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## **Transitional activities: Children's projects in Finnish pre-primary education**

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### *Abstract*

This chapter builds on three key theoretical premises of cultural-historical activity theory, namely that 1) human activities are object oriented (Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 1999) and that 2) children's learning and development are structured by the various opportunities offered and demands placed on them by different activities that constitute their everyday lives (Hedegaard & Fler, 2012) and lastly that 3) the relative importance of various activities for children's development between different historical periods and within ontogenesis changes (Beach, 1995). Within the broad frame of these premises, in this chapter we will explore the notion of children's projects (Hilppö, 2017) and its theoretical and empirical relevance for the development of cultural-historical activity theory. More specifically, the focus in the chapter is on such projects as *transitional activities* and how they are related to more leading activities in children's development like socio-dramatic play and school learning (Elkonin, 1972). Importantly, the chapter will explore how children's projects emerge through children's agency (Rainio, 2010; Rainio and Hilppö, 2017) and the opportunities these projects offer for supporting children's learning and development. The theoretical arguments advanced in this chapter are illustrated with an example of a children's project from a Finnish pre-primary education group. The chapter will conclude with a discussion about the role of Finnish early education and especially pre-primary education in the emergence of children's projects.

### **Introduction**

*"We know very little about the transition from one stage to the next or from one phase to the next".*  
El'Konin, 1972, p. 249.

*"The problem of educators, teachers, parents, the state, is to provide the environment that induces educative or developing activities, and where these are found the one thing needful in education is secured."*  
Dewey, 1913, p. 97

We need to start with an explanation. This chapter is in many ways hypothetical. While the arguments advanced are well supported by both theoretical and empirical work done within the broad framework of cultural-historical activity theory, what new we have to offer is still under construction and therefore tentative. In short, we suggest that children in early education, schools, homes and other places come up with and engage in their own projects, activities they have created and that take place in between, within and on the sidelines of more official school, home or free time activities. These projects can be very shortly lived or be sustained over longer periods of time and engaged across multiple different contexts. Furthermore, we suggest that such projects can entail important learning opportunities for the children to expand their knowledge and skill and hence can also be seen as developmentally important. In this sense, we argue that such projects could be understood as examples of *transitional activities*, an intermediate theoretical concept we introduce in this chapter to describe children's engagement between what are typically understood as more developmentally substantial and long-term activities, or leading activities (Elkonin, 1972).

Given that our ideas on children's projects and the concept of transitional activities are still quite tentative and abstract (even romantic) we will draw on an example of a children's project from a Finnish pre-primary education group in order to ground and illustrate our ideas. The vignette was collected by a pre-service teacher during a practicum period in a public, municipal kindergarten in the north of Finland. The vignette takes us to the pre-primary education group's gym time and an imaginary trip to Lapland. It serves to illustrate the start of a children's project centered around staging dance performances for friends and other children and adults in the kindergarten.

*The teachers had planned a gym time for their group. The exercises were embedded in a narrative about travelling to Rovaniemi [A city in the north of Finland] and seeing various sights, people and animals that were characteristic to Lapland, like Santa Claus and reindeers. The teachers' educational goal was to familiarize the children with different parts of Finland, Lapland on this occasion.*

*As part of the gym time, the children did cross country skiing [a popular sport and recreational activity in Finland] on imaginary tracks across snowy landscapes and saw the northern lights (Aurora Borealis) in the sky. The northern lights were done with different colored scarves hung across the room and a children's song about the northern lights playing in the background.*

*The children were thrilled about their trip to Lapland. After the gym, many of the recited the names of the towns and cities they visited and other really liked the cross-country skiing. One of the children was really inspired by the northern lights, the music and the scarves and started making dance performances with the materials for the other children. At first the performances were for friends only, but later the same friends joined the performances and together the children performed their dances for the rest of the kindergarten.*

What drew our attention in this vignette was how gym time and the imaginary trip to Lapland, a fairly mundane activity in Finnish pre-primary education, seems to have served as an initial scaffold for one of the children's dance project. Moreover, given that the dance performances grew both in the number of performances and performers, suggests that the kindergarten seemed not only to spark the project, but also support it and allow it to grow. Interestingly, to our knowledge, such self-initiated activities have been less studied within the educational sciences or other fields, although their potential significance for children's learning and development seems apparent (although cf. Crowley & Jacobs, 2002; Van Oers, 1998). As part of a long-term effort to understand and study such activities (Hilppö, 2017), in this chapter we are asking how these self-initiated dance performances (and other children's projects) could be understood and conceptualized from a cultural-historical perspective. Furthermore, we are also interested in exploring what is the potential of these projects, as activities inspired by official educational activities but developed by children on their own right, have for children's learning and development.

