



# Young Children's Belonging in Finnish Educational Settings: an Intersectional Analysis

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## Abstract

The study draws on a relational and intersectional approach to young children's belonging in Finnish educational settings. Belonging is conceptualized as a multi-level, dynamic, and relationally constructed phenomenon. The aim of the study is to explore how children's belonging is shaped in the intersections between macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of young children's education in Finland. The data consist of educational policy documents and ethnographic material generated in educational programs for children aged birth to 8 years. A situational mapping framework is used to analyze and interpret the data across and within systems levels (macro-level; meso-level; and micro-level). The findings show that the landscape in which children's belonging is shaped and the intersections across and within the levels are characterized by the tensions between similarities and differences, majority and minorities, continuity and change, authority and agency. Language used, practices enacted, and positional power emerge as the (re)sources through which children's (un)belonging is actively produced.

**Keywords** Children's belonging · Finland · Early childhood education · Intersectionality · Relationality · Primary school

## Résumé

L'étude s'appuie sur une approche relationnelle et intersectionnelle de l'appartenance chez de jeunes enfants dans des contextes éducatifs finlandais. L'appartenance est conceptualisée comme un phénomène à plusieurs niveaux, dynamique, et construit de manière relationnelle. L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer comment l'appartenance chez les enfants est façonnée dans les intersections entre les niveaux macro, méso et micro de l'éducation des jeunes enfants en Finlande. Les données sont composées de documents de politique éducative et de matériel ethnographique générés dans des programmes éducatifs pour des enfants de la naissance à l'âge de

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8 ans. Un cadre de cartographie situationnelle sert à analyser et interpréter les données à travers et à l'intérieur des niveaux des systèmes (niveau macro, niveau méso et niveau micro). Les résultats montrent que le contexte dans lequel l'appartenance des enfants est façonnée ainsi que les intersections à travers et à l'intérieur des niveaux se caractérisent par les tensions entre similitudes et différences, majorité et minorités, continuité et changement, autorité et capacité d'agir. Le langage utilisé, les pratiques mises en œuvre et le pouvoir de position apparaissent comme les (res)sources par lesquelles l'appartenance (ou non) des enfants est activement produite.

## Resumen

El presente estudio se basa en un método relacional e interseccional hacia el sentido de pertenencia de niños pequeños en contextos educativos de Finlandia. El sentido de pertenencia se conceptualiza como un fenómeno de niveles múltiples, dinámico y construido con base en relaciones. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar cómo el sentido de pertenencia de los niños toma forma en las intersecciones entre los niveles macro, meso y micro de la educación preescolar en Finlandia. La información recolectada consta de documentos de políticas educativas y material etnográfico producido en programas educativos para niños desde el nacimiento hasta los 8 años. Se utilizó un marco de mapeo situacional para analizar e interpretar los datos a través y entre niveles sistemáticos (nivel macro; nivel meso y nivel micro). Los hallazgos muestran que el panorama en el que el sentido de pertenencia de los niños toma forma y las intersecciones a lo largo y entre los niveles, se caracterizan por tensiones entre similitudes y diferencias, mayorías y minorías, continuidad y cambio, autoridad y agencia. El lenguaje utilizado, las prácticas establecidas y el poder posicional emergen como recursos por medio de los cuales el sentido o no de pertenencia de los niños se produce en forma activa.

## Introduction

This study focuses on young children's belonging in Finnish educational settings, extending from early childhood education (ECE) to the first grade of primary school. The concept of young children here refers to ages 0–8 years. The study is part of an international project focusing on children's belonging in educational settings in five countries: Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. We integrate Finnish data from various sub-studies to develop a holistic understanding of children's belonging with the following research question: How is young children's belonging shaped in Finnish educational settings? Shaping refers to both the conditions that frame children's belonging at the various levels of the educational system and the dynamic processes through which children's belonging is produced across and within these levels.

Children's belonging and its opposite, unbelonging, are phenomena that concern humans at both individual and societal levels. Previous psychologically oriented research maintains belonging as a universal human need. From their earliest years, humans create emotional attachment to other people, places, and material objects;

belonging is significant for children's development, learning, social behavior, and well-being (Over, 2016). Recent studies call for going beyond the individualistic view of belonging toward exploring the societal structures and dynamic processes through which children's belonging and unbelonging are constructed (Kustatscher, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2011). To belong, one has to be accepted within a community and society; this makes the questions concerning politics and power crucial for exploring belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). A rising concern in increasingly diverse societies is about children's unbelonging, exclusion, and marginalization, particularly for children with individual needs and minority backgrounds (Osler, 2017; Slee, 2019; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Preventing children's exclusion and enhancing their belonging are major policy agendas worldwide; many countries emphasize belonging through their curriculum frameworks (Guo & Dalli, 2016; Selby et al. 2018; Sumsion & Wong, 2011).

