources, and are able to actively construct their spaces within and in relation to these structures. By being autonomous and independent the 'perfectly fitting child' also makes educators' work easy. It is important to note that some scholars have been critical of how these new demands are applied to children, now that the emphasis is on autonomous and self-managing children (Gulløv, 2008; 2011). Obviously, there is a risk that some children may find these demands for independence and self-management more challenging than other children. Children who lack these skills may eventually challenge this organizational functioning that is no longer based on the idea of individual attendance or assistance, but on children's self-managing skills, if taken to the extreme.

#### *Parents reflecting the ideal of autonomy*

We extended our analytical gaze to cover the parents' interviews. In Finnish ECEC, parents bring their children to the kindergarten but are not present at the kindergarten at other times. They rarely spend a whole day or even part of a day at the kindergarten. Thus, parents are not directly involved in the negotiation of space between educators and children, and so they have a different position in relation to the construction of kindergarten space. However, responsibility for children's education and care is shared between families and institutions (Karila, 2012). In the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2017), parents have the status of important participants in their children's education and care, thus the parents' role in negotiating kindergarten spaces is something the educators have to take into account. Parents, also contribute to the socio-spatial space of ECEC, and in the relational approach to the construction of space it is possible to investigate this contribution. Parents' understanding of space and autonomy at kindergarten guides their own activities and most certainly how they discuss kindergarten with their children.

In the parents' views, kindergarten seems to be a place where children learn to be independent. Their interpretation of kindergarten is similar to

the educators' construction of the ideal independent child. A mother describes her thoughts about her child being at kindergarten:

Mother: It [kindergarten] has been an important thing during the last year. A big, big thing. When a child starts kindergarten. It will form the child's own world, trust on that, I am not able to [...] I have to give him that space, I can't be there all the time as his protector, I have to let him cope with his challenges on his own. And I have to trust that he will do all right and he will not, he will keep at it even though he is feeling sad.

For the mother it seems that placing her son in kindergarten was quite controversial. It is challenging for her to let him have his 'kindergarten world' outside the reach of his parents where he might even feel sad. At the same time it is unavoidable. She trusts that her son will cope with all the challenges he may face without them. One of the fathers approaches this same issue:

Father: Though Elsa is quite small, I want to teach myself that there is a world where I will only get some crumbs. [...] Even though I visit that place with Elsa daily and I see all the things there, when I chat with Elsa about those things, I realize that she doesn't necessarily... She wants to keep that stuff to herself, though she is nearly five.

The father starts by expressing the idea that he actively wants to learn, as part of his role as a father, that his daughter has her own life and world, starting in kindergarten. He also explains what he means by 'the crumbs' he gets: he recognizes that he doesn't have the same knowledge about events in the kindergarten as his daughter has, and he also recognizes that already at the age of four his daughter not only has her own kindergarten world but also wants to keep it her own.

The two parents portray the kindergarten as a specific and separate space for their children, as an independent world of their own. The parents are not able to share these experiences with their children, but that is as it should be in kindergarten. They also emphasize the need for them to learn how to cope with this situation themselves. All this supports the idea that autonomy is embedded in the parents' understanding of the kindergarten space. They have chosen to take their children to kindergarten, and obviously they also participate in constructing the ideals of that space. In their view, the kindergarten helps their children to become independent (see Broström, Skriver

Jensen & Hansen, 2016). They realize that they could not and should not interfere with that process. Thus, the ideal of the autonomous child is strongly present in the parents' understanding of 'what kindergarten is' and in how they position themselves towards the kindergarten space. While the parents say the process of their children becoming 'autonomous children' is not easy for them, it gives us some insight into the negotiation occurring in the space: the parents recognize the ideal of autonomy in the cultural interpretation of that kindergarten space, and they adjust their own feelings and expectations of the kindergarten as a specific place for their children. It is not only the children but also the parents who reproduce the values the space offers and the special ideal of autonomy that guides the construction of the kindergarten space.