Before exploring these questions more deeply (and providing our answers), we have to set the stage and explain our own understanding of the cultural-historical framework and its central elements that are most relevant for our arguments. In the next section, we will elaborate the following three premises, 1) that human activities are object-oriented (Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 1999); 2) that children's learning and development are structured by the various opportunities offered and demands placed on them by different activities that constitute their everyday lives (Hedegaard & Flee, 2012); and 3) that the relative importance of various activities for children's development changes between different historical periods and within ontogenesis (Beach, 1995). After this, we will explain and elaborate our notion of transitional activities as an intermediated theoretical conceptualization that helps us to understand children's projects from a cultural-historical perspective. We will close our chapter with a discussion of the role of early childhood educators and the pre-primary education in the emergence of children's projects.

### **Cultural-historical activity theory as a framework**

A central theoretical premise of the cultural-historical activity theory is that human activities are energized and driven by their object, the fundamental *raison d'être* or the what for of the activity. In cultural-historical terms, "*the object of an activity is its true motive*" (Leontiev, 1978, p. 62). These motives, like healing the ill, producing food or teaching children, represent vital needs of human societies, ones which the society constantly aspires to fulfill to secure its continuation. As such, these objects are understood as being inherently contradictory and complex assemblages of human and material actors that evolve through its inner dynamics but also by being connected to other activities (Engeström, 1987). Furthermore, although objects always appear as tangible things that are worked on, they also transcend their particular manifestations. As Engeström (1999, p. 170) explains:

*“The object is not reducible to the raw material given or the product achieved. It is understandable as the trajectory from raw material to product in the emerging context of its eventual use by another activity system. Thus, the object of a hospital may be characterized as the trajectory from symptoms to treatment outcomes in the context of the patient's life activity. The object is projective and transitory, truly a moving horizon. But it is also specific and concrete, crystallized, embodied and re-problematized in every single patient and illness entering the hospital, time and time again.”*

Importantly, from a cultural-historical activity theory perspective, the object of the activity drives the development of people's skills and competencies (e.g., Karpov, 2005). For children and adults alike, working to fulfill the requirements of the object calls on them to master new skills and tools, organize, collaborate and learn how to deal with the object. For example, to teach, teachers need to learn how to plan lessons, motivate students, manage teaching materials and master the substance of their curriculum. These demands for people's competence are not static, but are in motion and evolve with the society. With the growth of the public-school system and the size of the schools, teachers are more often called to collaborate with other teachers, professionals and parents to manage their students' learning. Moreover, technological advances are also pushing teachers to learn how to teach in an increasingly digital and connected world. In this sense, the object is a moving target, as Engeström (1999) argued.

The second cultural-historical premise central to our chapter is that children's learning and development are structured by the multiple institutions, their objects and associated activities that constitute the children's everyday lives (e.g., Hedegaard & Fleer, 2012). Between getting out of bed and going to sleep, children move across many institutions and take part in their activities. At home, this can mean taking part in preparing dinner, playing games or taking care of pets. In pre-primary education, circle time, free play, gym, or making art or crafts, each activity presents opportunities and demands for the children, requiring their engagement, developing and guiding their skills. According to Hedegaard & Fleer (2012) each institution, its practices, has its own cultural-historical tradition, which reflects both the function the institution serves in society as well as the local contingencies the institution has adapted to. By participating in these institutional activities, Hedegaard (2012) maintains, the children take part in the creating conditions for their own learning and development as well maintaining the activities and the institutions themselves (see also, Rogoff 2003). Importantly, demands and opportunities for learning and development do not emerge just from the activities themselves, but also from the tensions and contradictions between them. For example, the way in which children are required to participate in school might be significantly different to the expectations they face at home or with their peers (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2010; cf. Christensen, 2009). Moreover, these differences in expectations and demands and how intensively they are experienced relative to the socio-economic, ethnic or other status of the child's family (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). For children coming from a middle class, western cultural background, common educational practices, like the Initiate-Response-Feedback/Evaluation (IRF/E) classroom routine (e.g., Mehan, 1979), are more familiar than to others (e.g., Calarco, 2014).

