

**“It’s almost like official”  
- Children’s participation as a relational and spatial question**

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**Abstract.** In recent years, more attention has been paid to the opportunities that children and young people have for participation in their communities. The present article explores children’s public participation in the Finnish town of Tampere. Tampere was the first town in Finland that had a municipal Children’s Parliament. The organisation of the Parliament is based on electoral and representative democratic principles. The key event in the organisation and action of the Parliament is the General Meeting (Suurkokous), an event organised twice every year in a council hall. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, the paper concentrates on analysing the spatial and intergenerational arrangements of the General Meetings. The results of the study support the emerging body of research indicating that representative models provide possibilities primarily for those children who are already in an advantaged position and have many cultural and social resources.

**Key words:** children’s participation, space, intergenerational relations, resources, field theory

Please cite this article as:

Kiili, J. (2013). “It’s almost like official” – children’s participation as a relational and spatial question. *Qualitative Studies*, 4(1): 56-71.

**Introduction**

In recent years, children’s rights and opportunities for participation in civil society have been widely discussed. Children’s participation is doubtless firmly on the national agenda in many Western countries, including Finland. This article explores children’s participation in the Finnish town of Tampere. It was the first town in Finland that had a municipal Children’s Parliament – the Tampere Children’s Parliament (TCP), founded in 2001. The Parliament aims at operating as an intermediate domain and as a democratic dialogue space among and between children and local authorities. The key event in the organisation and action of the Parliament is the General Meeting (Suurkokous), which is organised twice every year in a council hall.

Currently, children’s public participation is a widely examined area of research and it follows that critical insights are gaining more scope as well. In Western countries, child and youth participation primarily takes place in formal public structures, which are usually pre-planned and developed by adults for children and young people. Among scholars there are many critical points made regarding these electoral arrangements and representative models, as they are fairly often tokenistic – sometimes disempowering, they are used mainly for educational purposes and that disadvantaged children are usually unequally represented (e.g. Cockburn, 2007, 2010, Theis, 2010, Turkie, 2010, Wall, 2011, Wyness, 2009). Along with the emerging critical literature many scholars are particularly interested in the role of adults and different spaces in the process of children’s participation (e.g. Cockburn, 2010, Mannion, 2010). This is also the main interest of this paper. In spite of the research-based criticism towards representative models – at least in Finland – they are

the main forums for children's public participation (Kiili, 2011). In that sense it is vital to evaluate them further by paying attention to the spatial and intergenerational arrangements of the action.

### **Participation, relations and space**

In the present article, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory will be used as a methodological thinking tool. A field can be defined as a network of objective relations between positions and it can be seen as a social space or a social microcosm that is structured by specific properties, relations and processes. The field can be mapped out in terms of relations between particular key institutions and agents. 'Field' is a relational concept as it reminds the researcher that the object of research is not the individual as such, but the field in which individuals exist as socially constituted agents. The structure of the field can be explained by identifying the distribution of the specific forms of capital (resources) that are active in the field. Capitals can present themselves as three fundamental forms: economic, cultural and social. By analysing the forms of capital it is possible to "differentiate everything that there is to differentiate" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 97–96, pp. 107–108).

Can children's public participation in one town be seen as a field? There is no indisputable notion of the proper way to define a field in the Bourdieusian sense, although there are some basic criteria, such as the field should be autonomous and should have an inner logic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). With social spaces there is always the problem of field borders, as they are typically fuzzy and contested (Thomson, 2008, p. 78). Space as a term is used here both literally and metaphorically. The concept refers to a physical space that carries practical and symbolic meanings for children (Alanen, 2011, p. 93). Children's participation is also studied as a social space, or here identified as a subfield among local decision-making. In this case, children's participation as a formal institutional structure constitutes an identifiable model of how children's participation on local decision making is organised. As a methodological tool, field theory helps to identify the key agents and characteristics that define children's actions.

The idea of a field theory allows to capture the role and socio-temporal orchestration of the General Meetings. Although the event takes place only twice every year, it operates as an embodiment of the subfield of children's participation in Tampere. This critically important event brings together the participants into a spatially and temporally bounded event, and in doing so renders visible the wider characteristics of children's participation, such as the norms and boundaries of their action and different positions, and the resources (capital) children have when they participate in the action (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006, p. 738).