## Discussion

A considerable amount of research in ECEC has recently focused on diverse approaches to space and place, and the application of spatial lenses to the analysis of practices related to children's institutional lives (Gallacher, 2016). Many of the studies have been inspired by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which focuses on heterogeneous assemblages including non-human and human elements. One such study, that bears close resemblance to our application of a relational approach, is the work of Jennifer Sumsion and her colleagues in Australia. In their work, following Tamboukou (2008), *smooth spaces* refer to open spaces that allow transformations to occur, whereas *striated spaces* refer to spaces that are ordered, more bounded and fixed, and that can be more limiting than smooth spaces (Sumsion, Stratigos & Bradley, 2014, p. 47–48). Similarly, in our analysis, we have illustrated how the ordered, fixed and somewhat predetermined structure of the pedagogical spaces enfold freedom and the free flow of activities.

Kindergarten and ECEC space is characterized by socio-spatially embedded and located routine-like events that occur repeatedly, in a somewhat similar manner, for all children (Williams, 2001). Even though, in our example, the schedule was presented to the children and parents, space and action were created on the basis of negotiation and independent decisions. Both the educators and the children had opportunities to shape the relational spaces. In the first example, the educators' autonomy could be seen in the planned activities and the division of labour between the working adults. The children's autonomy hinged upon at least two different kinds of knowledge base: first, regarding how the ECEC daily system normally works, and second, how the physical environment can be made accessible

(Eerola-Pennanen, 2013). The former refers to knowledge about how to participate in adult-led small group action and how to organize the independent action freely, parallel to the guided activities. The latter refers to the possibilities that space offers with its different kind of objects, such as the shallow shelves or other furniture and toys available. In the process of constructing the space, the children could stretch the boundaries between the adult-led and self-organized spaces.

The concept of autonomy was empirically associated with the attributes of freedom and responsibility that we identified in our first example. There was an openness to initiative-taking and spontaneity within the overall structures, which are often, but not always, predefined. It is in the encounter between freedom and responsibility and within their tensions and negotiations that the space and children's autonomy are constructed. Here we follow on from previous research into children's spaces and places that shed light on how places organized for children and children's own places intertwine with each other (Rasmussen, 2003; Raittila, 2008).

Educators continuously construct kindergarten spaces not only through their actions but also through their accounts and reflections. The interview data showed how they evaluate the child and children's behaviour in relation to the structures and the routines in the setting and their own work. A child who is able to use the structures to construct his or her own space and agency in relation to the potential and available opportunities 'does well', both socially and emotionally. Similar to the observational data on practices, the educators' verbal accounts emphasized freedom and responsibility. They also stressed that children's developing independency and self-management skills within the routines and rhythm of the day are important resources for children.

The parents are observers and play a part in ECEC practices through their accounts; thus, they also produce and reproduce the children's autonomy in the kindergarten space. However, they themselves position ECEC as a distant, separate and unique place to which they do not have full access. It is the child's own world, outside the home, beyond parental knowledge and influence, reach, and control. The parents acknowledge the limits of their knowledge and, thus, of their participation in the world of the child that was previously shared and embedded in the private sphere of the home. The parents are nonparticipants rather than participants of the daily practices of the kindergarten. The children also recognize this tension and utilize their autonomy as freedom to keep the kindergarten as their own space. They choose

what to tell the parents and they know that their parents do not have the same knowledge of daily practices as they have. This is part of the relational construction of the children's autonomy where the children have an active role, and the parents are engaged with the ideal of the independent child.

The experience of autonomy is lived through everyday action in the kindergarten and by the educators and children together. This analysis shows that achieving autonomy is not only an educational goal, but that it also affects the way space is organized, through the experience of daily life in ECEC. As an ideology and ideal, it envelops the space of kindergarten practice and, as a value basis, it overlaps simultaneously with everyday practices and accounts of how kindergarten space is determined. It is inevitable that through these practices children also learn broader political ideologies, such as democracy, rights and the responsibilities of members of society (Millei & Imre, 2016; Strandell, 2012). On the basis of our investigation, we understand autonomy as extending from separate actions and producing an 'ethos' of the space where the practices indicate a joint awareness of the diverse opportunities and limitations affecting children's and adults' ability to participate in the production of that space.