However, not all activities children engage in during their everyday life are developmentally equal in their impact. Rather, some activities have a more dominant role in shaping and directing children's development than other activities they engage in at the same age and hence conceptualized as *leading activities* (e.g., El'konin, 1972; Leont'ev, 1981). This will be the third cultural-historical premise our work will draw on. Such activities, like socio-dramatic play for preschool age children or object-centered joint activity with toddlers have been shown to have a more dominant role in shaping and directing children's development than other activities they engage in at the same age (e.g., Manuilenko, 1975; Karpov, 2005). Accordingly, the succession of leading activities forms the basis for a generalized description of children's developmental pathway from birth to adulthood, its central phases and turning points (El'konin, 1972).

Importantly, this pathway, and the nature of the leading activities within it, is understood within cultural-historical theory as being historically, culturally, and societally situated (e.g., Karpov, 2005; Beach, 1995). In some societies and cultures, children take part in the work activities of their community at an early age (Lancy, 2018). In other societies and cultures, such as western European heritage cultures like Finland, children play and take part in different forms of formal education before transitioning to being employed (El'konin, 2005). Moreover, whether or not an activity can be seen to be leading a person's development depends on the position of the activity in their life course. Beach (1995), based on ethnographical work in rural Nepal, argued that for adult shopkeepers taking part in formal schooling to

learn literacy and numeracy, shop keeping remained their leading activity and which their learning served. For younger villagers, who had not yet entered the work force, studying in school acted as their leading activity.

A central aspect of leading activities is their internal developmental dynamic. Although each leading activity forms its own, stable developmental phase, they also set up children for the next developmental phase (El'konin, 1972). That is, each leading activity contains within itself the prerequisite aspects of the next, developmentally more progressed level. When toddlers learn to manipulate everyday objects, like kitchenware or toys, they also gradually become aware of the various activities and social roles associated with them, like cooking. This readies the children for imitating those activities and roles in role play. Then, as preschoolers, engagement in role play entails controlling and mastering one's own behavior and thus sets the children up for taking part in formal instructional practices in school (e.g. Bodrova, 2008). More broadly speaking, through engagement with each leading activity the objective, societal worlds of different human activities are gradually disclosed in more nuanced, detailed and transformed forms for the children.

### **Children's projects as transitional activities**

How do these three premises compare to the vignette provided earlier? As with any theory, would it be possible to generate what took place in kindergarten's gym with the three premises? Or, in the spirit of pragmatism (Rorty, 1991), do the premises help us highlight relevant issues for understanding and developing the praxis of pedagogy and its science? In general terms, we think so. The imaginary trip to Lapland served a specific pedagogical goal, learning about different regions of Finland, that was motivated by the object of the kindergarten's activities, namely educating and caring for the children. The particular shape these activities took was also contingent on the local history of the kindergarten and how the practitioners and the children together realized the activities with the social and material resources at their disposal. Furthermore, for the children, assuming the role of a traveler on make-believe skies moving across an imaginary snowy landscape could be seen as a manifestation of the leading activity of the preschool period. However, these observations remain at a macroscopic level. While accurate in general, when we look more closely at the emergence of the dance performances and what is said about them, the concepts lose their clarity, or at least grasp them only partially.

This is hardly surprising. In order to make up the core of their respective theories, central premises and related concepts need to be highly generalizable and hence selective in what they highlight. However, this can also be a source of substantial critique. Regarding leading activities, Gutierrez et al., (2019) point out that play as an activity is developmentally significant not just in childhood, but across the lifespan (see also Göncü & Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Holzman, 2009). From their perspective, seeing play as solely the realm of children, directs our attention away from how playful interactions can drive the development of youth or adults. It also leaves aside the fact that children's development in institutional settings is connected and relative to adult development and not separate from it (see i.e., Vygotsky, 1987; Ferholt, Nilsson & Lecusay, 2019; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). Conversely, from our perspective, an overt focus on pretend play as the leading force in early childhood might also direct attention away from other or related activities and their developmental potential. One avenue for solving such discrepancies would be to let go of rigid periodization regarding leading activities, as Gutierrez and her colleagues (2019) have, and instead emphasize that whichever activity leads development at a given time is a matter of empirical investigation. However, this solution runs the risk of overextending leading activity as a conceptual category and losing its conceptual nuance and sensitivity regarding the developmental impact of various activities. An activity can contribute to children's (and adults') development without being developmentally dominant at the same time in the broader picture, as Leont'ev (1965, cited in El'konin, 1972) reminds us.

