



Assembled policies: The Finnish case of restricted entitlement to early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we utilize an application of Deleuze and Quattari's (1987) concept of assemblage to explore and better understand the interconnectedness and materiality of the policies of early childhood education and care (ECEC). To exemplify how directing our focus to assemblages can further the understanding of policies in the everyday life of families, we will present a Finnish case of entitlement to ECEC. Since 1996, children under school age have enjoyed the entitlement to full-day ECEC provided by local authorities. In 2016, the Finnish parliament enforced new legislation that allows municipalities to limit this entitlement to 20 hours per week unless the child's parents work or study full-time. By drawing on interviews with parents of one-year-old children (n=14), we will illuminate the component parts of ECEC arrangements. The case offers empirical insights in terms of how constructing ECEC policies as "assembled" can aid us in contesting two beliefs that have a firm position in the public debate: the idea of the parent's "free choice" and the notion of national policies having a hegemonic role in determining opportunities for agency.

Keywords: early childhood education; childcare; policy; assemblage

Introduction

Assemblage as a lens on policy

“Choice” is currently part of the dominant policy discourses in the field of childcare and early childhood education and care (ECEC) in many Western societies. It is claimed that families should be provided with the opportunity to make individual choices concerning childcare and ECEC arrangements. However, earlier studies on choice as a policy discourse and a mechanism of public policy expose an ambivalence, uncertainty, and contradiction around the issue of choice: there is a tension between the positive connotation of choice as an abstract principle and the negative impacts or anxieties that arise when choice is concretized (e.g., Barnes & Prior, 1995; Clarke, Smith, & Vidler, 2006; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2010). The policy discourse emphasizes individualistic notions of choice that obscure how social structures influence our lives (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2001). It is commonly accepted that children’s ECEC arrangements are influenced by national ECEC policies. National policies provide a context for making ECEC arrangements. The various cultural-material conditions for making “choices” regarding ECEC arrangements from the viewpoint of individual families have received sparse attention: ECEC and childcare policies have not been widely considered from the perspective of the everyday life of the people influenced by them (however, see e.g., Stratigos, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014). The present article brings out the complexity of childcare and ECEC arrangements, which in political discussions are often considered as straightforward matters of values and national policies. We argue that the concept of assemblage introduced by Deleuze and Quattari (1987) helps us understand this complexity. The objective of the article is to highlight how policies become materialized in a complex interaction between human and non-human, discursive and material factors or entities.

Recent discussions in education, social studies of childhood, and children’s geographies have shown interest in the materiality of educational practices (see e.g., Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Prout, 2005; Woodyer, 2008). It has been noted that social processes, such as the rationalizations of ECEC arrangements that are examined in this article, are interrelated with multiple material entities, such as places and non-human objects (Robertson, 2010). The materiality of policies is dealt with more rarely. Aligning with the presupposition of social processes being created in the intra-action between multiple material entities, we suggest that conceptualizing policies as assemblages will reveal the heterogeneousness of the constraints families face when making ECEC arrangements. Furthermore, such a conceptualization helps us question the hegemonic policy discourse of ECEC arrangements being the outcome of individual choices in a uniform policy space.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of assemblage, and especially DeLanda's (2006) reading of it, entails the importance of socio-material practices to lived spaces. It means that we conceptualize the possibilities of making ECEC arrangements as being an interrelated combination of, among other things, national policies, the physical environment, context-specific regulations, and cultural norms. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 406), "An assemblage [is] every constellation of singularities and traits deduced from the flow – selected, organized, stratified – in such a way as to converge . . . artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable invention." It highlights the situated contingency and interplay of manifold and heterogeneous entities that work together for a certain time (DeLanda, 2006). These heterogeneous entities can include utterances and meanings, but also other things, as explicated by Deleuze (2007, 177): "In assemblages you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs" or political imaginations, rationalities, technologies, infrastructures, and agents toward steering individuals and groups in particular directions as explicated by DeLanda, 2006). The concept resembles Latour's conceptualization of the actor network, a complex web of "social actors" and "nonsocial actants" in which everybody and everything in the network are members and mediators who shape and transform artefacts and discourses (Latour, 1987). To illustrate the usefulness of the concept of assemblage in examining ECEC policy, we will first map the kinds of entities involved in parents' enunciations concerning the care arrangements of their one-year-old children and the roles of the limitations to entitlement in these assemblages. The focus is on the connections between national policies and the cultural, non-human, and other material forces that come together in the temporally and geopolitically situated ECEC arrangements.