General Meetings are organised in a centre of the city in a public building and more precisely in a council hall. The hall is part of the action and because of that it is vital to analyse what forms of behaviour it allows, and what kinds of identities inhabit it (Cockburn, 2010, p. 311). In the article, meetings are observed and analysed as a spatial and relational phenomenon. Children's participation is seen to be interconnected with both children's individual agency and the social relations within which they act. Participation takes place in relation to the social and material environment; therefore spatial dimensions will be explored. Spatial dimensions make a difference to how children perform in meetings; their actions cannot be purely social, nor purely spatial (Lussault & Stock, 2010). A relational approach means that analytical emphasis is on the interaction between the children's generation and that of the adults, as well as the impact these two have on

each other (Alanen, 2001, Mayall, 2002).

In analysing spatial and relational aspects it is vital to note how relations, identifications and spaces are reciprocally linked as they co-evolve. Child-adult relations are co-constructed by both, and also affected by the places and spaces that these groups co-inhabit or inhabit separately (Mannion, 2010, pp. 333–338). Inspired by the field theory and from a relational perspective, the research questions in the article are:

- How does the space, the council hall, define children’s actions?
- What are the valued resources that are also held important and legitimate in General Meetings, and do they function as capital for children?

### Mapping the field: the evolution and structure of the Tampere Children’s Parliament

Tampere is the third largest city in Finland with over 210,000 inhabitants. At the end of 2010 the number of 7 to 15-year-olds totalled 16,209. The Tampere Children’s Parliament (TCP) was established in 2001 and began as a 3-year pilot project funded by the Ministry of Education, the Finnish Slot Machine Association and the city of Tampere. (Child and youth participation in Finland, 2011). The formal model of the TCP was created by two experts working on the pilot project. The main aims of the project were to help the schools in setting up school councils and to create a municipal model for children’s (7- to 12-year-olds) participation based on representative and democratic principles. After the project the city hired a youth worker responsible for children’s participation. She has a key role in facilitating children’s meetings and actions. The city allocates a certain monetary amount (10,000 €) for the use of the TCP. The structure of the TCP is representative and it can be described as a ‘pyramid model’.

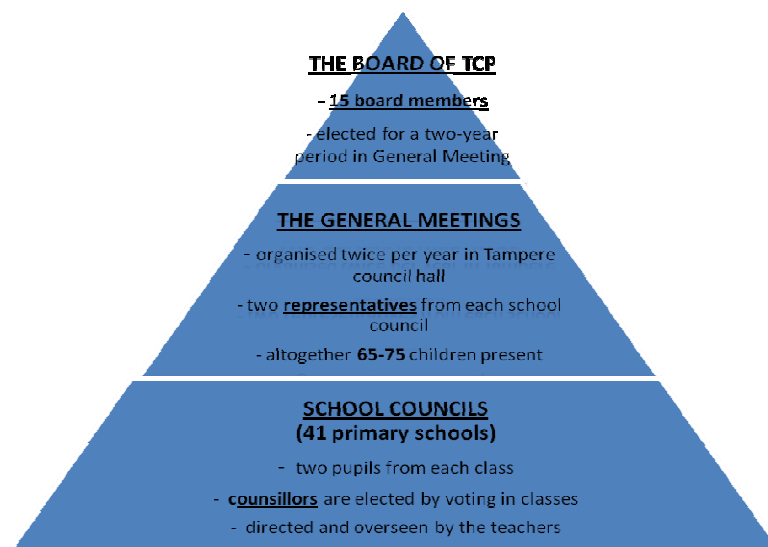


Figure 1: Structure of the Tampere Children’s Parliament

The base of the pyramid is formed out of 41 primary schools. The structure of the TCP is strongly based on a co-operation with schools. Each school has its own school council, which is directed and

overseen by the teacher. In general there are two pupils from each class in these councils and they are usually elected by voting. The youth worker supports school councils, she for example organises training days for teachers and also for councillors; the training is organised separately. All supervising teachers have one joint training day per year and they generally concentrate on issues regarding how the council meetings are directed. Teachers exchange ideas and experiences of different methods and initiatives together with the youth worker. Councillors' training is also organised once per year and the youth worker usually teaches the children the basic principles of the representative model of the TCP and also some basic conference protocols and guidelines.