An alternative strategy would be to develop so called *intermediate theoretical concepts* (Engeström, 2008; 2016). Such concepts are "*specific enough to be of use in the evaluation of observed phenomena, yet general enough to be incorporated into broader theoretical statements*" (Morrow & Muchinsky, 1980, p. 34) and thus also help us to connect more central theoretical premises and concepts to the specific empirical observations. What we argue in this chapter, is that the dance performances, and other similar children's projects, offer good grounds for such a concept, namely *transitional activities*. However, to substantiate this claim and explain our rationale for the term, we need to return to the pre-primary group and explain more about the dance performances and how they were created. The following narrative is told

from the perspective of the pre-service teacher who observed the children working on a number of different performances.

*When I came to the kindergarten, I noticed that some of the children liked to do different performances. Most of the performances were dancing to music. One of the children recruited their friends to dance with them, sometimes the whole pre-primary education group was dancing and sometimes the child performed alone. The performances had many roles. Some made tickets, some were the audience, others were musicians and other dancers. Once a group of eight kids made a performance for the whole kindergarten. They made invitations to each group and posters advertising the performance all over the kindergarten.*

There are several striking elements in the narrative. It seems that northern lights inspired an activity that was not just performing, but entailed setting the performances up and had multiple roles and a different division of labor between them. Moreover, the performances were not just for their own group, but also expanded to include also other groups from the kindergarten, at least as the audience of one of the performances. Importantly, the performances were created, and presumably also organized and directed, by the children. What makes this significant is that while creating similar performances for parents and other groups around major holidays (like Christmas) are a routine activity in Finnish early education, they are dominantly designed and organized by the early childhood educators. Overall, much like in play, creating, engaging and developing the performances arguably created a zone of proximal development for them and enable the children to “act a head taller” (Vygotsky, 1967).

But a head taller for why? What motivated the children to stretch themselves in this way? When asked for their reasons for performing, the child who had initially started the performances told the observing pre-service teacher that:

*I do the performances because I like it and I want to do them. They are fun to do. I like when I get to be with my friends and do performances for others. For a performance to be good, you need to rehearse a lot. Although you are a bit scared to perform, it does not matter. If you have trained hard, the performance will go well.*

What is particularly significant in the quote is at the end of the third sentence, “and do performances for others”. It suggests that while the performances were motivating in themselves, the fact that they were for others was also important. The performances seemed in part to “aspire to objective productiveness of its activity” (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 366), to creating experiences for others as well as for themselves. Discussing similar examples of dramatized and invented games from Russian preschools, Leont’ev suggested that: “*The dramatisation-game is thus a possible form of transition to productive activity, namely to aesthetic, activity with its characteristic motive of the effect on other people.* (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 352).

For Leont’ev such games and other similar activities represented breakdowns of the leading activity of the preschool period, namely roleplay. This characterization is problematic for us in three connected ways. First, there are several elements in the dramatization games that come close to pretend play (such as taking up roles) and therefore the line between pretend play and productive activity is in practice more fluid than clear-cut. Second, Leont’ev’s view arguably positions other activities as developmentally lesser and deficient in relation to “pure” role playing. Although breakdowns and disruptions are central to cultural-historical theorizing, especially regarding development, characterizing activities like the performances as non-functional downplays rather than highlights their possible developmental role. Finally, the characterization underscores Leont’ev’s (and also El’konin’s) narrow conceptualization of play and its motivating forces. As Lindqvist (1995) argues, Leont’ev saw play dominantly as stemming from children’s unrealized want to take part in activities that adults around them were engaged in and hence took the form of reproducing those activities through roleplay. This overlooks the fact that play is motivating also in itself, as something real, concrete and immediate for the participants themselves, even if imagined. If this aspect of play is taken into account, the basis for seeing activities like the performances or other children’s projects as breakdowns of play breaks down itself. Productiveness, in the form of aesthetic for oneself and the other players, is already present in the activity.