Mapping elements of the assemblage provides us with tools to engage with the question of *striated space* when parents organize the care of their children. Deleuze and Guattari elaborated the concept of "striated spaces" particularly in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The concepts of striated and smooth space highlight the relations we have with space. While smooth spaces allow transformations to occur – in that sense, they are dynamic and open – striated spaces are often hierarchical, rule-intensive, strictly bounded, and confining (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). These conceptual tools help us illustrate how complicated the idea of "freedom to choose" in families' ECEC arrangements is in practice. In what follows, we will explicate in a more detailed manner the national policy of entitlement to ECEC in Finland.

National policy of entitlement to early childhood education and care in Finland

In order to achieve the aims of the article, we will focus on a particular ECEC policy in Finland, namely the restriction of entitlement to ECEC that took place in 2016. In Finland, ECEC is organized as integrated services for 0–5-year-olds. The governance of ECEC forms a twofold system where national-level governance and the municipalities have their own roles. The municipalities have independence in deciding on the provision of ECEC, as long as they fulfil the statutory demands, for example concerning staff qualifications and the child–staff ratio (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 1973). Since 1990, children under three years of age have enjoyed the entitlement to full-day ECEC provided by local authorities. From 1996, the entitlement covered all children under primary school age. This entitlement is known in Finland as “the subjective right to daycare.”

In 2016, the Finnish parliament enforced new legislation that allows municipalities to limit the entitlement to ECEC to 20 hours per week (either four hours per day, five days a week, or full-day attendance for a couple of days per week) unless the child’s parents work or study full-time. This was done due to the government’s aim of balancing the budget (Government proposal 112/2015). In part-time ECEC (i.e., under 20 hours per week), the child–staff ratio for over 3-year olds is 1:13, while it is in 1:8 in full-day ECEC. Thus, the restriction allows municipalities to have more children using ECEC services with fewer personnel. However, full-time ECEC was guaranteed upon application by the parents for those children considered to benefit from it for developmental, social, or other reasons.

Municipalities have the opportunity to decide whether to enforce the restriction. Some municipalities used the opportunity to limit the entitlement in full, some provided more than the minimum number of hours but still limited the entitlement, and some did not enforce the restriction at all.

Data and method

Conceptualizing policy as an assemblage means we focus on how the restriction of entitlement to ECEC is connected to other entities of social reality – both human and non-human – when the restriction is enacted. We needed to approach it from the viewpoint of the everyday life of the families potentially encountering the restriction policy when making decisions concerning childcare and education arrangements. The data source for this article consists of the interviews of 67 parents of 1–2-year-old children. We focused on this age-group of children because when the child is around one year old, the

entitlement to parental leave ends in Finland, and parents make their first decisions concerning institutional childcare and education. For example, they need to consider whether to continue taking care of the child at home using the support of the child home care allowance or to return to working life. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Selected for further investigation were all cases in which a child would be entitled to only part-time ECEC if the municipality had limited the entitlement, for example, families in which one of the parents did not work or study full-time and cases in which the ECEC arrangements were in some way influenced by the restriction policy. There were 14 cases of this type from eight different municipalities. As the concept of assemblage was used as a lens for the analysis, we mapped the components connected to the use of the restricted entitlement to ECEC as an inscription for action, as well as the relations between them. To address the aim of the study, we examined the data with the following questions: 1) What are the component parts that influence families' ECEC arrangements? 2) What role does the restriction policy play in these arrangements?

All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the families. For the same reason, we have slightly altered some of the details, such as the ages and professions of the participants. The excerpts are not direct translations – for example, we have left out some of the filler words.

Assemblages of childcare arrangement as striated spaces

Our analysis shows that the ECEC arrangements of the families consist of various interrelated entities that become assembled. They include gender roles, access to the ECEC services (availability, distance of the services, fees), the parents' presuppositions concerning ECEC services, the work situation, legislation concerning different kinds of monetary benefits, other kinds of different resources the families have available, and the children's and parents' characteristics, needs, and desires. The way in which entities of (the policy space as) the assemblage – what kinds of interconnected material and discursive entities play part in their ECEC and childcare arrangements – can be mapped is exemplified in the following description of the childcare arrangements of the Korhonen family.