The middle of the pyramid is formed of General Meetings organised twice every year. School councils can send two representatives to the meetings. They are usually elected by voting, but in some schools the teachers choose the representatives. Most of the children attending are 10 to 12 years old. Meetings take place in a council hall and they last three hours. The meeting itself is based on familiar and well-known structures of official meetings. Children are also advised to use the computers, electronic voting devices and microphones in a same manner as members of city council. This formal structure was created by the adult experts working on the pilot project. The board of TCP organises and prepares the meetings together with the youth worker. They make and send the invitations and agendas to school councils in advance. At the beginning of each meeting, representatives will elect a chair, secretaries, scrutinisers of the minutes and vote counters. These persons are chosen by electing from the children who stand as candidates for the jobs. They can be board members or representatives, but as a rule they tend to be board members. During the meeting every child has one vote; children also have the opportunity to make initiatives.

The board of the TCP represents the top of the pyramid. Members of the board are elected in the General Meeting once every second year; each member is elected for a two-year period. There are 15 members on the board and the children are ordinarily 10 to 12 years old. The election is formal, as each pupil participating in the General Meeting has one vote and can stand as a candidate. The board have meetings twice per month; it can be described as the key group of the TCP. These children are usually invited to different kinds of meetings and workshops organised by the city administration and other partners, such as the local and national ombudsmen and NGOs. They also prepare the General Meetings by making budgets, actions plans and reports of the TCP.

### **Empirical material and method**

The empirical material for the article was collected during the period of 1.4.2010–9.12.2010. Written and oral consents for the research were applied for and granted from the administrative body of the municipality and also from individual research participants (i.e. written consents from the municipality and parents as well as oral consents from the children and teachers). Prior to the interviews it was stressed that the research subjects have the right to stop the interview at any point. In addition, the ethical principles of the study (anonymity, data protection) were explained to the research participants.

The research material comprises interviews of children and teachers and observations of two General Meetings held in May 2010 and November 2010. The observations took place in the council hall where the meetings are organised. I as a researcher sat at the back of the gallery, where invited guests were seated. I took field notes as I was particularly interested in the organisation of the meetings and the rules and codes of conduct during the meetings. As well, I attended one training

day for teachers held in September 2010, at which 20 teachers were present. I made observations during the group work of teachers and I discussed with them the organisation of the TCP. I also conducted one group interview during the training day, but because of the tight schedule there was no time for further interviews.

During the autumn of 2010 I interviewed altogether 8 teachers and 27 children (10 to 12 years old). Fourteen of these children were board members and 13 were councillors. Most of the children were interviewed in groups or in pairs. Children could decide themselves if they wanted to be interviewed by themselves, in pairs or in groups, and most chose pairs. Ten children were interviewed in groups of three or four and only one boy wanted to be interviewed alone. Interviews of board members were carried out during a training weekend at a nearby leisure centre organised for the board. Councillors were interviewed during a school day in their own schools. Teachers were interviewed in schools or in cafes in the city centre. Three teachers were interviewed as a group during the training day and the rest individually.

The interviews were semi-structured and partly based on the observations made in May during the General Meeting. The children's interviews lasted from half an hour to one hour and the teacher's interviews lasted about an hour. The topics covered were: (1) the subject's background (age, personal history in school councils / Children's Parliament); (2) the selection of representatives (methods, evaluation of these methods); (3) the action and organisation of school councils / TCP (meetings, training days and weekends, initiatives, co-operation among children and with adults, etc.) and (4) evaluation of different aspects of the action and organisation of the school councils and TCP. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Inspired by the social studies of childhood (Alanen 1992; James et al., 1998; Mayall 2002), which emphasizes research with children rather than on children, the study aimed to discover which mechanisms promote or hinder children's public participation. During the field work I became convinced of the benefits of a dialogical approach both in conducting the interviews and during the analysis. I started the field work with observations and during the interviews afterwards I had the opportunity to discuss with the children and teachers the observations made during the General Meeting and the teachers' training weekend. As a concrete method, the dialogic approach also requires that the researchers evaluate their conduct so that they do not control the conversation, as adults often do (Christensen 2004, p. 174). This was particularly important with the children. As there were usually two or more children present when I conducted the interviews, it was easier to form a dialogical relationship with them – they complemented and challenged each other's ideas and thoughts. I also emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers; I was interested in their experiences and views of the organisation and actions of TCP.