Although research on children's belonging has increased, most studies take either an individual or a structural approach. Studies employing multi-level approaches are scarce (Antonsich, 2010). We address this gap by applying relational and intersectional approaches that highlight the multiple levels and dynamics through which children's belonging is shaped in educational settings.

## **A Relational Approach to Children's Belonging**

We draw on a relational approach to explore children's belonging as a multi-level and dynamic phenomenon. We understand belonging as a dynamic process wherein children identify themselves and become identified by others in relation with people, cultures, places, and material objects (May, 2013). In children's daily lives, their relations with others play a crucial role in this identification process. Children develop a sense of self by identifying themselves with others, but their sense of self is also shaped by parents, siblings, teachers, and peers who tell children who they are and what kind of children they should be (May, 2013). Children tend to identify themselves with those who they view as being similar and differentiate themselves from those who appear to be different; therefore, unbelonging is important for any study of belonging (Christensen, 2009; Kustatscher, 2017).

Relationally oriented research highlights multiple intertwining sources of (un) belonging that extend from families, peers, friends, and neighborhood toward more anonymous and abstract realms, such as state, nation, and citizenship (Fegter & Mock, 2019; May, 2013). As Yuval-Davis (2011) remarks, belonging "can vary from a particular person to the whole humanity, in a concrete or abstract way, by self or other identification, in a stable, contested or transient way" (p. 12).

Children's belonging as a relational phenomenon concerns not only children's social relations but also their relations with material, cultural, and political contexts (Fegter & Mock, 2019; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). In particular, geographically oriented studies have maintained the significance of places to children's belonging (Fegter & Mock, 2019; Kustatscher, 2017). Other studies have indicated how spaces, practices, materiality, and cultures in ECE settings and schools shape children's belonging (e.g., Juutinen et al. 2018; Selby et al. 2018).

## Employing an Intersectional Lens

We apply an intersectional lens to capture the complexities and dynamics of children's belonging in educational settings. The origins of intersectionality lie in feminist research, which highlights the need to explore social categories, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social class, concurrently and in connection to power relations (Carastathis, 2014). Intersectionality considers that the interactions of social categories serve as organizing social structures, thus influencing political access, equality, and justice (Hancock, 2007). Over the years, the interest in intersectionality has expanded to reach many research areas, and multiple applications of intersectionality exist with different emphases (Carastathis, 2014; McCall, 2005).

McCall (2005) noted that studies applying intersectionality take on different stances toward social categories. Whereas *anticategorical approaches* reject and deconstruct stable social categories, *intercategorical approaches* utilize categories to explore how inequality is co-constituted between different social groups (Carastathis, 2014; McCall, 2005). *Intracategorical approaches* focus on multiple dimensions within particular social groups "in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups" (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). All these approaches agree that multiple levels of analysis are needed to capture the complexity of social life (Carastathis, 2014).

Studies applying intersectionality also have variation in their scalar reach. Whereas some studies primarily deal with macro-level social structures that create social positions for individuals and groups, others are more concerned about how individuals and groups experience and occupy these positions at the micro-level (Carastathis, 2014; Christensen, 2009). Scholars also call for combining macro and micro-level analyses to capture both the structural and experiential complexity of social life (Fegter & Mock, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Antonsich (2010), among others, suggests that empirical studies on belonging should necessarily consider matters that shape belonging both at the micro- and macro-levels. Christensen (2009) elaborates upon the idea of intersectional analysis as bridging micro- and macro-level analyses, suggesting a third level, a meso-level "of collective organizations and institutions in linking the macro structures to the level of individual agency and identities" (p. 37).

Within the multiplicity of intersectionality, this study applies an intracategorical approach by focusing on one social group, young children. However, we recognize that the category of young children is not a self-evident and neutral concept. Cannella (1997), for instance, maintains that differentiating children from adults inevitably means subjugating children under adults' power position. Regarding the scalar reach of intersectionality, this study applies a multi-level approach: we explore how young children's belonging is shaped at the intersections of three levels: the Finnish educational policies (macro-level), the organizational and institutional conditions of educational settings (meso-level), and the relations and interactions in children's daily lives (micro-level).

## Study Context: The Finnish Educational System

In Finland, education for children aged 0–8 years is divided into three stages: ECE for 0–6 years, pre-primary education (referring to one year before compulsory education), and primary school (usually attended at 7 years old). For children needing long-lasting support (e.g., deaf, blind, and cognitively impaired), compulsory education may begin earlier. The three stages have separate national core curricula that apply to both public and private services. All children have a subjective right to ECE; however, paradoxically, the rates of children participating in ECE are lower in Finland than in many other OECD countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2016; Salminen, 2017). The Finnish educational system relies on educators' professionalism and requires that all educators have qualifications for working with young children (Salminen, 2017).