The Korhonen family recently moved to a rural municipality in Finland. The municipality has enforced the restriction to access to ECEC. The family has three children under school age. The mother looks after them at home. The description of the Korhonen family's childcare arrangements illustrates that there are many interrelated elements entangled in the childcare arrangements. It can be seen as an assemblage - a relational

construct that is comprised of heterogeneous and emergent component parts (DeLanda, 2006)

Monetary benefits play a part in the Korhonen family's care arrangements. The family receives the child home care allowance. In Finland, families with children are entitled to various forms of financial assistance provided by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). The child home care allowance that the mother receives is available to parents of children under three years who do not attend municipal ECEC. The allowance consists of a basic amount, which was €341.27 per month in 2016 and an additional care supplement that is affected by family size and income. The maximum amount of the care supplement is €182.64 per month (Kela, 2019)¹. Municipalities can top this up by paying a municipal supplement that varies between €50 and €300 per month (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2018). The child home care allowance can also be paid for other siblings of the under 3-year-old child who are below school age and are looked after at home. The home care allowance for siblings was €102.17 per month for each child under three years old and €63.93 per month for each child aged 3–6 years old. Payment of the child home care allowance is stopped for all children in the family when the youngest child reaches three years of age.

The municipality in which the Korhonen family resides does not offer any municipal supplement to the home care allowance. Nevertheless, the mother of the Korhonen family reports that the child home care allowance, including the additional allowance for the siblings, plays a significant role in the family's childcare arrangements, as we can see from the following excerpts:

Interviewer: *What kinds of things are topical for your family at the moment? You moved recently?*

Mother Korhonen: *Well, all of those practical things. Wherever you live you have to get the finances to work and get the kids cared for and so on.*

...

Mother Korhonen: *In our case, there is no chance of [utilizing ECEC services] if that means we lose the home care allowance.*

...

¹ The median of total earnings in Finland in 2017 was €3,018 euros per month while the median of earnings of females was €2,771 per month (Statistics Finland, 2019).

Interviewer: *If you think about your life four years from now, what kind of situation will you be in then?*

Mother Korhonen: *I haven't thought about it really, but I think that I need to have a job. The home care allowance will end at some point. Then it may be time to think about something.*

The mother notes that the financial situation is one of the top concerns for the family at the moment. She also states that it is not possible to utilize ECEC, since then the family would not be eligible for the home care allowance. It is, in her rationalization, an important part of the family's finances and care arrangements. Further, she states in that she needs to find a job after the home care allowance ends. In her rationalization, the home care allowance has enabled her to look after the children at home.

The work arrangements of the father are related to the Korhonen family's desires concerning the childcare arrangements. Earlier, the father worked long hours. The mother reports this having been challenging for the family, as the next excerpt shows:

Well, in the past, he [the father] had a different employer, so he had unfeasible workdays. It was really challenging for our family. Now he has another employer and he can finish work at half past four. And it has worked out better for us.

...

Previously, his commute might have been quite long, but he always came home for the night. He did not need to be away on business overnight. Previously it was tough. He worked late at night. But now, I'm satisfied with the situation.

The mother describes her husband's working hours in his earlier job as unreasonable. She clarifies that it was especially challenging for the family. She highlights this by repeating it, stating that it has been hard when he worked late at night. Now, when the father is able to end the work at half past four, the situation works out fine.

Since the mother does not have a vocational degree and has dropped out of university studies, she believes it will be hard to find work where she would receive more salary than her husband, who works in the construction industry.

But really, I have nothing else than a high school education. It does not pay to go to work if the husband already has a better-paid job. It is not worth shaking up the system.

Ideals concerning good parenthood thus also play a part in the family's ECEC arrangements – it is one of the entities of an assemblage (DeLanda, 20116). The above excerpt contains the idea that the mother assumes there should be at least one parent at

home with the children – if she worked, then the father should stay at home. Later, she underlines this:

I would happily be at home, yeah, I think it's important to be at home with your own children.

She also states that she is not going to continue her studies because the university is located in a different part of the country and the family is not planning to return there. Another reason is that less demanding work would allow her to concentrate on her family:

Mother Korhonen: *I studied at the university for one year but I did not finish. We do not have any intentions to return. I have abandoned all dreams of making a career.*

Interviewer: *What did you study?*

Mother Korhonen: *I studied French to become a teacher. I have abandoned all dreams of making a career. It is not important to our family, in a sense, to acquire any higher career. It is enough that I have a small job and the rest of time it will be nice to concentrate on family matters.*

The mother ties dropping out of university studies and being satisfied with a less demanding job in the future to her strong emphasis on family life. She constructs them as being polar opposites. This is not surprising in the Finnish context. Caring for small children at home is popular among Finnish families, as homecare has been constructed as ideal for small children by Finnish parents (Mahon et al., 2012; Repo, 2016).