With the use of qualitative methods, I have committed to the idea of respecting and promoting children's and also teacher's entitlement to have their opinions and views heard. In my view, research as a practice has a role in moving children's voices into the spheres of public policy and practice (see also Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, pp. 135–137). Currently the board members, councillors and youth workers are planning to make some changes to the organisation of the TCP. Along that process I have discussed with children and local authorities the findings of my research.

## **Analysis**

The research material is qualitative in nature, and for that I have applied the adaptive theory and the orientating concepts essential to the adaptive analysis created by Derek Layder. The adaptive method combines pre-existing theory and theory generated from data analyses in the formulation and actual conduct of empirical research (Layder 1998). In adaptive analysis the preconception of the phenomenon, the theoretical assumptions and the research data form a dialogue-like process. My analysis is based on a dialogue between research material and theory, particularly in the form of orientating concepts, the purpose of which is to help the researcher organise the data and its themes (Layder, 1998, pp. 17–25, 108–109).

Adaptive method is used here in two senses. First the analysis is sensitive to empirical phenomena. When organising the research material, I have worked in an inductive way as it is important to remain open in order to understand the material (Reay et al., 2010, p. 111). For the article a systematic analysis of the transcriptions and observations were carried out concentrating on issues regarding the General Meetings. I was looking for expressions, evaluations and areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the ways in which the General Meetings are organised and carried out. When I analysed the material further I concentrated on organising it into the following categories: expressions about the space (council hall), the code of conduct and rules in meetings, co-operations among children and co-operation with adults. Based on these observations the key question for the analysis was: during the meetings, why are particular forms of resources valued more than others? The inductively formed categories and the question about resources were analysed from a relational and spatial point of view. With the help of Bourdieu's field theory, I examined the norms and boundaries of children's actions and the different positions and resources (*capital*) children have when they participate in the action. The concept of *capital* was used as an orientating concept when analysing the material.

## **Participation, space and adults in General Meetings**

### *Whose space?*

The aim of General Meetings is to gather children together to decide on matters of importance to them. Children need to have a recognised position as councillors in their own schools before they can enter the event. In other words, it is not a public meeting open to all children of the municipality. Meetings are organised in a council hall. The space, the sitting order and electronic devices among other things clearly define the way in which children are to behave. The formal model of General Meetings is based on an idea that children can use the space in the same way as adults, they only need to be informed and educated to use it in order to be legitimate 'opinion-givers' (De Castro, 2012, p. 54). This assumption trusts the capacities of children to acquire the same skills as adults.

Children also commented on the space and the code of conduct in meetings. There are children who think it is "cool" and effective to work in a space like this. It is definitely and above all the space – the council hall – that gives the meeting the importance it should have. Children saw the space as a valuable resource and a vital part of their actions in meetings. Children used this locally important and recognised space as a tool when they were aiming to convince adults of their actions and decisions. One girl, who has attended at least four prior meetings, told me that in order to make decisions that adults take seriously, it is necessary to work, behave and use the space like

adults do. Meaningful action means formal ways of behaving and working. Board members also felt that the meeting is such an important event that it is only fair that they are able to use the council hall.

*I like General Meetings; I think it's cool that we do things the same as adults. I think adults will take us much more seriously when we do things almost like officially. And we also have the right to use the council hall; it is not just for adults but for all of us all who live here, also for children (Interview, boy, board member).*

There were also critical points made about the space and organisation of the meetings. There are children who think the meeting is surprisingly formal and thereby also exciting and sometimes even intimidating. In addition, few children thought that the meeting “*was just boring*”. It is far from the everyday life of children. Usually these children attend the meetings only once, as they decide not to apply there anymore. For them the organisation of the meeting was not a pleasant or interesting experience; on the contrary, it was seen as useless or uncomfortable event.