This study was implemented in 2018–2020, which was a time preceded by significant changes in Finnish educational policies. The renewed legislation and national curriculum guidelines highlighted the pedagogical function of ECE, emphasize children's and parents' opportunities for participation, and laid a foundation for the goal-oriented and systematic planning of education. At the same time, the differences between educational policies at the municipal level increased owing to municipalities' right to self-government (Puroila & Kinnunen, 2017). For instance, the national regulations leave room for municipalities to make decisions concerning groupings of children, resources, local curricula, and bilingual services. However, the reformation of educational policies is still ongoing, for instance, national guidelines for inclusive practices in ECE are in process.

## Methodology

### Data and Participants

The data utilized in this study are from the project "Politics of belonging: Promoting children's inclusion in educational settings across borders." The authors are investigators of the Finnish research team and collected the Finnish data utilized in this study. For qualitative research projects, analyzing the same data sets multiple times and from different perspectives to explore various research questions is increasingly typical (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). The data generated in the aforementioned project are employed in many international and national sub-studies to explore children's belonging from different perspectives (e.g., educational policies, educators' perspectives, parents' perspectives, and children's daily lives in educational settings). Some of the sub-studies are already published (Sirkko et al. 2019), but most are either under review or in the writing phase. Some data are not yet utilized in any studies. The present study has a synthesizing function: various Finnish data gathered for the project were combined to enable an intersectional analysis with the goal of producing a holistic picture about how belonging is shaped across and within macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of young children's education.

We employed two kinds of data to capture the elements shaping children's belonging across and within multiple levels. First, we explored the Finnish educational policies by analyzing the contents and language of the national core curricula for ECE, pre-primary education, and primary education (Table 1).

Second, we utilized ethnographic material comprising group interviews with educators, interviews with parents, observations, photographs captured by children, and discussions with children. Before fieldwork, we informed the participants, highlighting that their participation was voluntary and anonymity would be protected. We received ethical approvals for the entire project from the municipal authorities, leaders of the settings, and all participants. Besides following these formal ethical protocols, we gave special attention to "ethics-as-process": we committed to encountering participants in an ethically sensitive way throughout the research process (Lind, 2017).

Children from three educational settings participated in the study: a group of 3–5-year-olds (ECE1), a pre-primary group (ECE2), and a group of first-graders in a primary school (PS) (Table 2). The settings were located in two municipalities in Northern Finland. From a total of 75 children across the three settings, 47 children participated in data generation. The educators comprised four ECE teachers, two primary school teachers, one special education teacher, one leader, two ECE nurses, and one assistant. We also interviewed seven parents in one ECE setting.

## Analysis

We applied *situational mapping* as an analytical tool to implement intersectional analysis and to work with a vast collection of data, representing multiple perspectives and levels (Clarke, 2003; Salazar Pérez & Cannella, 2013). By using situational mapping, the usually invisible features of a situation can be made more visible by gathering the human and non-human key elements in the situation (Clarke, 2003). First, we created a "messy" situational map to identify the key elements that appeared to be meaningful for children's belonging in our data. We attempted to remain as open as possible to various issues that brought children together or separated them from each other, thus producing different conditions for children's (un)belonging, across and within the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of education. All the researchers read through the data which they had gathered and made notes on a common messy map about the elements that seemed to shape children's (un)belonging (see Appendix 1). For instance, in the beginning of the analysis, we identified the emphasis on educational continuity and the diverse ways of categorizing children.

**Table 1** Research material analyzed on Finnish educational curricula and policies

Research material	Amount of material
National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2018)	67 pages (24,471 words)
National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (FNAE, 2014a)	58 pages (26,953 words)
National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014b)	566 pages (266,45 words)