The assemblage of the ECEC arrangements also include other services that may or may not be available. According to the Social Welfare Act of 2014, municipalities are obliged to organize social services for their residents. This means providing social assistance to persons living in the municipality; organizing guidance and counselling on social welfare benefits and other forms of social security and their use; providing information on social welfare and other forms of social security; and taking measures to improve social conditions generally and eliminate social grievances in the area.

The Korhonen family has had the opportunity to utilize family work services. In Finland, these kinds of services are called preventive child welfare services. This refers to the special support provided for families within basic public services, for example at maternity and child health clinics, and within other healthcare services, family centers, education institutions, and youth work programs. Children and families using preventive child welfare services do not need to be child welfare clients. The work is carried out as part of the services intended for children and families instead. However, there are no

national guidelines on how this kind of support should be organized. The mother of the Korhonen family reports that earlier, they were allowed to use an ECEC center located five kilometers from their home for five hours, twice a week for a three-month period free of charge and without losing the home care allowance.

Our children were still in daycare last summer. It was a municipality-supported thing. They [the children] got a place free of charge. But now such support has ended and it is no longer offered here. The children really liked going there. They had friends and there was variation in our everyday life. For them it was very good, and of course, from my point of view, I got somehow larger reserves of strength to care for the children.

As the excerpt shows, the mother reports that there has been a change in the local policy. It was not possible for them to receive such a benefit any more, even though both the children and the mother had found the arrangement helpful. The mother reports that now they receive help from family work instead, meaning that a family worker visits them and looks after the children approximately three hours per week.

Interviewer: *Do you think it has been a good service?*

Mother Korhonen: *Yes, although it is not that much. Usually, it is three hours a week. Anyway, it gives me a bit of extra strength. So if I have plans of my own, or I need to go to see a doctor or dentist or whatever, I can go. Also, if I feel that I am in a need of a little free time, then I get to go somewhere.*

We can see that even if the mother would perhaps prefer having access to ECEC services, she constructs the family work as being important for fostering her own wellbeing – it gives her extra strength. Thus, even though she states she feels exhausted, she still holds that it is possible to care for her children at home. In this way, the family work provided by the municipality is entangled with their ECEC arrangements. The excerpts show well how assemblages are in constant flux, meaning that an entity of an assemblage may be detached from it and other entities plugged into it. Interactions within an assemblage change (DeLanda, 2006).

The Korhonen family had tried to find alternatives to the ECEC center. They had utilized open ECEC, which was located in an adjacent municipality 20 kilometers from their home. Open ECEC consists of activities that are often intended for children who are cared for at home. There are no national-level regulations regarding staff qualifications, child–staff ratios, or fees for open ECEC services in the same way there are for ECEC centers. Often there are no meals provided for the children attending open ECEC. In Finland, open ECEC is usually organized by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or municipalities, although there is no obligation for the municipalities to organize such services.

We tried out open daycare to meet other children. And yes, it was really good.

...

Of course, if you need and want to leave your children there, it will become expensive quite quickly. At least if you have three of them.

The mother stated that open ECEC was good for the children, since they were able to meet other children. It was free of charge if a parent stayed with the children, but there was an hour-based fee for each child if the parent left to run errands. Since the open ECEC was located in a nearby municipality, a car was needed to go there.

There are some buses, but they do not drive here very often. There is no public transportation.

...

The distances are... No. The car is necessary here.

The mother explained that the family lives in the area where owning a car is indispensable because the local public transport is infrequent or non-existent. Distances are long. This is also part of the family's ECEC assemblage:

There would be a family daycare in the city center. It is at least something, but how can you get a care place for your children if you don't have a car? If you'd like to [use it], it would be quite a rigmarole in practice.

The long distances and lack of car and services close by requires prior planning and arrangements in order to maintain both the children's and adults' social relationships.

Usually, we try to arrange something every week so that we don't just stay inside the house. In the summer, when the weather was good, we spent time outdoors, of course, but it always depended on the day.

...

If you need a friend, you have to go and arrange it, find a place to visit. Certainly, we have places to visit and the children love these visits.

These excerpts show how policies become entangled with very material entities such as cars, places and distances. This is how the concept of assemblage opens up a new way of examining the complex relations between heterogeneous entities (DeLanda, 2006).