*I was there once; it was last year's meeting. I didn't like it. I mean I did like the space; it was cool. But we just sat there for hours. I didn't say anything, I just voted a few times. I don't even remember what it was about, what I voted. It was useless, the whole thing. (Interview, boy, councillor)*

*We usually have three to four pupils who are eagerly willing to participate in the meeting. But when they come back they usually say that that's it. They didn't like it, it was too formal. For them the council hall was an interesting place but they didn't like the meeting. They just sat there for one day and that's it. (Interview, teacher)*

The board members and the representatives who felt comfortable in the meetings told me that in a meeting they behave differently compared to other spaces, such as their homes, shopping centres or in school. In the council hall they feel more mature and independent, almost like adults. Children who talk too loudly or disturb others, who just sat there and did not have the courage to speak or who have difficulties in using the voting devices and microphones are deemed too childish to attend the meetings – these children's behaviour is not mature enough. “*Mature enough behaviour*” was seen as resembling that of the adult council members' behaviour as one board member told me that “*you need to cope with the space*” in order to take an active role. Children saw for example voting as an expression of political maturity as “*we decide things by voting just like adults do*”. Children's views can be seen as a strategy of how to use the space and the setting provided for them; they can't change it so they need to cope with it.

*It is really a special place, like no place I have ever been before. Somehow it is intimidating, but also exciting. Imagine, they allow us to use it! But you also need to know how to behave there, it is not a playground. You must be old enough to go there; it is not for little children. (Interview, girl, councillor)*

Particularly those children who enjoyed the meetings assumed that they need to behave like adult council members in order to have the attention and respect of local authorities; children want to be taken seriously. Although all children attending the meetings are councillors in their own school

councils, and in that sense they are interested in making a difference, part of them nevertheless felt uncomfortable in General Meetings.

*It was not something I liked; it was too long and boring. I don't know... Once was enough for me.*  
(Interview, girl, councillor)

These children didn't have the same interests as others or they were not willing to play by the rules set down by the local authorities. Instead, they usually decide to stand back from the action. This presents an example of a situation in which children find it easier, more beneficial or more familiar not to participate (Mosse, 2001, p. 49).

#### *Whose decisions?*

One of the main aims of the General Meetings is to form a dialogue with local authorities and among children and to decide matters together. One example of this was a discussion concerning the campaign called "Tampere K-18". K-18 means "forbidden under the age of 18". The campaign attempts to prevent substance abuse by children and young people. The main aims of the campaign are to encourage adults not to buy alcohol or tobacco for minors and to encourage different enterprises to not sell to minors. The campaign also wants to generate critical discussion about the alcohol use of children and young people. The main organiser of the campaign is the city of Tampere and its preventive unit, but it works together with local actors such as the Youth Forum, NGOs (Red Cross, parents' associations), the police and the local newspaper. The TCP decided a year earlier in a General Meeting that they would support and work together with the campaign.

As one concrete method the campaign uses stickers – grocery stores, kiosks, supermarkets or other such places can have stickers with the K-18 logo stamped on their doors or counters if they commit themselves to the campaign goals. For example board members have been touring around the city centre asking different enterprises if they want to join the campaign. It has been quite a successful campaign and many of the stores have joined in.

There was active discussion among the children of the goals and achievements of the campaign. This issue was on the table during the General Meeting held in November 2010. At the meeting one adult, a city official was present to introduce the campaign and also inform those children who were attending the meeting for the first time. After that the chairman opened a discussion. Children presented individual statements in favour of and against the idea of the campaign. The critical statements were present and there were at least eight children presenting them. Most of the criticism was directed at the fact that selling alcohol to minors is already illegal, so it is a waste of money to have a campaign like this – the problem has already been taken care of by the law. The money should be used directly to something that works in favour of all children, for example improving the libraries, parks or cycle tracks. All those children presenting the critical statements were representatives.

*How does this campaign help the situation of children in general? This is already illegal, so why are you using your money on stickers?*

*Stickers are of no use, they make no difference. There should be something that really grabs the attention of young people!* (Observations: comments by the representatives)



The board members on the other hand made several statements in favour of the campaign, stating how important it is to prevent alcohol abuse with different methods. Additionally the city official made several statements in favour of the campaign.

*It is really important to prevent alcohol use by children and young people. We have had great co-operation with board members this year. The stickers are like symbols for young people – when they see one they know they have no chance to buy anything illegally. (Observations: comment by the city official)*

In spite of the critical points made by the representatives, the campaign continued to be one that the TCP supports and works with. The board members were in control of the discussion as the critical statements did not have any concrete impact, not even in the form of voting on the future of the co-operation. This likely happened because there were no demands made about voting. It can be asked whether the representatives were properly informed of their opportunities and rights during the meetings and whether they even knew that they had the possibility to make a counter-motion. Apparently the *modus operandi* was not familiar to those children who presented critical views.