**Table 2** Ethnographic research material utilized in the analyses

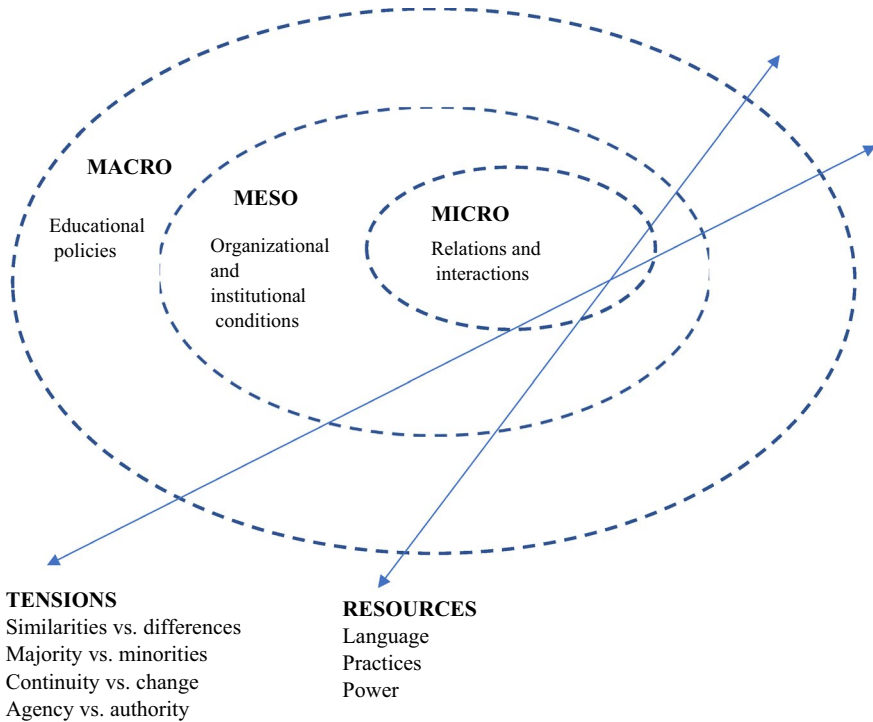
Setting and Participants	Research Material
ECE setting 1 (ECE1) <i>Researchers:</i> Puroila and Kyrönlampi <i>Participants:</i> 26 children aged 6; EC teacher 1 (female); EC teacher 2 (female); EC nurse (male); Leader (female)	Group discussion 1–2 teachers and nurse (1:32 h) Group discussion 2–2 teachers and nurse (1:06 h) Group discussion 3–2 teachers and nurse (0:53 h) Interview of the leader (1:07 h) Photographs taken by 13 children 4 group discussions with children about their photographs (1:27 h)
ECE setting 2 (ECE2) <i>Researchers:</i> Viljamaa and Juutinen <i>Participants:</i> 20 children aged 3–5 years; EC teacher 3 (female); EC teacher 4 (female); EC nurse (female); Assistant (female); Leader (female); ECE special teacher (female); 7 parents	Group discussions with the staff (1:33 h) Interviews of 7 parents (4:15 h) Research diary based on participatory observations (30 pages) Photographs taken by 18 children Discussions with children around the photographs (7:44 h) (Video)observations of children's daily situations
Primary school (PS) <i>Researcher:</i> Sirkko <i>Participants:</i> 16 children aged 7 to 8 years; Class teacher (female); Class teacher (female); Special education teacher (female); School assistant (female)	Photographs taken by 16 children and discussions with children (1:05 h) Group discussion with staff (1:03 h)

Second, we proceeded from the messy map to a more ordered one by employing three analytical questions:

- (1) What kinds of elements shape children's belonging in the national educational policies?
- (2) What kinds of organizational and institutional elements shape children's belonging?
- (3) What kinds of elements shape children's belonging in their daily lives in educational settings?

We discussed the elements included in the messy map, connected elements that were quite similar, and organized the elements as belonging to macro-, meso-, or micro-levels (see Appendix 2); for example, we combined several elements referring to groups of children to "grouping practices."

Finally, we discussed and interpreted the ordered map and proceeded beyond separate elements and levels toward a more holistic picture of children's belonging (Fig. 1). Using the ordered map, we searched for trends that intersected the three levels of the educational system. Our first notion was that a number of *tensions* shaped the conditions for children's belonging across and within different levels. We identified four tensions forming the tension-filled landscape of children's belonging: similarities and differences, majority and minorities, continuity and change, and agency and authority. Our second notion was that although these tensions exposed children



**Fig. 1** Tensions and resources shaping children's (un)belonging in the intersections of macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of education

to belonging or unbelonging, the tensions as such did not produce children's (un)belonging. For instance, having similarities with others did not guarantee children's belonging, or differing from the group did not necessarily lead to children's unbelonging. Therefore, we analyzed the more active side of children's (un)belonging: What are the means through which children's (un)belonging is produced in the intersections of different levels of the educational system? We found that the language used, practices enacted, and positional power functioned as *resources* by which the levels dynamically operated and actively produced children's (un)belonging (Fig. 1).

## Findings

This study applied intersectional analysis to explore how young children's belonging is shaped in the intersections between the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of Finnish educational settings. Two significant perspectives were found: tensions that shape conditions for children's (un)belonging and resources through which children's (un)belonging is actively produced across and within different levels of education. In what follows, these tensions and resources are discussed



by drawing various examples from our data. Intersectionality appears in the following sections in moving between different levels—how tensions and resources shape children's (un)belonging across macro-level educational policies, meso-level organizational and institutional conditions, and relations and interactions in children's daily lives in educational settings.

### Tensions Between Similarities and Differences Shaping Children's (Un)belonging

The three analyzed curricula, identified in Table 1, address democracy and equality as basic values, indicating a political will to promote children's belonging by emphasizing *similarities* and avoiding *differentiating* children at the macro-level of Finnish educational policies. All children have an equal right to attend ECE, pre-primary education, and primary school. The excerpt below exemplifies the principles of inclusion and democratic values in educational policies.