In addition, characterizations concerning the children of the family were part of the ECEC assemblages. For example, the mother states she would prioritize an ECEC center because

she believes that her children would enjoy ECEC activities. According to her, her children are so lively that they need action and personnel who are able to organize various activities.

I'd like to our children to get a place in an ECEC center because there are lots of children, and our children are so lively and boisterous that they need to be able to run around and socialize.

Overall, the description of the Korhonen family's childcare arrangements illustrates the elements of striated space. Firstly, striated space is rule-intensive, and secondly, it is confining (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As the case of the Korhonen family exemplifies, the assemblage of care arrangements ties together both local regulations and national legislations. For example, the child home care allowance is available to parents of children under three years who do not attend municipal (local) daycare. The caregiver can be the child's parent, another caregiver, or a private daycare provider. In addition, local adaptations to the social welfare act affect how families are supported and what kinds of services are provided for them and are available in general, constraining the Korhonen family's childcare arrangements. The family's childcare arrangements can be described as being strictly confining, which is also a sign of striated space (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The resources of the family – such as access to transportation – entangled with their location in relation to their social relations, the services available, and temperaments of their children, and this formed the space the mother depicts as bounded. The assemblage did not seem to leave much leeway for other kinds of arrangements. The Korhonen's case is characterized by conflicting flows of culturally constructed desires: the municipal officials'/policymakers' desire to balance the budget by reducing the services offered for families, the family's desire to have at least one parent at home with the children, the children's desire for stimulating and inspiring activities, and the mother's understandable desire for some time to herself to gather strength and energy. We suggest that *the simultaneous existence of conflicting desires* could be considered one of the key elements of striated space.

Childcare arrangements in general can be described as striated spaces. They are dependent on the parents' employment situation; the location of the family home (how the services are organized, situated, and available in that particular municipality); the number and ages of the children; the family's access to different kinds of resources, such as information, vehicles, and care assistance; and the desires of different stakeholders. All the 14 cases we examined somewhat resembled this kind of striated space. Some of the interviewees described their ECEC arrangements by stating "this was the only option we had" or "there was no other option." These were striated spaces regardless of the

municipality's decision concerning the restriction of the entitlement to ECEC. We will examine this notion further in the next section.

Restriction of the entitlement as part of care and education arrangements

In this section, we illustrate how the concept of assemblage leads us to examine the interconnections between different entities in social reality – in this case, the interrelation of the restriction policy with other entities of the assemblage – and the various functions the entities have in the everyday life of families. This shows us the contingent nature of childcare policies. An assemblage represents a gathering together of political imaginations, rationalities, technologies, infrastructures, and agents toward steering individuals and groups in particular directions. The relations between these entities are not “logically necessary” but “contingently obligatory” (DeLanda, 2006, 11). We cannot know beforehand how a particular entity of social reality – a certain national policy in this case – might interact with other entities (DeLanda, 2006), such as the culturally constructed desires of human actors or institutional practices. When examining the role the restriction has in these cases, we identified four cases where the restriction plays a part in the assemblage and ten cases where the restriction was not described as having any role in the family's ECEC arrangements.

In six of the ten cases where the restriction is not described as playing any part in the family's ECEC arrangements, the family was entitled to only part-time ECEC, meaning that the restriction had been enacted in their municipalities. These six cases illustrate that the restriction does not necessarily have a direct influence on the child's ECEC arrangements. What is common to these cases is that parents stated that they preferred caring for their children at home. This is in line with earlier studies, which have recognized the Finnish cultural construction of good motherhood featuring the idea of caring for children at home (Närvi, 2014). The mothers constructed their desire concerning the ECEC arrangements by aligning with the boundaries the restriction had set. None of them used even part-time ECEC services, even when entitled to them.

Furthermore, the care arrangement in one case was influenced by the restriction, even though the family was entitled to full-time ECEC. Thus, even having the entitlement to full-time ECEC did not guarantee that the restriction would not influence the care arrangements. We will unravel this case a little later in this article.

In what follows, we will focus on the cases where the restriction was part of the family's childcare assemblage and describe how the policy of entitlement was entangled with other component parts of the childcare assemblage.

The Mäkinen family comprises a father, a mother, and two-year-old Aatos. The father works full-time in a city approximately 90 minutes' drive from their home. The mother has been unemployed for almost four years. Earlier, she had been a student in higher education. The right to study is time-limited and her time was running out. Thus, she had resumed her studies to finalize her diploma work. Despite this, her official status is unemployed – she receives unemployment benefits and studies part-time.