Instead of breakdowns, we suggest that children’s projects and other similar activities could be better conceptualized as *transitional activities*. This would highlight more how such activities seem to

entail aspects of conventional roleplay as well as of productive work toward which the children are stretching themselves. Importantly, this conceptualization would also capture the way in which such activities entail a reversal of roles between children and the adults, especially within institutional contexts. This kind of extended and shared play activities between adults and children have previously been studied and developed as *playworlds*, a specific form of adult-child joint play in the context of education (see Marjanovic-Shane et al., 2010; Ferholt et al., 2019). In the case of the dance performances this would mean highlighting how the dances were sparked by the adult-directed gym activity, but were created and led by the children. In addition, highlighting the transitional nature of the children's projects also emphasizes their possible temporary character and intermediate role in children's development as well as the notion's relation to the concept of leading activities. More generally, characterizing children's projects as transitional activities would also be in line with Vygotsky's conceptualization of human development as achronological and disproportionate (Kellogg & Veresov, 2020). In this sense, borrowing Vygotsky's metaphor (Vygotsky, 1987), children's projects could be described as the smallest crystals of ice that form in water before it turns into solid ice.

### **Children's projects as sites for agency and exploration**

Water molecules do not self-induce a change in their state, but children's projects do. They emerge through the agency of the children. In Leon'tev's terms, these agentic moments rise from "*an open contradiction*" between the child's position in the world of human relations and their experience of their own potential (Leon'tev, 1981, p. 361). What Leon'tev is essentially referring to here is the child's sense of agency (Hilppö, 2016), their first-person experience of themselves as an actor who can engage with their world and push into the opportunities they see as opening for them. Such experiences could emerge in multiple ways in children's everyday life. For example, learning to use a specific tool might prompt various ideas about how it could be used or engaging in a science experiment with one's teacher could generate ideas for re-creating it at home and adding something new to it. In the case of the dance performances, the imaginary trip to Lapland functioned as a formative activity for that experience. In broader cultural-historical terms, such an experience could be seen as particular kind of a "*need state*" (Bratus and Lishin, 1983; Miettinen, 2005) which through imagination gives rise to transformative agency (Rainio, 2008; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017) and a new motive, the dance performances.

However, the material practice of the new activity is always richer than the plans or ideas that precede it (Miettinen, 2005; Engeström, Nummijoki, Sannino, 2012). The idea of the dance performances does not entail all the possible ways in which it could be realized. Hence, pursuing a project like the dance performances means a process of exploration for the children, adventuring into the new activity as an open-ended pursuit. In practice, this exploration means discovering how the project can be realized and what it means for the persons involved, but also discovering what more can be done and what other options for realizing the project are in the world. As Leont'ev (1978, p. 161) pointed out, the further an activity develops, the more fully the original need that sparked the process is fulfilled. In this sense, while specific goals might be realized through engagement with the project, at the same time new goals and possibilities also appear and need to be explored. In the case of the dance performances, this could be seen with the gradual growth of the project. According to the pre-service teacher's narrative summary above, the performances eventually were not just about dancing to the audience, but also about generating a more encompassing experience with advertisement, tickets and playing music.

But pursuing the unfolding horizon of the project generates exploration also in another, more bounded sense. To highlight this, we must again return to the kindergarten in question and share another quote from the pre-service teacher who observed the development of the dance performances.

*When I got to see a number of consecutive performances, I noticed that the performances started coming together more and more. The kids came up with elements that they needed to do together and at the same time in the performances. They also started to pay more attention to the lyrics of the songs, to sing while dancing and enacting the lyrics.*

The fact that the performances were "*coming together more and more*" suggests that the performances were not static, the same performance each time around, but rather that they developed over time. This development of the children's project, being able to create more coherent, synchronized and deliberately

choreographed dance performances, is an indication of learning on part of the children. As Dewey (1910; e.g. Miettinen, 2000) argues, this kind of learning begins when something, a problem, disrupts our engagement with what we are doing and leads into exploring the cause of the disruption and possible solutions to it. This exploration starts with the formulation of a working hypothesis and then testing it, initially via thought experiments and then in action. If the tentative solution does not work, the process of exploring the problem is continued with knowledge gained from the first attempt. If the problem is solved, the participants move forward with the project and the experience of solving the issue turns into a resource for future problem solving. In this sense, given the tentativeness of each potential solution and how the problems are nested within the children's project as a whole, these problem-solving processes could be seen as smaller explorations in themselves (cf., Rantavuori, Engeström, Lipponen, 2016).