*The development of early childhood education and care is guided by the inclusion principle. All children may participate in early childhood education and care together, regardless of such issues as their needs for support, disability or cultural background. ... Early childhood education and care promotes the democratic values of the Finnish society, such as equity, equality, and diversity. (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE] 2018, p. 15, 21.)*

However, “children” are not identified as a homogenous category in the curricula. The citation above contains sub-categories of children regarding their needs for support, disabilities, and cultural backgrounds. A closer analysis of the language used in the curricula revealed that sub-categories exist for children of different ages, children with illnesses, Sámi children, Roma children, plurilingual children, and children speaking foreign languages.

A crucial question for children's belonging is how the democratic values and principles of inclusion are realized at the organizational and institutional level (meso-level) and how children experience belonging in their daily lives between similarities and differences (micro-level). Our analysis showed that Finnish municipalities play a significant mediating role in determining the preconditions for children's belonging in institutional education. The municipalities hold power through financial control to permit or deny additional staff to support the inclusion of children with individual needs.

*Leader: We now have two children who are dangerous for peers and staff. It's mentioned in their individual plan that they require adults' immediate, full-time physical presence. This is away from other children. We've to carefully consider what's good for all children. [...] There were prolonged battles [with municipal authorities] that required strong input on the leader's part and arguments after the next, and I'd say that I've been enraged and taken contacts to many directions. And we have got an assistant for one of the children and will get another assistant for the other child in November. (ECE1)*

The educators struggled with addressing the differences among children and simultaneously treating children equally in the daily relations and interactions in educational settings (micro-level).

*Teacher 2: We have to balance [things], as we've autistic children who can't help saying "Fuck you!" These children are practicing what's appropriate as well as dirty speech. [...] How [do we] justify different rules for children? Children of this age notice that, hey, I've these rules, how come they act differently? Nobody should feel that they're being treated unfairly. (ECE1)*

Our research revealed that the children themselves recognized differences, such as ages, genders, languages, abilities, and bodily features, among their peers (micro-level). They identified themselves with some children and differentiated themselves from others. They often formed friendships on the basis of similarities, such as gender and mother language. A Finnish mother stated that it was important for her child to play with peers who could communicate in Finnish. Although she advised the child to play with all children, the child showed preferences for Finnish peers. However, some children expanded their friendships across different ages, genders, and languages. For instance, a Finnish-speaking five-year-old girl regarded a younger boy with an immigrant background to be her friend: "Here is my friend Abdul in this picture; we belong to the same small group" (ECE2).

### **Shaping Children's (Un)belonging Between Majority and Minorities**

The principle of supporting all children's linguistic and cultural identities and belonging is embedded in the macro-level policies of the Finnish educational system. The curricular goal of basic education is that "a child learns to appreciate different languages and cultures and to promote bilingualism and multilingualism" (FNAE, 2014b, p. 88). The three curricula discussed in Table 1, identify the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among children; however, how they articulate diversity varies. Whereas some texts regard diversity as "a richness" (FNAE, 2014b, p. 16), others use weaker expressions, for instance, children's varying backgrounds "are taken into account" (FNAE, 2014a, p. 39).

All curricula mention Finnish, Swedish, Sámi, Roma, and sign language, of which Finnish and Swedish are the official national languages. The situation of the Sámi is more complex, as different stages of the educational system have different regulations. Finnish municipalities must ensure that a child can receive ECE in Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi throughout the country, whereas the teaching language is Finnish or Swedish in pre-primary education and basic education. The *Basic Education Act* (628/1998, Sect. 10) states that the teaching language "may also be" Sámi, Roma, or sign language in pre-primary education and basic schools and that the teaching language should be Sámi for children who live in the home region of the Sámi and can speak Sámi. The curricula also refer to supporting the development of foreign-language-speaking children's language skills and cultural identities. However, the curricula contain the idea that children with minority language backgrounds must learn either Finnish or Swedish to integrate into Finnish society.

The two municipalities studied here are examples of the differences between Finnish municipalities regarding their population. One represents small cities with little variation in people's linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, whereas the other represents a bigger city with an increasingly diverse population. This difference was visible in the educational settings. All children in the primary school setting were Finnish whereas around one-third of the children had a minor linguistic and cultural background in the two ECE settings.

Teacher 1: *One-third of them [children] have different linguistic backgrounds. [...]*

Teacher 2: *We've many who speak the Somali language. Then we've Arabic and Vietnam languages, and a family who combines Finnish and Tagalog. (ECE2)*

Finnish educational policies leave room for local authorities to decide how education for diverse linguistic and cultural groups is implemented, which highlights municipalities' role in shaping children's belonging (meso-level). In ECE settings, practices were designed to support children with minority backgrounds to learn Finnish; for example, children had the right to spend extra time in "preparatory pre-primary education." There were also practices for supporting children and families with minority backgrounds in their own language and culture; for example, interpreters were made available when parents discussed children's individual educational plans with the educators. In one ECE setting, "teachers of the home language" were available for children from the biggest minority language group but not for all children with minority linguistic backgrounds. Regardless of the supportive practices, the educational settings provided children with an environment dominated by the Finnish language and cultural habits.