In Finland, the unemployed are eligible for unemployment security. The purpose of unemployment security is to compensate for the financial losses caused by unemployment. Unemployment security aims to provide financial support while a person is looking for work and to improve the individual's capacity to reenter the job market. In order to receive the benefits, the unemployed individual must register as an unemployed jobseeker and look for full-time work. The unemployed jobseeker can study on a part-time basis, as the mother of the Mäkinen family does. The unemployment benefit is higher than the student allowance that the mother might be eligible for if she studied full-time (Unemployment Security Act, 2002).

In order to make it possible for the mother to finish her diploma work, the Mäkinen family decided that Aatos should attend ECEC. He attends ECEC two days per week. The municipality where the Mäkinen family lives has restricted the right to ECEC to 20 hours per week for families where a parent does not work or study full-time. The municipality is obliged to offer at least two options (with the restricted hours) to families – one half-day option and one half-week option. The options offered to the Mäkinen family are portrayed in gray in Figure 1.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8 am – 12 pm					
12 pm – 4pm					

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8 am – 12 pm					
12 pm – 4 pm					

Figure 1. The options for using the 20 hours of ECEC offered to the Mäkinen family.

The parents chose the latter option: Aatos is entitled to attend ECEC for half of the week, on Wednesday afternoon and all day on Thursday and Friday. The mother states that the first option – four hours a day, five days a week – does not suit them well. She is applying for jobs and working on her diploma work, both of which require time for concentration,

and thus, she states that she feels the longer continuous hours of attendance work best for them. The father's commute and the location of the house make it difficult for the family to arrange time for the mother's studies and job applications. The Mäkinen family would prefer Aatos to attend ECEC on Wednesday morning rather than in the afternoons, since the afternoon program in the ECEC center consists mainly of naptimes and snacks. The family states in the interview that there is no point in Aatos attending ECEC only at those hours. The mother says that Aatos would not benefit from attending for those hours, and this kind of differently structured day and change in routine would only confuse him. Thus, Aatos usually attends ECEC only on Thursdays and Fridays. In the next excerpt, the mother describes the situation.

The municipality has decided that if a child attends ECEC in the latter half of the week, he may be brought to the care on Wednesday afternoon. He is entitled to attend from noon to 4 pm. Wednesday mornings were not an option [for them]. In my opinion, the time slot given is extremely bad for a child of this age. In practice, he goes there to eat and then he is put to bed right after that. He can sleep at home. I protested and sent feedback. I spoke with the manager and she stated that it is a municipal guideline and there is no flexibility. That is why he attends only on Thursdays and Fridays. We do not use the half day [on Wednesdays]. I felt that it is better for us that he sleeps at home rather than at the ECEC center.

The policy of restriction is entangled with the geopolitical and economic, temporal situation of the municipality. Together they form a very specific type of policy space. The municipality where the Mäkinen family lives has gone through serious changes in its economic structure. A large multinational company has closed down a unit in the area, resulting in (in addition to job losses for both the Mäkinen family's parents) a collapse in local tax revenues. It is not surprising that the time of attendance in ECEC has been restricted for economic reasons. It makes it possible to enroll more children, because two children can share one place, with one attending for the first half of the week and the other for the second half. The legislation regulates the number of children in one child group, so the municipality officials interpret this to mean that the children sharing one place cannot attend ECEC at the same time. Thus, it is not possible for Aatos to attend ECEC on Wednesday mornings – another child is using the service at that time.

The Nieminen family consists of a mother, father, and two children – Lilli, who is nearly three years old, and her baby sister. The mother cares for them at home. Lilli attends ECEC for half of the week in the same way as Aatos Mäkinen. Before the baby was born, both parents worked full-time and Lilli attended ECEC full-time. When the baby was born and the mother began parental leave, the parents wanted Lilli to continue in ECEC part-time. The parents reported that the main reason for this was that if they canceled Lilli's ECEC place, there was no guarantee that Lilli and her sister would later receive places in the

same ECEC center. The municipality's policy is that if a child already has a sibling in the ECEC center, she/he takes precedence over other applicants. Thus, according to the family, it is more probable that they can both have a place in the preferred ECEC center if Lilli continues in ECEC part-time.

The Nieminen family's municipality has interpreted the legislation differently from the municipality where the Mäkinen family lives. Children who share one place can both attend ECEC on Wednesday mornings. Neither of the children need to attend ECEC on Wednesday afternoon, as the next excerpt shows:

Interviewer: Is there a possibility that Lilli would be there only [on Wednesday] in the afternoon, or does the half day always mean mornings?