This example demonstrates the different positions held by children in meetings. The process of how to handle the agenda in meetings is obviously unclear to some of the children. It can be asked whether the model of participation is ethical enough as the electoral process and the code of conduct generates inequalities among children, even though the aim of the TCP is to exist as a democratic space for dialogue and decision-making. Board members have recognised positions and also more knowledge and experience in terms of conference protocols and guidelines compared to representatives. In that sense they also have more resources to rule the space and meetings.

#### *Whose knowledge?*

In Tampere the mayor has issued a permanent order stating that children's views must be considered in municipal decision-making. The aim of the General Meetings is to give the local authorities the opportunity to gather knowledge produced by children. General Meetings are used as one of the most important forums for gathering children's views. Based on the representative model, the meetings are made up of a small number of children who represent the interests of their age-related peers in these regular meetings. However, it can also be asked whether the meeting is an instrument that can bring the diversity of children's local knowledge to the table. 'Local knowledge' is highly differentiated in terms of who produces it and in terms of different ways of knowing (Mosse, 2001, pp. 19–22, 38).

*To be honest I think these guidelines for the meetings are ok, but there is a group of children who never say anything, they are so shy and quiet. They should tell us what pupils in their schools think about different things. In that sense they might have many opinions that we know nothing about. The aim is to get everybody's opinions heard but that is not the case. (Interview, girl, board member)*

For the city administration it is rather easy to make inquiries into different topics in General Meetings or to ask the opinion of the board. But these children do not represent the entire spectrum of children living in Tampere. As the previous extracts show, even the representatives had different and quite strong ideas about the K-18 campaign, but the critical statements were mostly overlooked

by the board and by the city officials. Also the overall structure of the TCP and the decision-making process are unclear to some children. There are many representatives who have quite vague ideas of what happens to the discussions and initiatives after the General Meetings. Where do they go, who will handle them, how and when?

*We have talked a lot about the quality of school lunches and we have made an initiative about it. I don't know what has happened after that, I don't know. Maybe my teacher knows, I don't know.*  
(Interview, girl, councillor)

*I don't know much about the work of the board or what the children have decided in General Meetings, I have no idea what they decide and what happens to their initiatives. Our pupils rarely have anything concrete to say about the meetings; they just talked about the space, how they used the voting devices, etc.* (Interview, teacher)

The TCP board handles the initiatives that are decided upon in General Meetings and after that they will move them along to the responsible city officials or other actors in question. But this was not clear to those representatives that I interviewed. The overall organisation and structure of the TCP and General Meetings seems to be quite challenging for many children.

#### *Adults in meetings*

One of the official aims of the General Meetings is to form a dialogue between generations. On the basis of the permanent order issued by the mayor, it can be argued that in Tampere there is a confidence that the knowledge of adult experts and council members is not enough. However in meetings there are very few adults present and they can be divided into three groups: guests who sit at the balcony and have no right to speak; visiting authorities who arrive and leave during the meetings; and youth workers who help children during the meetings. Sometimes reporters are also present.

Local authorities are seen as key partners, but in meetings they are usually present very briefly and only when there are topics that concern them. They arrive to present their own agenda and after that children can ask questions and give comments to the adults. Children are expected to give their statements by asking permission to speak and after that they need to wait for their own turn. The only method is to speak in public into the microphones. After the specific issue is dealt with the local authorities usually leave the meetings. This routine trusts the assumption that children and young people will be willing and able to share their wishes, beliefs and views with local authorities if they are provided with specific structure and spaces in which to do so (also Cockburn, 2010, p. 311).

Co-operation and dialogue between children and adults is clearly one of the major challenges of the meetings, as one representative (boy) told me that *"I don't know what to say there, you must decide really quickly what to say, I'm not that fast in my thinking"*. Dialogue among 65-75 children and between children and adults is as such an ambitious aim. If dialogue means talking and commenting on each other's ideas, this happened only very briefly, under strict rules and timetables, and by those children who had the courage or who were willing to take a stand and speak in public.