The parents described how the tensions between majority and minority cultures emerged in children's daily relations and interactions (micro-level). Parents with minority backgrounds expressed sadness that their children were not invited to birthday parties or to play with the Finnish children. According to some parents, their children had experienced bullying owing to their skin color; they felt that the staff had not intervened in the same way as if a Finnish child had been bullied. Although "the foreigners" seem to be expected to adapt to Finnish culture, the ECE settings also held events to celebrate diverse cultures. Parents with minority backgrounds were invited to talk about their culture and read books to the children in their own languages. Special events were also arranged; a Somali mother said that her daughter experienced a very meaningful culture day where she saw a Somali flag and heard a song about the Somali flag in her ECE setting.

The children themselves showed abilities to adapt to the linguistic and cultural diversity in their groups. Joint activities and plays connected children with different backgrounds. Those who were more skilled in certain languages served as interpreters for the children unable to speak or understand that language. Some children had developed their skills in many languages. For instance, a child proudly exclaimed: "I can speak three languages—Finnish, English, and Somali—that makes three languages! Because I am Somalian" (ECE2).

## Tensions Between Continuity and Change Shaping Children's (Un)belonging

The idea of promoting children's belonging through educational continuity is embedded in the macro-level Finnish educational policies: the three curricula highlight a learning path on which children can smoothly move from one stage to another. Regardless of the emphasis on continuity, children cannot avoid changes in their educational environments. When moving from home to an institutional environment, children are expected to relate to new adults, peers, and practices. Nor are the practices similar when children move from one educational setting and group to another. These changes expose children to experience unbelonging.

The Finnish educational system is built on an *age-related order* that influences children's opportunities for belonging. This order is visible in the curricula; children of different ages have distinct curricula. Although the curricula contain similarities in terms of continuity, their orientations toward learning and teaching change when moving from stage to another. For instance, the curriculum for basic education contains guidelines for each grade and subject; these guidelines are missing in the other two curricula. The change also manifests in the language the guidelines use: whereas the curriculum for ECE only uses the term *child*, the term *pupil* dominates the language in the curriculum for basic education.

Age-related order goes from the core curricula (macro-level) to the institutional practices (meso-level) and to children's daily lives (micro-level). The groups participating in this study were formed according to children's ages, which both enhanced and limited their belonging. The children had opportunities to create friendship with peers of the same age, but their opportunities to build bonds with younger or older children were limited. A first-grader complained: "Our teacher said that older pupils aren't allowed to come to the school yard of younger pupils" (PS) (also Sirkko et al. 2019).

In Finnish ECE settings, a traditional institutional practice is to name each group (meso-level). Belonging to the "Bunnies" or the "Moomins" serves as a marker of children's collective identities and belonging. In the school setting, the children talked about "Anna's class" and "Maria's class," referring to the primary school teachers. Usually, the groups of children are formed for each operation year, from fall to spring. The excerpt below mirrors the institutional condition that might challenge children's belonging: variation exists in the extent to which the group and educators remain the same from one operation year to the next.

Teacher 1: *Next fall, new children will swarm into our group, and we'll notice how much happens during a year. We'll start quite from the beginning. [...]*

Nurse: *We'll have a group with all children newcomers. This year, we had eight five-year-olds who continued, and there were only eighteen new children. (ECEI)*

The educators described specific practices intended to *support children in transition situations*. These practices included organizing familiarization time when a child moves from home to ECE and discussions with parents about the child's individual ECE plan. Educators explained transferring information between professionals as a common practice when children move from pre-primary school to school.

In ECE settings, the groups of children were further divided into smaller groups, which influenced children's daily relations and interactions (micro-level). One educator was designated to more closely work with some children, and the educators often referred to these children as "my group." For instance, the educators and the small groups used to eat their meals at the same table. The small groups were meaningful for children's belonging between this continuity and change, and the children were clearly aware of the small groups. A child explained: "We're part of Maria's group, and this is our room. And Anni is part of Sari's group, and their room is on the other side of this wall" (ECE2).

### **Shaping Children's (Un)belonging Between Agency and Authority**

All three curricula address children's agentic rights—their participation and their right to be heard regarding issues affecting them—which can potentially enhance children's ownership and belonging in educational settings (macro-level). The idea of children's agency is presented in two different ways in the curricula. On the one hand, children are described as active agents who are involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating their own activities and contributing to their learning environments. On the other hand, active agency emerges as a future goal toward which children are guided to become capable citizens of a democratic society.

The curricula touch upon children's and parents' participation in preparing, evaluating, and developing the local-level curricula. However, how their participation is expressed varies from "informing the pupils and their guardians of key decisions" (FNAE, 2014b, p. 8) to "ensuring" that the parents and children have participation opportunities (FNAE, 2018, p. 9). Hence, the local authorities decide how children and parents can influence institutional education at the local level (meso-level).