Mother Nieminen: It means mornings. Educational activities take part in the mornings. In the afternoons, they only nap and snack and so on.

Although the national-level policy is the same and both of the municipalities have enforced the restriction, there is a difference in the municipalities' interpretations and the ways in which the policy is enacted. The concept of assemblage directs us to see how policy becomes entangled with and filtered through the interpretations of local officials. The policy space for making decisions concerning the child's ECEC arrangements turns out to be different compared to the first case.

The father works shifts and he often has Thursdays and Fridays off. First, the manager of the ECEC center allotted Wednesday to Friday for Lilli's ECEC days. The Nieminen family stated in the interview that due to the father's work schedules, this would not be suitable for the family. The family would spend Thursday and Friday together when the father has time off. Monday to Wednesday would work better for them. After several negotiations with the ECEC center, the Nieminen family changed the attendance to Mondays through Wednesdays.

They also stated that six hours, three days a week would work better for them, arguing that the schedule would be more regular and benefit Lilli:

We tried to suggest that Lilli would attend three days a week, six hours per day. Our child does not need to be there from 8 am to 4 pm. I am at home, so I can drive her to be there from 9 am to 3 pm. No. It was strict no. Only 20 hours. I tried to point out that it is just 18 hours.

As the excerpt shows, this did not suit the ECEC center, even though the Nieminen family tried to point out that the hours of attendance would actually be fewer. From the municipality's point of view, there would be no opportunity to share one ECEC place

between two children if they followed the family's suggestion. Even though the hours of attendance would be lower, it would be more expensive from the municipality's perspective.

The Koskinen family lives in the same municipality as the Nieminen family. The mother works shifts. The father has retired, and thus the family in principal should have only limited entitlement to ECEC. The family's two children are not yet of school age, and they attend ECEC three days per week from 8 am to 4 pm, so the family has received extended entitlement to ECEC. The father describes the older child as having special needs:

Olli is a very demanding child. He was in the central hospital in a kind of... there were both parents present and then Olli as well. It was kind of a discussion. It worked out very well. It was free of charge and we received a huge amount of support. They described Olli as being a very sensitive but demanding child.

In this ECEC assemblage, the child's characteristics play a part. The father describes the boy as being sensitive and demanding. This is underlined and justified by referring to an authority – the central hospital. The assemblage of their care arrangement included also the father's age and health situation. The father is retired and reports having health problems and insomnia.

Now I understand that, since I am retired, they could say, "You can't use the municipality's [childcare] services." Well, our family is out of the ordinary since I am aged and retired. As I told you, even if it is not particularly difficult work, it is quite bustling from 6 am to 9 pm. And if I have had a broken night and sleep badly, it might be that after couple of years, I don't know if I have any resources to do it. It would perhaps be too much for me.

The father's health problems and their relation to his insomnia are part of the assemblage of the care arrangement. They were interrelated with his reserves of strength and energy to manage daily practices. As a result, contrary to the cases presented earlier, the restriction in this case did not constrain the family's use of ECEC. The mother of the family had just made an agreement with the local authorities that the family would increase the days of attendance from three to four days per week. This was due to the change in the mother's work situation. The father notes that it was not a problem. Even though the Koskinen family lived in the same municipality as the Nieminen family, the restriction had a different role in the former's ECEC arrangements. If we focused only on the geopolitical context, the policy space for making ECEC arrangements would have seemed identical. Although both families tried to make changes in the time of attendance, only the Koskinen family was successful. For the Koskinen family, the concept of assemblage led us to see how the restriction became entangled with the father's age and health, the older child's special needs, and the mother's working hours, resulting an extended entitlement to

ECEC. The mother of the Nieminen family was possibly interpreted by the municipality officials as being more capable of caring for her children at home compared to the father of the Koskinen family, and this probably explains why the municipality would not organize the Nieminen children's attendance according to the family's preference. Even though these cases shared the same geopolitical context and time, other entities of assemblage altered the policy space –possibilities to make choices.

The Lehtonen family comprises a mother, father, and four children. The mother uses parental leave in the summer time and works in the winters. The father works full-time. Earlier, the youngest child of the family, Elli, was cared through family daycare. Family daycare is ECEC that is most commonly organized at the care provider's home. National legislation sets out that there can be a maximum of four children in a family daycare group (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 1973). There are no specific qualification requirements for the childminder who runs family daycare.