The explorations, either in their expanded or more bounded sense, do not emerge solely through the children's transformative acts. In the case of the dance performances, creating them also meant recruiting friends and the adults to work on the performances, as told by the pre-service teacher in her first quote above. Recruiting others highlights the children's relational agency (Edwards, 2005, p. 172), their *"capacity to work with others to expand the object that one is working on and trying to transform by recognising and accessing the resources that others bring to bear as they interpret and respond to the object."* This relational work is also important in order to stabilize the project as a new activity of the children's lives in early education. As we have argued elsewhere, agency is a complex and contradictory phenomenon (Rainio, 2010; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). While the enactment of agency can be understood as requiring a level of independency from one's immediate surroundings and standing out from one's community, at the same time it also stems from the community, for example in terms of the cultural tools and recognition given by the community. In the context of children's projects this means that although children might create and engage in a project on their own, the way in which others receive and recognize the project is similarly significant. Rainio's work (Rainio, 2008; 2010, see also Rajala, Kumpulainen, Rainio, Hilppö & Lipponen, 2016) suggests that dealing with such projects without undermining the agency of the children requires specific efforts and awareness from the teachers and other adults who become involved with the project. This need for pedagogical sensitivity and skill is accentuated even more when the project and its goals are not easy to understand from an adult perspective or push on what adults might regard as appropriate for children to do.

In other words, what is important is how the children's projects impact their social situation of development (Bozhovich, 2009). Are the children able to create new relationships or change the quality of existing ones through the projects? What the case of the performances suggests is that the Finnish kindergartens in general and pre-primary education in specific might potentially be well suited to accommodate children's projects and offer good grounds for their development. Next, we will explore and discuss aspect of the Finnish early education and especially pre-primary education that seem to use relevant for the emergence of children's projects.

### **Finnish pre-primary education as a context for children's projects**

Over the recent years, the Finnish educational system has enjoyed intense national and international attention, and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector along with it. This has resulted in multiple descriptions and attempts to characterize its main differences from other national systems (eg., Hujala, et al. 2009; Einarsdottir, et al. 2015). In her recent review, Kumpulainen (2018) argues that the Finnish system does not have any one element that makes it unique. Rather, the merits of the Finnish ECEC lie in several intertwined values that permeate the different ECEC services and the educational system as a whole. According to her, these values are 1) the system's principled nature, i.e., the way in which education and care are embedded within the Nordic social welfare state model and its legislation, 2) mutual trust between families, the government, educators and children, 3) child-centered pedagogics and 4) the opportunity to personalize and build individualized support for children's learning and development. Although these values work in concert and form a complete whole, we will elaborate more on the last two which we believe are the most impactful concerning children's projects.

The child-centered nature of Finnish ECEC is well displayed in the current National Core Curriculum. In its opening statements, the curriculum outlines that its mission is to *"promote children's holistic growth, development and learning in collaboration with their guardians"* and that *"Knowledge and skills acquired in early childhood education and care strengthen children's participation and active agency"*



*in the society*” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 12). Later, when discussing learning in ECEC settings more specifically, the curriculum states that “*In early childhood education and care, the previous experiences of children, their interests, and their competences are the starting point for learning.*” and in that the curriculums, the “*conception of learning is also based on a view of the child's active agency.*” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 18). In practice, this emphasis has meant that children are invited to participate in creating and assessing activities with the early childhood educators and that their interests and lifeworlds are taken as a starting point for the activities (e.g., Alasuutari, Karila, Alila, & Eskelinen, 2014; Kangas, 2016). While these educational policies and guidelines have not always translated into professional practices as such (Kangas & Lastikka, 2019; also Paananen, 2017), the child-centered nature of the Finnish ECEC means that children have both the opportunity and the support they might need for creating and engaging in their own projects in pre-primary education.

This opportunity and support is further accentuated by the number of structural elements aimed at securing individualized care and support for learning and development. In addition to families having the several options to choose between the type of care best for their child, Kumpulainen (2018) highlights the individualized education plan (IEP) negotiated between the parents, the child and the early childhood educators as an important tool in this regard. The IEP’s goal is to act as a formative bridge between the child’s current interests, their possible developmental needs and the ECEC curriculum and help tailor the pedagogical practices for each child (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). Again, while the IEP’s are not always taken into account in everyday practice and can become stagnant documents (Paananen & Lipponen, 2018; Heiskanen, 2019), they do offer a substantial opportunity to bridge children’s lifeworlds and deepen the connections between home and pre-primary education. In relation to children’s projects, this means that projects created at home can more easily travel to the early education setting (and vice versa) and children can recruit more materials and support for the projects.