The child moves through these accounts and narratives of the various actors. It is a space that is future-oriented and that is continuously constructed based on previously created experiences and meanings. It is both simultaneously being constructed whilst constructing further social relations. In conclusion, theories of space offer tools to investigate how ideologies and cultural ideals are formed and shaped in space and in relations and how, in turn, space shapes them. Ideologies, ideals and goals are present in this, guiding our doings and thinking and spatial approaches offer productive tools for illuminating how these values and ideals operate in educational practices. This article has merely sketched out one perspective that should be developed further.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to the editors and reviewers for their helpful comments on our article. This article is based on the data collected as part of the 'Children's paths in early childhood education' project at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. We are grateful to the kindergarten, and, particularly, to the children, educators and parents who allowed us to conduct the ethnography in their center. Mari Vuorisalo's contribution to this research project has been funded by a post-doctoral research grant from the Finnish Cultural Founda-

tion at the University of Tampere. We are also grateful to Kati Laaksonen, Senni Salminen and Juulia Ylikoski who assisted in transcribing the material.

## References

- Bennet, J. (2010). Pedagogy in early childhood services with special reference to nordic approach. *Psychological Science and Education*, 3, 16–21.
- Broström, S., Skriver Jensen, A., & Hansen, O. H. (2017). Values in Danish early childhood education and care. In C. Ringsmose, & G. Kragh-Müller (Eds.), *Nordic social pedagogical approach to early years* (pp. 25–42). Cham: Springer.
- Dahlberg, G., & Moss, P. (2005). *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. (B. Massumi, Trans.) London: Continuum.
- Eerola-Pennanen, P. (2013). *Yksilönä vaan ei yksin. Lapset minuuden muodostajina päiväkodissa*. [Individual but not alone. Children's self-formation in day care.] Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research 464. University of Jyväskylä. Retrieved April 26, 2018 from <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/41154>
- Fuller, M. G., & Löw, M. (2017). Introduction: An invitation to spatial sociology. *Current sociology monograph*, 65 (4), 469–491.
- Gallacher, L. A. (2016). Theorizing young children's spaces. In A. Farrell, L. Sharon, & E. Kay M. Tisdall (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood research* (pp. 118–132).
- Gulløv, E. (2008). Institutional upbringing: A discussion of the politics of childhood in contemporary Denmark. In A. James, & A. L. James (Eds.), *European childhoods. Cultures, politics and childhoods in Europe* (pp. 129–148). New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Gulløv, E. (2011). Welfare and self care: Institutionalized visions for a good life in Danish day-care centres. *Anthropology in Action*, 18 (3), 21–32.
- Karila, K. (2012). A Nordic perspective on early childhood education and care policy. *European Journal of Education*, 47 (4), 584–595.
- Lahelma, E., Lappalainen, S., Mietola, R., & Palmu, T. (2014). Discussions that 'tickle our brains': Constructing interpretations through multiple ethnographic data-sets. *Ethnography & Education*, 9 (1), 51–65.
- Löw, M. (2008). The constitution of space. The structuration of spaces through the simultaneity of effect and perception. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11 (1), 25–49.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London: Sage.
- Millei, Z., & Imre, R. (2016). "Down the toilet": Spatial politics and young children's participation. Politics, citizenship and rights. In K. Kallio, S. Mills, & T. Skelton (Eds.), *Politics, citizenship and rights. Geographies of children and young people*, vol 7. (pp. 171–188) Singapore: Springer.
- Millei, Z. (2011). Thinking differently about guidance: Power, children's autonomy and democratic environments. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 10 (1), 88–99.
- National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care*. (2017). Regulations and Guidelines 2017: 10. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.