Daily life in educational settings appeared as an arena where the tensions between agency and authority were present, especially in the intergenerational relationships between children and adults (micro-level). The children had limited opportunities to influence the institutional practices shaping their belonging, such as forming groups. The educators were authorized to make various decisions on behalf of the children; however, the children could participate and choose their activities within the limits of the institutional order. A mother with a minority background noted that the relationships between children and adults were more equal in Finnish educational settings than in her previous place of residence. The educators said that their strategy was mainly to promote children's participation in daily activities. Particular events of democracy education were also organized to provide a forum for children to take initiative, express opinions, deal with conflicts, and search for common solutions to problems.

From the children's viewpoints, their agency mostly appeared through participating in and contributing to small but significant matters in their everyday lives; for example, children found it important that they placed their own name tags on the wall each morning. One child described: "Here are the names of all the children who belong here. I take a photo of that. I like to play with Maria" (ECE2). The children who entered the setting as newcomers soon began to learn the rhythm and habits of

the setting. They adapted to its practices but also negotiated and contested them. They reached out to the other children and educators to create bonds and responded to others' initiatives. They participated in the activities the educators guided and created joint activities with peers when possible. They showed joy in learning new skills, competences, and languages, which expanded their sense of agency and promoted their belonging (also Sirkko et al. 2019).

### **Resources for Producing Children's (Un)belonging: Language, Practices and Power**

The previous sections on tensions provide examples of the resources utilized in actively producing children's (un)belonging on the tension-filled landscape of education: language, practices, and power. Our study showed a two-fold function of *language* for children's (un)belonging. As described earlier, linguistic background was an element that caused tensions for children's belonging. In addition, language appeared to be a resource through which children's (un)belonging was actively produced both in policy documents (macro-level) and in how people used language in their daily interactions (micro-level). Children were categorized through language—expressions like “children with illness” and “autistic children” create different identifications within the category of children. Both adults and children produced several categories of belonging while talking; they categorized children using verbal expressions like “first-graders,” “small,” “big,” “boys,” “girls,” and “monoglots.”

Other verbal means were also used to produce children's (un)belonging. Employing the pronoun “we” expressed identification with some people, whereas “they” or a passive voice were employed to differentiate oneself from others. The educators gave examples about how children used language as a resource in their peer relationships. According to the educators, children adapted their speech when communicating with peers who had different mother languages: they used shorter expressions and spoke more slowly to help the other understand.

Besides language, children's (un)belonging was actively produced through institutional and pedagogical *practices* (meso-level). Dividing children into groups and dedicating particular spaces for groups produced both material and symbolic borders between the children, influencing their daily relations, interactions, and opportunities for belonging (micro-level). The material borders were walls, doors, and fences, and the symbolic ones were nicknames and logos. The daily schedule and routines provided children with a predictable environment to allow familiarity, continuity, and belonging. However, how well the institutional practices met children's individual needs and how well they adapted to the social order of the setting varied.

Some practices were designed to support children's belonging by recognizing individuals within groups—for instance, parents could ask for individualized practices when discussing children's educational plans with educators. Small rituals also supported children's individual recognition in the community, thus enhancing their belonging—for instance, every child's birthday was acknowledged, and all children had similar opportunities to special tasks that they found pleasant. Children's belonging was also shaped through the design of their material environment. Using

pictures was a practice for creating shared understanding when there was no common language. The material items, texts, and symbols visible in the setting involved cultural meanings, either promoting or restricting children's feelings of at-homeness and belonging.

This study also provided insights into the *power* hierarchies within Finnish institutional education. The national-level curricula are binding regulations that must be followed by municipalities and in educational settings. Thus, macro-level policies hold the highest power to determine conditions for children's belonging. However, the Finnish educational system grants some power to local authorities (meso-level) to promote or hinder children's belonging. Municipalities can adapt institutional education to the needs of the local population by, for example, providing education in languages other than Finnish or Swedish. The intentions of the national policies may also collide with the decisions made at the municipal level; for example, the practices and resources of supporting children with individual needs and minority backgrounds largely depend on municipal decisions.

At the micro level, the educational settings emerged as arenas dominated by professionals. The curricula legitimate educators' powerful positions by granting them the responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating pedagogical activities. Although the curricula mention parents' opportunities to participate, they mainly paint parents as collaborators or receivers of information. Regardless of educators' authority, children were not just objects of adults' power but were capable of employing power themselves in their daily relations and interactions. They sometimes tested the rules and actively resisted the educators. Power also played a central role in the children's peer relations: children with a high peer status had the power to include or exclude others.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore how children's belonging is shaped in Finnish educational settings. Relational and intersectional approaches (Carastathis, 2014; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011) challenged us to analyze the shaping of children's belonging in the intersections between educational policies (macro-level), organizational and institutional conditions (meso-level), and relations and interactions in children's daily lives (micro-level). The study contributes to educational research, policies, and practices by advancing knowledge about the intersectional complexity of children's (un)belonging—that is, how the multiple levels and interrelations operate in shaping children's (un)belonging.