*I always say something, I usually have many questions but they (local authorities) don't always have enough time to answer to all my questions. (Interview, boy, councillor)*

When children participate they tend to do so in their own groups. Children's worlds are separated from those of adults (Percy-Smith, 2010, p. 114). This is the case also in Tampere. There is an assumption that the few minutes local authorities spend in meetings is enough, as it is a *children's* meeting. There is also a strong belief that the brief conversation between children and adults is enough for both parties (see also Thomas, 2012, p. 11). In some respects, adults are quite overlooked in General Meetings, as very little attention has been paid to the role of adults. On the one hand this is understandable because there is a fear that adults will rule the meetings if they are invited to be involved more intensely. But on the other hand, children's meetings and behaviour is expected to be almost the same as that of the council members. In that sense the process of children's participation is based on adult-like conduct and manners, which are evidently directing the way in which children behave and use the space provided for them.

### **Valued resources as spatial capital**

Based on the findings expressed in this article, children have different kinds of experiences of the General Meetings. There seem to be two groups of children – board members and active representatives (meaning those children who attend the meetings more than once) – compared to those representatives who attend the meetings only once. Meetings provide possibilities mainly for those children who are ready to work along the formal structures created for them by local authorities. According to the teachers the board members and active representatives have similar characteristics. They are usually those children who do well in school, who are interested in making a difference, who are outspoken and who have many friends.

*I have been around for many years and I can really say that usually the active children are active in many ways, they are the most active ones in school councils, and you can really see them enjoying themselves. But they are usually those children who do well in school also – I don't mean that they are necessarily the top students but they are good students. And they have a lot of hobbies, sometimes I think maybe too many. (Interview, teacher)*

In other words, they are not marginalised children or those children who are really shy or who cause trouble in school or have difficulties with school subjects, teachers or other children. It has been discovered that in many Western countries the formal electoral arrangement and models suit those children who have certain advantages, such as material and cultural resources (Wyness, 2009, p. 549; Turkie, 2010). Why is that? Why do these formal models favour those children who are already privileged in one way or another? This question can be approached as a relational and spatial issue.

Children attending the meetings have different kinds of resources, interests and skills. Children's resources are unequally valued because certain forms of action were more valued and received more approval than others. They were particularly valued by teachers and local authorities because of the structure; the rules and the setting of meetings were created by adults. There is a risk that participation of these 'well-off-children' might reproduce and deepen social inequalities. Teachers did admit that most of the active children attending the school councils and General Meetings are well-off, but they didn't consider it to be a problem.

*The system of TCP, I think you need certain qualifications in order to get by there. I also really think that it is good we have this kind of a model where also those children who do well in school have something extra; they have extra-attention from adults as they also need attention. Usually you only have enough resources to concentrate on those children who badly need help in school. (Interview, teacher)*

Teachers saw the TCP as an opportunity and extracurricular activity for those children who have the capacity to represent the children in Tampere and individually to take most advantages of it for themselves. Teachers also saw it as an educational assignment aiming to form more informed citizens who are and who will be better able to engage with local policy-making in the future and thus benefit the entire community, as *“at least few of these children are future politicians, you can see that already now”* (also Wyness, 2006, Turkie, 2010). Moreover, the active children themselves stated that representatives attending the meetings should be active, outspoken and interested in making a difference. The meeting was not designed for little or childish children because *“it is not a playground”*.

Children who felt comfortable in General Meetings had many kinds of valued resources that they could use as capital. In particular the strong role of school as a fundamental basis for children's participation is clearly visible here; the resources that are valued in school are also valued in General Meetings. Although schools are not responsible for the practical organisation of General Meetings, the relations among children and between children and adults were characterised by the broader configurations and values of schooling. In meetings these resources convert into specific, field-related capital, which is here referred to as *spatial capital*. The capital is made up of cultural and social resources and it is an ability to make use of a space. It enables more than just an entry to a site; it empowers the individuals to make meanings regarding its usage (Centner, 2008, p. 198). Spatial capital captures spatial and relational aspects of children's actions in this given setting. By 'spatial capital' I refer to social and cultural resources which children can use and utilise in this officially organised meeting and in this particular space. These skills and resources are not only place-bound but also socially acquired during the life history of an individual in different settings such as the home, school and hobbies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The valued cultural resources were both academically achieved and embodied (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). Most of the active children do well academically and they also feel comfortable in school. Children also told me a lot about their after school activities and hobbies. Many of them have a wide variety of hobbies in which they are regularly educated or tutored by adults (such as music, dancing, the Scouts, swimming, team games, etc.). In that sense they are used to being instructed by adults in different settings.