- Olwig, K. F., & Gulløv, E. (2003). Towards an anthropology of children and place. In K. F. Olwig, & E. Gulløv (Eds.), *Children's places. Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 1–19). London, New York: Routledge.
- Paavilainen, A. (2017). *Social exclusion from peer interaction and relationships in a daycare center – a micro-ethnography*. Master's thesis, University of Jyväskylä. Retrieved April 26, 2018 from <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:juu-201709043660>
- Pierce, J., Martin, D. G., & Murphy, J. T. (2011). Relational place-making: The networked politics of place. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36, 54–70.
- Raittila, R. (2008). *Retkellä. Lasten ja kaupunkiympäristön kohtaaminen*. [Making a visit. Encounter between children and an urban environment]. Jyväskylä studies in education, psychology and social research 333. University of Jyväskylä. Retrieved April 26, 2018 from <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-3217-6>
- Raittila, R. (2012). Whit children in their lived place: Children's action as research data. *Journal of Early Years Education*, 20 (3), 270–279.
- Raittila, R. (2013). Pienryhmätoiminta ja leikkialueet: Varhaiskasvatuksen pedagoginen toimintaympäristö rakentuu arkisissa käytännöissä. [Small group action and play areas. The pedagogical action space is constructed in action]. In K. Karila, & L. Lipponen (Eds.), *Varhaiskasvatuksen pedagogiikka*. [The Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education.] (pp. 69–94). Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Rasmussen, K. (2003). Places for children, children's places. *Childhood*, 11, 155–173.
- Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom. Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rutanen, N. (2004). Is there "free play"? Example of a researcher as constructing limits and possibilities for children's actions. *The culture created by children and children's participation – Seminar proceedings 17 June 2004*. Stakes, Helsinki. Retrieved April 26, 2018 from [http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/lapset/In\\_English/Rutanen.pdf](http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/lapset/In_English/Rutanen.pdf)
- Rutanen, N., Raittila, R., & Vuorisalo, M. (forthcoming). Clothes and clothing practices in Finnish early childhood education and care. In P. Rautio, & E. Stenvall (Eds.), *Social, material and political constructs of arctic childhoods: An everyday life perspective*. London: Springer.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Strandell, H. (2012). Policies of early childhood education and care — Partnership, and individualisation. In A. T. Kjörholt, & J. Qvortrup (Eds.), *The modern child and the flexible labour market: Child care policies and practices at a crossroad?* (pp. 222–240). Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Sumsion, J., Stratigos, T., & Bradley, B. (2014). Babies in space. In L. J. Harrison, & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and care. Exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research and practice. Educational perspectives on early childhood education and development*, 11 (pp. 43–58). New York and London: Springer.
- Tamboukou, M. (2008). Machinic assemblages: Women, art education and space. *Discourse*, 29(3), 359–375.
- Vallberg Roth, A-C. (2014). Nordic comparative analysis of guidelines for quality and

content in early childhood education. *Nordic Early Childhood Research Journal*, 8(1), 1–35.

Vuorisalo, M., Rutanen, N., & Raittila, R. (2015). Constructing relational space in early childhood education. *Early Years*, 35(1), 67–79.

Williams, P. (2001). Preschool routines, peer learning and participation. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 45(4), 317–339.

### **Authors:**

Mari Vuorisalo, Ph.D.  
University of Tampere  
Faculty of Education  
Tampere  
FI-33014  
Finland  
E-mail: mari.vuorisalo@uta.fi

Raija Raittila, Ph.D.  
University of Jyväskylä  
Faculty of Education and Psychology  
P.O. Box 35  
FI-40014  
Jyväskylä  
Finland  
E-mail: raija.raittila@jyu.fi

Niina Rutanen, Assoc. Professor  
University of Jyväskylä  
Faculty of Education and Psychology  
P.O. Box 35  
FI-40014  
Jyväskylä  
E-mail: niina.a.rutanen@jyu.fi