There are also other contributing aspects that make Finnish pre-primary education a formative setting for children’s projects. The Finnish pre-primary education, like in other countries, is situated between early education and care services and elementary education, as such a transitional institution itself, and arguably a mix between the care and play oriented kindergarten groups for 0 – 5-year-olds and primary education with its emphasis on formal instruction. For example, approximately 700 hours per year are used for different pre-primary activities, which breaks down to four hours per day (Kumpulainen, 2018). Although only this part of the day is mandatory for all 6-year-olds, most of them attend for the full day. In addition, in most cases pre-primary education groups are situated in the kindergarten’s facilities (Kumpulainen, 2018). This means that the schedule and daily rhythm has openings and room for self-generated activities during which the children have access to the pre-primary education materials as well as other resources of the kindergarten. Taken together with the trust between adults and children and the other values and associated institutional practices, Finnish pre-primary education could arguably be seen as an open learning environment (Hannafin et al., 2013) in which children can pursue their interests and ideas in a setting that both sparks and supports them. As such, as a learning environment the pre-primary education would exemplify Dewey’s notion of a cultivating environment in which “*one thing needful in education is secured*” (Dewey, 1913, p. 97).

The extent to which primary school practices offer students a possibility to occupy a new social position in their life has a significant impact on how they come to value and engage with formal instruction at school (Bozhovich, 2009). According to Bozhovich (2009), preschool children dominantly strive for a new social position toward the end of their pre-primary education year and if this new position is not realized by what school has to offer to them, they lose their interest in school. One possible way to counter this would be to allow for children to take their projects to primary school and support the projects’ growth in a new institutional setting. In primary education, with its different resources and opportunities, children’s projects could be taken as a potential nexus where the official school curriculum, children’s own interests and their everyday lives could meet.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have argued the need for a new intermediate concept, transitional activities, to theorize and describe children’s self-generated activities, like children’s projects, that are relevant for their learning and development, but which fall outside existing conceptualizations within cultural-historical theorizing. To substantiate and ground our argument, we presented a vignette of a children’s dance project from a Finnish

pre-primary education group. We also argued that the Finnish ECEC, especially pre-primary education, could be seen as a good formative context for different kinds of children's projects and suggested that the projects could also serve children's transition from pre-primary education to primary school.

Our formulations are still tentative and preliminary and as such need to be further substantiated through future work, or refuted altogether. This work could take several directions. One possible avenue could be following children's projects in the everyday life of early education settings and creating comprehensive research designs around them. A central challenge for this work would be identifying children projects as they emerge and following how they are received and how they possibly evolve. Much like with interest-driven engagement (Valsiner, 1992), the projects possibly become visible only after-the-fact, after they have been created and worked on by the children. Furthermore, if the projects travel and are worked on in other settings, like the children's home, following them might provide an additional challenge. However, collecting more detailed ethnographic data on the projects and how children engage with them would allow for more closer level analysis of how children organize their work on the project and what they learn through their engagement. An additional direction would be to engage in similar efforts in other open learning environments in primary school (see, Hilppö & Stevens, submitted; Hilppö et al., 2016), makerspaces, libraries (Parek & Gee, 2019) or even in more conventional, but less constrained educational settings like craft education. There are also indications that children's projects and the learning connected to them could be studied in non-western and non-educational contexts (e.g., de Leon, 2015).

While these avenues present enticing prospects, a caveat is also in order. Across educational sectors we are currently witnessing a trend of personalization, increasing accountability and escalating performance pressures (e.g., Langemeyer, 2006; OECD, 2017; Chimirri, 2019). In this climate, uncritical uptake of children's projects runs the risk of turning them from an activity enjoyed in itself into a measure of control and formal educational achievement, one more way of sorting the successful from the failed (Hilppö & Stevens, 2020; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). While daunting, this risk should not deter researchers (us and others) from continuing what we have begun in this chapter. From our perspective, children's projects and other transitional activities can be significant sites for supporting children and letting them freely engage in things that they find interesting and exciting. In times that fill children's lives with other people's agendas and requirements, projects can offer children with a possible respite and a chance to grow something more on their own terms. This is a captivating opportunity not just for the children themselves, but also for us adults who live with them.

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