*I'm used to this kind of a thing that you need to listen to others and wait for your own turn. And that you do things together, also with adults. It is the same in Scouts where I go once a week. You need to work together and listen to the instructions that adults give you, for example when we go camping together. (Interview, girl, board member)*

These children perceived themselves as mature and capable enough to be part of the General Meeting and they had different kinds of embodied cultural resources and skills here referred as

*“mature enough behaviour”*. Because the meetings are organised in an official manner mimicking the council meetings, these children had the resources needed to cope with the setting. Board members and active representatives enjoyed the meetings and the formal structures and were eager to speak in public and use the electronic devices. They were really enthusiastic about the importance of the space and the code of conduct in meetings. These children also have social resources as they are quite popular amongst their classmates and they have been councillors, representatives or board members for many years. They have recognised positions in school, and because of that teachers and classmates trust the capacities of these children.

Children’s embodied actions and the use of spatial capital can also be analysed with the idea of habitus, which is one of the key concepts in Bourdieu’s field theory. In short, habitus is a mental, cognitive and internalised structure which reflects among other things the age, status and history of an individual. Habitus develops over time and is linked to the life history of an individual (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 466–484). As an open concept it indicates the socially developed capacity to act appropriately (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008, p. 731). Habitus becomes active in relation to a field and it is through the workings of habitus that practice (agency) is linked with different resources (capitals) and the field. In different fields different kinds of capitals actualise. One of the essential features of habitus is that it is embodied – it is not composed solely of mental attitudes and perceptions (Reay, 2004, p. 432).

The ‘fit’ or correspondence between the field and habitus can be used as a tool when analysing children’s engagements or disengagements (Alanen, 2011, p. 95). Children had different kinds of thoughts and views about General Meetings and they had embodied reactions in meetings. Board members in particular clearly thought that the space and organisation of meetings are functional and things that they truly valued. They were like fish in the water when using their spatial capital. On the other hand the meeting was quite disempowering to those children whose resources during this particular event were limited. Even though they were members of school councils, the meeting was seen as an uncomfortable or useless experience. They didn’t feel relaxed and they *“just sat there for hours”*. These children’s habitus encountered a field which was not that familiar to them, and as a result it produced ambivalence, frustration and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). They usually resolved this unpleasant experience by standing back from the meetings.

## **Conclusion**

Western democratic societies are based on political representation. In this respect it is understandable that the TCP is based on electoral processes and representation. It is also fair to ask why children’s participation should be morally superior to that of adults. With this I mean that there are only a few marginalised adults (uneducated, minority groups, etc.) present for example in municipal decision-making processes. By contrast, one of the current topics in “adult structures” is the fairness of electoral representation. In that sense also adult structures are under constant negotiation and evaluation, and new forms of representation are emerging such as expert advisory bodies and citizens’ forums (Hendriks, 2009).

The Tampere Children’s Parliament and the General Meetings aim at giving children a concrete arena and a democratic space where they have the opportunity to practice public participation. In Finland there are also other municipalities that have organised children’s participation via representative and electoral arrangements. On the basis of the analysis it is vital to critically

examine the electoral arrangements, the use of the spaces and the adult-like code of conduct as part of children's participation. Particularly spatial and intergenerational considerations, such as the meeting places and roles of adults, are important elements of the participatory action and they need to be taken into consideration critically, more explicitly and, above all, together with children. Open, not predetermined approaches are needed when developing children's participation (see also Turkie, 2010, p. 269).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the present model of children's participation in Tampere is not transformative but instead reproductive, as it reproduces the traditional forms of civic participation and the problems therein as well. The formal model of TCP assumes that all children should be able to operate under the norms and rules of a representative democratic model created solely by local authorities. The TCP should offer a sense of transformative possibility for all children, and at the same time it should be kept in mind that it is not the individual who is in need of transformation – rather, it is the system of participation (Mills, 2008, p. 83).

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#### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland, project 'Children's participation and intergenerational relations: The case of Children's Parliaments', (Project No. 251173).