Among the multiple applications of intersectionality, this study utilized an intracategorical approach by focusing on belonging within one social category, young children. Acknowledging that this category is neither self-evident nor neutral, we suggest that educational research, policies, and practices benefit from studies wherein the complexities of belonging among young children are explored. Our study clearly shows the subcategories in which children are categorized across the different levels of the Finnish educational system, such as children's ages, individual needs and (dis)abilities, and their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Drawing from the intersectional theorization

to belonging (Hancock, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011), the sub-categories are not mere social locations but influence children's power positions and their equal and just treatment. This study confirms the findings of previous studies, highlighting that educational settings do not provide equal opportunities for children's belonging, especially if they have individual needs or a minority linguistic and cultural background (Garvis et al. 2018; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). One of the challenges relates to the role of education in both promoting national identities and citizenship on the one hand, and welcoming diversity on the other (Osler, 2017).

The study provides insights into the complex, multi-level mechanisms and processes that operate around young children's education, uniting and separating children. In previous research, both micro-level relations and interactions and macro-level structures and politics—important for children's (un)belonging—are well documented (Guo & Dalli, 2016; Juutinen, 2018; Selby et al. 2018). This study draws attention to the significance of meso-level organizational and institutional conditions for shaping children's (un)belonging. The findings reveal that the meso-level has a crucial mediating role in determining conditions for children's (un)belonging through financial resources, local policies, and institutional practices. In Finland, the conditions for children's belonging may differ from one municipality to another, depending on the political will to promote all children's belonging.

This study's contribution is not, however, on a single level but rather on how different levels and interrelations operate together, providing children with different opportunities to belong (see Fig. 1). The study identified tensions and resources as meaningful for shaping children's (un)belonging. Previous studies have addressed tensions framing children's belonging, for example, Juutinen et al. (2018) identified tensions between individuality and collectivity; including and excluding; and stability and variability as meaningful for children's (un)belonging in play situations. The findings of this study comply with those tensions but also enrich the view by drawing attention to similarities and differences among children, majority and minorities, continuity and change, and agency and authority. This study also shows that these tensions not only concern children's daily interactions but also intersect the entire educational system.

An interesting notion was that the tensions did not directly lead to children's belonging or unbelonging; rather, the language used, practices enacted, and positional power emerged as the (re)sources through which children's (un)belonging was actively produced between these tensions. Previous studies on children's belonging acknowledge the significance of these resources; in particular, positional power is widely regarded an inherent part of belonging (Juutinen, 2018; Kustatscher, 2017; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). The present study takes a further step, exemplifying how these (re)sources are employed across and within various levels of the educational system.



## Conclusion

This study portrays a complex picture about how young children's belonging is shaped in the intersections between macro-, meso-, and micro-levels in educational settings in Finland. Although the findings cannot be directly generalized beyond the research context, the study may inspire researchers to examine how the various levels, tensions, and resources, addressed in this study, resonate with their own educational system. The study also challenges policy-makers and educators to reflect upon how all children's belonging is promoted or hindered within their own contexts.

On a global scale, the Finnish educational system contains strengths that can potentially promote children's belonging, such as universal access to education and democratic values emphasized in society. The findings, however, call for a critical re-consideration of how the educational policies emphasizing equality, educational continuity, and children's agentic rights are enacted, promoted, or hindered in the intersections between the various levels of the Finnish educational system. In light of this study, further efforts are required to provide children with educational environments that are welcoming for all.

## Appendix 1

A messy situational map of elements shaping children's belonging in educational settings.



## Appendix 2

An ordered map of elements shaping children's belonging in educational settings.

**Macro-level: *What kinds of elements shape children's belonging in the national educational policies in Finland?***

- #1 Universal access to education
- #2 National curriculum frameworks and regulations
- #3 Division into institutions: early childhood settings (0-5 years), pre-primary schools (6 years), primary schools (7 years)
- #4 Democracy, equality, equity and participation as explicitly expressed values
- #5 Inclusion as a principle
- #6 Educational continuity
- #7 Professionalism in education
- #8 Traditions, languages and cultural heritage in Finland

**Meso-level: *What kinds of organizational and institutional elements shape children's belonging in Finnish educational settings?***

- #1 Municipalities as mediators between state and settings
- #2 Leadership
- #3 Resources
- #4 Staffing
- #5 Grouping practices
- #6 Spaces and material environment
- #7 Institutional and pedagogical practices

**Micro-level: *What kinds of elements shape children's belonging in their daily lives in Finnish educational settings?***

- #1 Educators' attitudes, values and competences behind their actions
- #2 Groups of children
- #3 Children's individual needs and backgrounds
- #4 Communication (both verbal and non-verbal)
- #5 Peer relations
- #6 Joint activities
- #7 Parent involvement

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