The fee in Finnish ECEC is dependent on the income and size of the family. In the Lehtonen's municipality, the fee depends also on the reserved days of attendance regardless of whether the family uses them or not. Earlier, Elli's family had enrolled Elli to attend family daycare ten days per month. According to the mother, the municipality then decided that ECEC services for all children attending less than 15 daycare days per month would be transferred to ECEC centers. We can assume that this was done in order to make the service more efficient. It is not possible to increase the number of children in a family daycare group, even if a child does not need full-time ECEC. This is possible only in ECEC centers. Therefore, it makes sense to provide part-time services only in ECEC centers in order to make the savings expected from the restriction policy. This move had become topical at the time, since the number of families with limited entitlement had increased due to the restriction policy. Since the parents preferred family daycare and did not want to change the daycare place, they notified ECEC officials that they would need ECEC 15 days per month. This increased their fee.

The restriction policy influenced all four families whose ECEC arrangements – the policy spaces for making the decision concerning their children's ECEC – we mapped out above. However, examination of these cases shows that the influence was contingent (see also DeLanda, 2006). The Mäkinen and Nieminen families stated that the policy restricted the flexibility of the schedule. The Mäkinen, Nieminen, and Koskinen families would have preferred a different schedule, and only the Koskinen family was successful and received full-time entitlement. As a result of the restriction policy, the fees of the Lehtonen family increased, even though they were not the target group of the policy. In sum, the concept of assemblage (DeLanda, 2006) led us to examine these cases in a way which illustrates how the ECEC policies become entangled with both human and non-human, more or less

material entities. Policy spaces that were created as different things became entangled together: The restriction policy became entangled with other policies, such as policies related to the student allowance and unemployment benefits, as well as with the family characteristics and resources. Together they formed unique, contingent policy spaces – geopolitically situated assemblages for ECEC arrangements. Adopting this anti-reductionist position has implications for contemporary policy research. For example, by resisting both macro- and micro-reductionism, assemblage theory poses a fundamental challenge to the traditional structure/agency distinction.

Concluding remarks

Although it has been acknowledged that policies are formed in complex national and multinational relations to local contexts (e.g., Lendvai & Stubbs, 2009), traditional analysis in education has a history of viewing policy as a top-down process (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). Furthermore, the focus of earlier examinations of ECEC policy has mainly been on mapping the different types of governance of ECEC systems or the discourses that can be identified from policy texts (Gibson, McArdle, & Hatcher, 2015), rather than the everyday life of children or their parents. There has been a need to challenge the tendency to conduct social analyses only on the level of individuals (micro-reductionism) or society as a whole (macro-reductionism) (DeLanda, 2006). Accordingly, in an effort to avoid the pitfalls of micro- or macro-reductionism, we aimed to capture both perspectives. To do this, we utilized an application of Deleuze and Quattari's (1987) concept of assemblage, which captures both the materiality and contingency of social practices, to explore and better understand the policy space of ECEC.

In this article, we have discussed a case of an ECEC restriction policy at the local level in terms of the different positions the restriction of entitlement to ECEC has in the assemblages of ECEC arrangements. We illustrated how the concept of assemblage helps us understand how policies become entangled and merge with various interrelated entities, such as gender roles, access to ECEC services (availability, distance of the services, fees), the parent's presuppositions concerning ECEC services, work situations, legislation concerning different kinds of monetary benefits, other kinds of different resources families have available, and the child's and parent's characteristics, needs, and desires. In those processes, certain elements and relationships between these elements of the assemblage are given more priority than others depending on the geopolitical context. Approaching our data from the perspective of assemblage helped us understand the process of policy expanding to influence people who are not the target groups of the policy. Examining our cases leads us to suggest that one of the characteristics of striated

spaces, in addition to being 1) hierarchical, 2) rule-intensive, 3) and strictly bounded and confining, is that they are 4) filled with conflicting desires.

The framework we used helped us exemplify how ECEC arrangements are striated spaces irrespective of the restriction policy. That is to say, there are many other things that restrict the decisions parents are able to make. Thus, it seems obvious that the strong discourse of free choice concerning ECEC arrangements prevalent in Finnish ECEC policy (Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010) does not really have a strong reference point to the actual ECEC arrangements.

Overall, it turns out to be quite difficult to produce “choice” in ECEC. We ask whether instead of emphasizing “choice,” we should focus on developing services that would more easily accommodate the needs of users. This would entail the services being flexible and the users of them being heard and feeling part of their development process.

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